Dominance and Prestige in Diverse Contexts: Investigations into the Relative Contributions of Coercive and Persuasive Attributes in Mate Selection, Rape Avoidance, and the Social Dynamics of a Mutual Aid Organization

Author
Snyder, Jeffrey Keith

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

by

Jeffrey Keith Snyder

2012
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dominance and Prestige in Diverse Contexts: Investigations into the Relative Contributions of Coercive and Persuasive Attributes in Mate Selection, Rape Avoidance, and the Social Dynamics of a Mutual Aid Organization.

by

Jeffrey Keith Snyder

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Daniel M. T. Fessler, Chair

Evolutionary anthropology is a scholarly endeavor informed by the history of human evolution, drawing on the fields of evolutionary biology, behavioral ecology, behavioral economics, and evolutionary psychology, in addition to the substantial contributions of conventional anthropology itself. This frame of reference allows for a functional perspective on human behavior without ignoring or neglecting important sources of individual and cultural variation. In a general way, this work investigates how natural and sexual selection pressures shape human psychology and behavior, generating evolved proclivities and propensities, including the propensity for humans to be cultural animals. Hence, this perspective situates humans as active agents navigating a complex terrain of selective regimes and interacting with multiple local social systems in the interest of achieving both cultural competency and fitness.
More specifically, within this framework, the work of this dissertation examines both differing forms of social status and cooperation and conflict in mating and mate selection.

Much of the work presented here explores how, as autonomous agents operating within the affordances and constraints of their social ecology, women negotiate heterosexual mateship choices across varying environments. Positing that dominant men may also be domineering mates in the household, my research previous to this dissertation focused on critiquing the simplistic perspective that heterosexual women prefer dominant men. This research established that it is more likely that, on average, women interested in upward mobility actually prefer prestige in their prospective partners rather than dominance. Furthermore, these women pay attention to the context of men’s domineering behaviors, ensuring that men adhere to culturally-prescribed norms of behavior. Presumably, this suite of preferences functions to increase the probability of coordination and cooperation in long-term pair bonds – cooperation directed toward the raising of extremely altricial human offspring.

While the majority of heterosexual women surveyed in my prior work prefer male partners who pursue social status through prestige rather than through dominance, nonetheless, observation suggests that some women select domineering partners in spite of available alternatives. Clinicians and scholars alike tend to approach this phenomenon from a perspective that pathologizes these women and deprecates their choices. Chapter 1 of the dissertation argues that such women can, in part, be understood as confronting a trade-off wherein they shift their preferences toward men who are likely to offer them necessary protection in spite of the strong possibility that these same men will be domineering in the household. This work reveals that women who perceive themselves to be more vulnerable to crime indeed have preferences for such aggressive and physically formidable men. Hence, women who select domineering men as
long-term partners may be responding in a functional manner to their unfortunate circumstances. Rather than suffering pathology or dysfunction, these women are making the best of a bad situation, a fact that has likely eluded middle- and upper-class investigators who are less familiar with the experiences and dangerous environments that such women face. Importantly, this work also offers an explanation for why preferences for long-term partners who can offer protection were long posited but went previously undetected.

Again focusing on cooperation and conflict in mateships and mate selection, Chapters 2 and 3 of the dissertation call to task evolutionary psychology researchers who have, I argue, incorrectly characterized women’s psychological responses to rape and their defensive coping strategies. My data-driven investigations challenge widely-held views on the subject. It is important for any phenomenological investigation to be held to high standards of scientific rigor. In addition, as sexual coercion and rape are deeply disturbing social ills and a profound tragedy for the victims, it is especially important that the scholarship of this topic be held to the highest levels of rigor.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation systematically re-evaluates the logic and methods used to investigate women’s rape-avoidance behaviors. Here, I contend that a significant body of the investigation of this phenomenon relies heavily on self-report measures that are only applicable to women in university or college settings, failing to accurately capture important variation in women’s behaviors according to age and relationship status. I suggest in this work that women’s fear of rape should be the primary motivator of rape-avoidance behaviors; thus, fear of sexual assault should be a useful index in measuring rape defensive strategies. Employing this approach, I obtain results that significantly deviate from the findings of previous researchers.
Chapter 3 is an extension of the notion that fear of rape is an important index. Here I examine partnered women’s fear of rape, simultaneously calling for higher levels of rigor in the study of partnered women’s risk for emotional sequelae following sexual assault. A reified but under-investigated hypothesis contends that partnered women face a higher cost of sexual assault because the victim’s mate may misperceive the assault as a cuckoldry threat. A thorough review of the existing evidence suggesting that partnered women face higher costs of rape indicates that existing findings are equivocal at best. I then present novel results indicating that the effects of relationship status on fear of sexual assault do not correspond with the notion that partnered women face higher costs due to rape than unpartnered women.

Turning from issues of dominance to issues of prestige, in Chapter 4 I present an ethnographic description of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) as a mutual-aid group and a quasi-egalitarian cooperative institution characterized by complex prestige dynamics. I argue that, within this egalitarian organization, there is a clear dependence on experience-based transmission of cultural norms through a process of apprenticeship and imitation that necessarily generates a prestige hierarchy. Whenever status becomes a commodity, there is a risk that individuals will leverage their status into positions of dominance and control over subordinates. The codified orthodoxy of this institution has specific proscriptions condemning such behaviors and, accordingly, proscribing the pursuit of status. Mirroring small-scale societies, individuals in NA strategically employ leveling mechanisms designed to limit the power and personally sanction self-aggrandizing behaviors. Thus, what emerges is a relatively stable organization, across regions and time, with more-experienced members teaching the norms of the institution to less-experienced members and gently leading at local levels while treading carefully as regards self-aggrandizement.
In sum, adopting an evolutionary perspective concerned with questions of ultimate function, this work examines the psychology and social dynamics of cooperation and conflict in a variety of domains. Simultaneously, this work stands as a cautionary tale against ethnocentrism and disciplinary in-group favoritism, warning of the dual dangers of sweeping important cultural contexts under the rug and settling for low standards of scientific rigor.
The dissertation of Jeffrey Keith Snyder is approved.

H. Clark Barrett

Robert T. Boyd

Martie G. Haselton

C. Colin Holbrook

Daniel M. T. Fessler, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012
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VITA

1998-2001  Texas A & M University – Corpus Christi.
Psychology and Philosophy (Summa cum laude)

Master of Arts (M.A.) in Experimental Psychology
Teaching Assistant, Psychology Department

2003-2012  University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Anthropology
Lecturer
Teaching Assistant, Teaching Associate, Teaching Fellow
Teaching Assistant Coordinator
Graduate Student Researcher
Editorial Assistant

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Chapter 1: Trade-offs in a Dangerous World: Women’s Fear of Crime Predicts Preferences for Aggressive and Formidable Mates

1.1 Introduction

Diverse evidence indicates that violence was a significant determinant of female fitness in ancestral populations. Compared to men, women are generally more vulnerable to male violence due to sexual dimorphism in stature, muscle size and composition (Frayer & Wolpoff, 1985) and aggressivity (Daly & Wilson, 1988). In the past, this greater vulnerability would have been compounded by obligatory female care of infants (Geary & Flinn, 2001, 2002; Taylor et al., 2000). Moreover, given the frequency of sexual coercion in contemporary populations, and its prevalence across primate species, sexual assault in particular would likely have been a source of selective pressure acting on women (Smuts, 1992), as rape decreases female fitness via the costs of physical trauma, by reducing female choice, and by compromising mate value (Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Duntley, 2005; Malamuth, Huppin, & Paul, 2005). In addition to dyadic violence, extrapolations from ethnographic, historical, and archeological data suggest that feuding, raiding, and warfare were common throughout evolutionary history (Biocca, 1971; Gat, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Keeley, 1996; LeBlanc, 2003; Morgan, 1980), and that homicide, sexual assault, and resource appropriation or destruction are likely to have occurred with sufficient frequency to have recurrently impacted female fitness.

A number of investigators have theorized that violence was a source of selective pressure shaping the evolution of women’s mate selection preferences, as individual men differ in their ability to protect their partners from aggression (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Buss, 1994; Ellis, 1992; Geary, 2002; Symons, 1979). However, to date, only limited findings speak to the notion that women’s preferences reflect the services that men can provide as protectors from violence.
Bleske-Rechek & Buss (2001) found that, among U.S. undergraduates and coffee-shop patrons, women judge requiring physical protection as a more important reason for initiating an opposite-sex friendship than do men, and show a greater preference for physical strength in their opposite-sex friends. In a similar sample, Greiling and Buss (2000) found that one motivation for extra-pair mating was to elicit protection from abusive partners or family members. Similarly, Li and Kenrich (2006) found that eliciting “protection from other” was one reason reported by a small number of U.S. undergraduates for engaging in a short-term sexual relationship. 

In describing development of the Partner Specific Investment (PSI) scale, Ellis (1998) reports that some dating women from a U.S. sample nominated signs of the willingness to protect as a form of investment. Similarly, Ellis, Simpson, and Campbell (2002) report that, in the development of the Trait-Specific Dependence Inventory (TSDI), dating women from a U.S. sample indicate in surveys that the ability to provide physical protection contributes to men’s mate value. In sum, existing findings suggest that when listing traits in the abstract, some women include men’s protective abilities in their mate selection criteria. However, in these studies, this trait is not highly valued relative to other attributes, and there is little direct evidence that such considerations play an important role in women’s evaluations of prospective partners. We suspect that the contrast between the likely importance of violence as a selective pressure shaping female mate selection mechanisms and the limited significance of such considerations in findings published to date reflects limitations of prior research, problems that the present endeavor is intended to address. Central to this enterprise is the recognition that, from the woman’s perspective, aggressive dominance in a male partner is a double-edged sword.

Although the ability to supplant competitors may reflect ambition, index earning potential, and lead to higher status, domineering and aggressive traits in men may nevertheless
often be avoided in long-term mating contexts because coordination and cooperation are at a
premium in pair bonds (Snyder, Kirkpatrick, & Barrett, 2008). Offspring will have higher fitness
in pair bonds in which resources and effort from both partners are directed in a cooperative
fashion toward them (Kaplan, Hill, Lancaster, & Hurtado, 2000). Consistent with this, evidence
indicates that traits such as intelligence, kindness, stability, and idiosyncratic compatibility are
highly valued by both men and women in their long-term partners (Buss, 1989; Pillsworth, 2008;
Pillsworth & Haselton, 2005). However, while there are reasons to expect convergence between
the interests of men and women, this convergence will often be incomplete. Parental investment
theory (Trivers, 1972/2002) predicts that men will frequently invest less in their offspring than
will women, and that men are more likely than women to divert resources toward obtaining
additional mating opportunities. The more that the investment strategies of the two parties
diverge, the greater the conflict of interests between them. Highly self-interested, aggressive,
and domineering men may be more likely to employ coercive tactics in negotiating these
conflicts, including violence and abandonment or threats thereof. Moreover, issues of relative
investment are not the sole source of conflict, as women will themselves sometimes benefit from
relations with extra-pair partners (Pillsworth & Haselton, 2006), a strategy that can result in male
fitness-reducing misallocation of paternal investment. While being more domineering and
aggressive may or may not be related to higher mate-guarding vigilance, it is plausible that such
men are more likely to inflict severe, violent consequences in response to the possibility of
cuckoldry.

Consistent with the above propositions, results from Western samples indicate that the
use of aggression for personal gain outside of the home predicts partner abuse. That is, general
aggressiveness as a trait is a predictor of partner-directed aggression at home (Lorber & O’Leary,
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2004; O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994). More broadly, while dominance as a personality trait is not isomorphic with aggressiveness, it is nonetheless frequently characterized by coercion in agentic self-interest (Gurtman, 1992; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990). Furthermore, the ability to prevail in male-male violence, and hence to also provide protection from it, is a function of both personality and morphology and, importantly, these two facets are linked. Recent findings from Californian undergraduates suggest that men who are physically stronger than average tend to be involved in more fights, endorse coercion more, and respond to transgressions with more anger than is true of other men (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009). Likewise, results from India indicate that larger, stronger young men report more physical aggression than their smaller counterparts (Archer & Thanzami, 2009; Archer & Thanzami, 2007).

To summarize the above, conflicts of interest are common within mateships, and aggressively dominant men who are physically formidable (hereafter termed ‘aggressive-formidable’ men) will often be more likely to employ violence and coercion to resolve such conflicts in their favor. Given the potential risks that aggressive-formidable men pose to women, it is little wonder that they are often avoided. Yet, observation suggests that some women nonetheless appear to be attracted to such men as potential long-term partners. Indeed, some women seem to select these men in spite of the availability of alternative partners who are more likely to be nonviolent. Conventional approaches view women who are attracted to aggressive men as suffering from deficits in self-esteem, deficits in healthy attachment style, preferences for possessive men, a desire to recreate and renegotiate past negative relationship dynamics, or a desire to confirm negative beliefs and expectations with regard to relationship experiences (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005; Breitenbecher, 2001; Van Bruggen, Runtz, & Kadlec, 2006; Zayas & Shoda, 2007). In contrast to proximate explanations that are often framed in
terms of deficiencies, we argue that women’s variable preferences for male aggressive
formidability are best understood as the product of evolved psychological mechanisms that
respond to a woman’s assessment of her circumstances; those preferences that appear puzzling,
distressing, or even pathological to middle- and upper-class investigators may thus be partly
explicable as reflecting reactions to experiences to which the latter are rarely exposed.

Previous work on the effects of unstable environments on sociosexuality has focused on
quantity versus quality trade-offs in reproductive strategies, with dangerous circumstances and
economic uncertainty being seen as contributing to a predilection for multiple short-term unions
(Belsky, Steinberg, & Draper, 1991; Ellis, Jackson, & Boyce, 2006). While we find much to
recommend in this work, it nonetheless overlooks the possible effects of such environmental
input on criteria employed in those instances in which long-term mating is advantageous.

Cultural environments vary in the degree to which dominance-based strategies for
obtaining status in local intrasexual competitions are effective, as groups differ in the extent to
which they recognize aggression as a legitimate means of conflict resolution (e.g., compare
Boehm, 1984 with Briggs, 1970). Paralleling cultural variation, social structural factors can
influence the likelihood that aggression will be employed: highly stratified societies can yield
unequal opportunities for success in intrasexual competition that, in turn, simultaneously
increases the stakes of competition and makes aggressive tactics of competition potentially more
effective, or at least more attractive to marginalized individuals excluded from opportunities to
compete in high-status competitions (Daly, Wilson, & Vasdev, 2001). More broadly, the
frequency of violent intergroup conflict varies dramatically across time and space, with some
settings characterized by generations of peace, while others exhibit near-constant cycles of
raiding and warfare (e.g., compare Chagnon, 1983 with Dentan, 1968).
In environments characterized by substantial levels of conflict, domineering, coercive, aggressive, and even violent strategies can pay off for men competing for access to resources. In these same environments, women and their children will often face an elevated risk of violence. Under these circumstances, the costs that aggressive-formidable men may inflict on their long-term partners will frequently be outweighed by the tangible benefits that they provide, in the form of increased access to resources and protection from extra-pair violence. Because ancestral environments will have varied with regard to prevailing levels of violence, with corresponding variation in the cost-benefit ratio of partnering with an aggressive-formidable man, we propose that selection favored the evolution of facultative female preferences for male aggressive formidability, where such preferences are calibrated to the actor’s circumstances.

The above hypothesis suggests that the contrast between the results of published studies of mate-selection criteria and the observation that some women seem attracted to aggressive-formidable men likely reflects a) the nature of the populations sampled in prior research, b) the nature of the questions asked, and c) the difficulty of coping with ambivalence when examining preferences. First, prior studies have relied on convenience samples of Western university women. Because the vast majority of such women have exclusively experienced relatively safe environments, they can be expected to place a low value on male aggressive-formidability – for women far removed from the risk of violence, the costs of an aggressive-formidable partner greatly outweigh the benefits. As for that small minority of university women who have experienced very dangerous environments, they are themselves pursuing social mobility, and hence, consistent with the values of the larger society, can be expected to greatly value prestige-based status over dominance-based status. Second, prior studies have generally failed to disambiguate these two types of status (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001) in men. Conflating prestige
and dominance makes it difficult to cleanly measure the contributions of each to male mate value (Snyder et al., 2008). Third, the hypothesis outlined above does not predict that women should ever be blind to the costs that aggressive-formidable men might inflict on them – even women who stand to benefit from the protection offered by such a partner should still be cognizant of the risks that he poses. The current studies therefore attempt to sample a larger number of women from a broader range of environments, and to present them with clear differentiations between prestige-linked traits and dominance-linked traits.

1.2. The Current Studies

To the extent that pairing with an aggressive-formidable man buffers a woman from dangers in her environment, given its potential costs, the utility of such a relationship depends not simply on prevailing rates of violence, but rather on the woman’s ability to cope with such violence absent assistance from a mate. Because women vary in their own abilities to deter potential assailants, in their access to other social sources of protection, and in their attractiveness to potential assailants, for a given level of violence in a particular environment, the benefits offered by an aggressive-formidable partner will vary across individual women. Subjective perceptions of the risk of violence can be understood as the product of assessments that first compile information concerning prevailing rates of violence, and then weight this information in light of a woman’s own vulnerability and the resources that she brings to bear in coping with such hazards. Consonant with this perspective, existing findings indicate that women’s fear of crime is impacted by perceived gender differences and vulnerability to men (Stanko, 1995), as well as class, age, parenthood, and disability (Pain, 1992). Fear of crime may thus usefully index the extent to which a woman sees herself as potentially benefiting from having an aggressive-formidable partner, and may be more accurate in this regard than objective
measures of prevailing crime rates. The latter possibility is reinforced once it is recognized that measures that aggregate events at the community level will only approximate a given individual’s particular history of exposure to cues of the presence of danger, and, the larger the geographic and demographic scales of such measures, the greater this discordance is likely to be. We can therefore expect that crime statistics and similar measures will only partially capture the experiences that should contribute to a given woman’s assessment of the potential utility of pairing with an aggressive-formidable man. In contrast, because a woman’s own perceptions of the dangerousness of her environment are likely to more directly reflect her experiences, such perceptions should correlate more closely with her mate-selection preferences.

Consonant with the notion that the value of obtaining protection from violence is a product of the combination of prevailing levels of violence and one’s own ability to resist violence, a product that can be expected to be subjectively represented, we predicted that (a) the greater a woman’s self-perceived vulnerability to violent crime, the stronger her reported preferences would be for aggressive-formidable men as long-term partners. Because prestigious men have greater access to coalitional support that can deter potential assailants, and because, in modern nation-states, prestigious men often have privileged access to institutional authority (e.g., police response times are quicker in wealthier neighborhoods, etc.), we also predicted that (b) the more dangerous a woman perceives her environment to be, the stronger her preferences for prestigious men as long-term partners. Note, however, that we expect this association to be tempered by the fact that prestige-linked traits do not entail trade-offs for a woman akin to those intrinsic to dominance-linked traits, and hence preferences for the former should be less contingent on self-perceived vulnerability to crime than preferences for the latter. Next, to evaluate how subjective perceptions of danger differ from objective measures of danger in
explaining women’s preferences for dominance-linked traits, we explored the extent to which (c) the prevailing level of crime in a woman’s environment predicts her preferences for aggressive-formidable men as long-term partners; paralleling prediction b, we likewise explored the extent to which (d) preferences for prestige-linked traits similarly vary as a function of the prevailing level of violent crime in a woman’s environment.

Income inequality is an important determinant of the extent to which violent aggression is worthwhile (Daly, Wilson, & Vasdev, 2001). Given that, while undoubtedly hypertrophied in many modern societies, some degree of intergroup variation in resource inequality likely characterized ancestral societies as well, it is possible that signs of substantial income inequality serve as cues indicating that violence is likely to occur. If so, then (e) the degree of income inequality in a woman’s community should predict her preferences for aggressive formidable men. Lastly, (f) preferences for aggressive formidability should be independent of major demographic variables and socio-economic status.

Given that the degree of danger in a given environment can vary across time, and given that people can move from one area to another, an optimal adaptation would be one in which a woman’s mate-selection preferences are periodically updated in light of current circumstances. However, it is possible that plasticity in mate-selection mechanisms may be constrained if these mechanisms are integrally tied to other features of sociosexual psychology. Consonant with the need to align physiological and psychological features in a coordinated fashion if life history strategies are to be realized, existing findings indicate that some parameters of sociosexuality appear to be set during critical periods prior to sexual maturation (Belsky, Draper, & Harpending, 1991; Ellis, Jackson & Boyce, 2006). It is therefore possible that the same is true of preferences with regard to aggressive dominance. To investigate this, we compared the effect on
mate-selection preferences of the rate of violent crime rate in a woman’s current community with the effect of the rate of violent crime in her childhood community.

1.3. Study 1

1.3.1. Participants. In order to capture significant variance in individual exposure to violence, we sought to recruit a relatively large sample. We employed an Internet-based survey protocol in which we solicited participants using postings to four web sites used to advertise online psychological surveys. Excluded from the analyses were male participants, and female participants who did not complete the questionnaires, provided homogenous responses (for example, entered a value of “1” for all questions), were under 18 years of age, entered mutually incompatible responses, or did not provide a current U.S. postal code. This left a sample of 1048 women, ranging in age from 18-66 (Mean± SD = 30.01± 10.35), from 46 U.S. states and Washington D.C. The frequency of races within this sample is 77.6% Caucasian, 7.5% African-American, 5.8% Hispanic, with the remainder reporting as “Asian,” “Middle-Eastern,” “mixed,” or “other.” Median income was $43,617. The majority of participants reported having some higher education, with only 8.10% of the participants indicating an education level at the high school level or lower. A majority (62.20%) of the sample reported they were currently in a committed romantic relationship.

1.3.2 Method. Fear of crime was measured using a modified version of the British Fear of Local Crime Survey (The Crime Reduction Centre, 2000). Participants identified their perceived level of vulnerability on a 1-4 scale from “not at all worried” to “very worried” about being the victim of twenty specific crimes, including being mugged, sexually assaulted, bullied, or harassed.
To obtain geographical information with which to determine the objective levels of crime to which participants were likely exposed, we asked participants to provide their current postal ZIP code, and the ZIP code of the area in which they spent the majority of their childhood. Regional property and violent crime indices were then assigned for each postal code using an online real estate/relocation planning web site, Sperling’s Best Places (2007). This web site consolidates multiple sources of crime data, calculates, and provides to the public indices of crime rates using a 0-10 (low to high crime) system. All crime data, including those used for childhood ZIP codes, are contemporary, as we did not have access to data from previous decades.

Women’s mate preferences were measured using a scale adapted from Poore, Gable, & Haselton (2006) in which descriptive traits were rated by their importance in a prospective long-term partner on a range response scale (1=Not at all Important, 9=Extremely Important). This scale examines attributes associated with aggressive forms of dominance, non-aggressive forms of status, and physical attributes (specific items used for analyses are reported below). The order of presentation of fear of crime and preference scales was counter-balanced.

1.3.3 Results. Objective crime indices indicated that most participants’ current environments were characterized by moderate levels of overall crime, with property crime being more common than violent crime: current violent crime (Mean± SD = 4.78± 2.33, N = 1048); current property crime (Mean± SD = 5.05± 2.08, N = 1048). Similar patterns obtain with regard to our indirect assessment of participants’ childhood environments: proxy of childhood violent crime (Mean± SD = 3.76± 2.44, N = 1048); proxy of childhood property crime (Mean± SD = 4.09± 2.35, N = 1048).
Items composing the independent and dependent variables were reverse-scored when appropriate and aggregated by means. The fear of crime predictor was an aggregate of “street robbing (mugging),” “another type of violent attack,” “being sexually assaulted,” “having your residence burglarized,” “having a car or other vehicle broken into/vandalized,” “theft from your yard, garden/grounds, shed, garage or farm,” “having a car or other vehicle stolen,” and “vandalism or damage to your property” (Mean± SD = 2.23± 0.62; Cronbach’s α = .89).

Aggressive formidability was composed of the items “dominant,” “domineering,” “commanding,” “overbearing,” “tough-guy,” “strong,” “powerful,” “broad shoulders,” “tall,” and “could win a fight if necessary” (Mean± SD = 4.28± 1.36, N = 1048; Cronbach’s α = .84). Prestige was composed of the items “admirable,” “natural leader,” “influential,” “ambitious,” “charismatic,” “outgoing,” and “wealthy” (Mean± SD = 6.21± 1.16, N = 1048; Cronbach’s α = .74). Means indicate that participants clearly prefer prestige to aggressive formidability.

We tested the hypotheses that neighborhood crime rates and perceived vulnerability to crime would be related to preference for aggressive mates by inspecting the bivariate correlations among the variables. The results revealed that crime rates were not correlated with participants’ subjective fear of crime (see Table 1). Income inequality in women’s current neighborhoods, as measured by Gini indices, is significantly, positively correlated with fear of crime, but is not correlated with women’s long-term mate preferences (see Table 1). Bivariate correlation analyses indicate that age and level of education are negatively related to fear of crime and preferences for aggressive-formidable men (see Table 1).
To test the respective predictions that both perceived vulnerability to crime and local crime rates would be related to preference for aggressive-formidable mates, we conducted a multiple regression analysis where aggressive formidability was the dependent variable and perceived vulnerability to crime and violent crime indexes were the independent variables. The analysis revealed that the proxy measure of childhood local violent crime rates had a small but statistically significant effect on preference for formidable men ($B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.01$). Proxy measures of childhood property crime, current violent crime, and current property crime were not significantly related to women’s long-term preferences.

Consistent with expectations, fear of crime was positively related to preferences for aggressive formidability ($B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.15$, $p < 0.01$); interestingly, the same was also true with regard to preferences for prestige-based status ($B = 0.26$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$). Potential moderating factors correlated with aggressive formidability and prestige were
tested with multiple regression. Fear of crime and the proxy measure of childhood violent crime remain significant predictors of preferences for aggressive formidability when age and level of education are held constant, suggesting that they are relatively independent of these variables (see Table 1.2). In addition, fear of crime remained a significant predictor of preferences for prestige when age, race and level of education were held constant (see Table 1.3).
Table 1.2

Study 1: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Preferences for Aggressive-Formidability (N = 948)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of crime</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood violent crime</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( R^2 = 0.055 \).
Table 1.3

Study 1: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Preferences for Prestige (N = 1040)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of crime</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $R^2 = 0.05$.

1.4. Discussion

Consonant with our central prediction, subjective fear of crime predicted a woman’s preferences for aggressive formidability in a male long-term partner. This effect remained significant when correlated measures of socio-economic status and an objective measure of childhood crime were held constant. Fear of crime also predicted preferences for prestige-based status, and this too remained significant when demographic factors were held constant. However, consistent with the notion that pairing with a prestigious man does not entail trade-offs, prestige-linked traits were preferred overall, and the attractiveness of such traits was less dependent on fear of crime. In keeping with our supposition that, compared to objective measures of prevailing crime rates, subjective perceptions of danger more completely capture
both an individual’s self-assessed ability to cope with threats and her own past experiences, in contrast to the above patterns, mate selection preferences were not predicted by most of the objective measures of crime rates, with only violent crime in a woman’s childhood environment predicting preferences for dominance and formidability in long-term mates; none of the objective crime measures predicted preferences for prestige-based status.

Our finding that objective measures of crime in the area in which a woman grew up predict her preferences for dominance/formidability raises the possibility of a critical window in development during which girls assess their local environment and calibrate lifelong mate preferences accordingly. While such as system would likely be inferior to one in which preferences were periodically updated in light of current circumstances, it is conceivable that there are constraints on optimality in this regard. However, given the low effect size of all of our findings, replication would lend confidence that this account is accurate. This is particularly important given that crime rates for a given region vary over time, yet our measures of crime apply to the contemporary characteristics of the region in which a woman grew up, rather than the circumstances that prevailed in that locale during her development. We therefore sought to replicate our findings in a second study.

1.5. Study 2

Again seeking a demographically diverse sample within a nation-state environment, we once more employed an Internet-based survey protocol, this time soliciting participants using postings to the Volunteers section of Craigslist.org for 38 large and mid-sized cities in the United States. Exclusion criteria of participants were the same as in Study 1. Women ranging in age from 18-61 (Mean± SD = 37.47± 8.70, N = 490) from 30 U.S. states completed the
questionnaire. The frequency of races within this sample is 75.7% Caucasian, 8.4% African-American, 9.2% Hispanic, with the remainder reporting as “Asian,” “Middle-Eastern,” “mixed,” or “other.” The median income of this sample is U.S. $40,539. Only 7.00% of the participants indicated an education level at the high school level or lower. The majority of participants reported having some higher education, with 52.50% reporting that they were currently enrolled in higher education courses, and 31.30% reporting that they were currently enrolled in a psychology course. In addition, a majority (58.80%) reported that they were currently in a committed romantic relationship.

The methods for Study 2 were the same as those used in Study 1, with the addition of sequential childhood environment divisions intended to explore the chronological parameters of a possible critical window. Participants were asked to provide the postal code for which they “spent the majority of” their childhood during ages 0-5, ages 6-11, and ages 12-18.

1.5.1. Results. Treatment of the variables was the same as in Study 1. As in Study 1, objective measures of crime rates indicated that, on average, participants’ environments were characterized by moderate levels of crime: current violent crime (Mean± SD = 4.47± 2.27, N = 490); current property crime (M = 4.76, SD = 2.00, N = 490); proxy of childhood violent crime, ages 0-5 (Mean± SD = 4.02± 2.31, N = 490); proxy of childhood property crime, ages 0-5 (Mean± SD = 4.34± 2.12, N = 490); proxy of childhood violent crime, ages 6-11 (Mean± SD = 3.86± 2.28, N = 490); proxy of childhood property crime, ages 6-11 (Mean± SD = 4.20± 2.13, N = 490); proxy of childhood violent crime, ages 12-18 (Mean± SD = 3.80± 2.23, N = 490); and proxy of childhood property crime, ages 12-18 (Mean± SD = 4.13± 2.07, N = 490). Reliability analysis of the subjective fear of crime aggregate yielded Cronbach’s α = .88. The subjective fear of crime aggregate indicated moderate fear of crime among participants (Mean± SD = 2.17±
0.64, N = 490). Preference aggregates for Study 2 consisted of the same attributes as those aggregated for Study 1. As in Study 1, analyses indicated that attributes related to prestige (Mean± SD = 6.45± 1.18, N = 490; Cronbach’s α = 0.72) were preferred over aggressive formidability (Mean± SD = 4.27± 1.48, N = 490; Cronbach’s α = 0.78).

The proxy of childhood violent crime was correlated with subjective fear of crime (see Table 1.4). Income inequality in women’s current neighborhoods, as measured by Gini indices, was slightly but significantly negatively correlated with women’s preferences for aggressive-formidable men, but not with subjective fear of crime (see Table 1.5). Bivariate correlation analyses indicate that level of education was negatively related to fear of crime and preferences for aggressive formidability (see Table 1.5). Preferences for prestige were positively correlated with preferences for aggressive formidability, but not with fear of crime.
Table 1.4

Study 2 – Correlations Between Predictors: Adult Subjective Fear of Crime, Childhood Proxy of Crime Rates and Childhood Gini

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fear of Crime</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Violent Crime (ages 0-5)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.81*</td>
<td>.87**</td>
<td>.712**</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Property Crime (ages 0-5)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>.69**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Violent Crime (ages 6-11)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Property Crime (ages 6-11)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Violent Crime (ages 12-18)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Property Crime (ages 12-18)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gini (ages 0-5)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.85**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Gini (ages 6-11)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Gini (ages 12-18)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
Table 1.5

Study 2 – Correlations Between Predictors: Preferences, Subjective Fear of Crime, Proxy of Current Crime Rates, Demographics and Current Gini

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aggressive-Formidability</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Prestige</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fear of Crime</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.19**</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Violent Crime (Current)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Property Crime (Current)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Age</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Race</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.14**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Education Level</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Income</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
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<td>10. Gini (Current)</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Replicating results from Study 1, linear regression indicates that fear of crime predicted preferences for aggressive formidability ($B = 0.23, SE = 0.116, \beta = 0.10, p = 0.03$); unlike Study 1, fear of crime did not predict preferences for prestige-based status. Potential moderating factors correlated with aggressive formidability were tested with multiple regression. Multiple regression indicates that the predictive value of fear of crime with regard to preferences for aggressive formidability remain significant when level of education and Gini are held constant.
(See Table 1.6).

Table 1.6

Study 2: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Preferences for Aggressive-Formidability (N = 423)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>$SE_B$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of crime</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education level</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini index (Current)</td>
<td>-4.34</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $R^2 = 0.07$.

1.6 General Discussion

Across two studies, we found that women’s fear of crime predicted the extent to which they valued aggressive formidability in a male long-term partner. These findings are consistent with our thesis that, because aggressive-formidable men offer greater potential protection to their partners, yet are also likely to inflict greater costs on them, women profit by selecting such mates only to the extent that their circumstances make obtaining the benefits worth paying the costs. In both studies, crime rates in a woman’s current environment did not predict her mate selection preferences. This is broadly consistent with our assertion that the value of the protection provided by an aggressive formidable mate is dependent on a woman’s own vulnerability to, and ability to address, violence. If, as we suggest, fear of crime is the product of a process that
assesses cues of risk in light of attributes of the self and existing social resources, then, when compared to exogenous patterns not specific to a given woman, such subjective representations should more closely track the benefits that a formidable partner can provide. That said, because individual vulnerability will always be linked to prevailing levels of violence, it is somewhat surprising that prevailing crime rates did not consistently predict women’s mate selection preferences, nor did income inequality, another exogenous variable that might be expected to index the risk of violence. It is an open question whether, on the one hand, this lack of correlation is entirely explicable in terms of the divide separating individual experience from data aggregated over large demographic and geographic areas, or, on the other hand, this indicates that there is a problem with our core thesis. Likewise, until such issues are resolved, the matter of whether levels of violence in a woman’s childhood environment exercise an independent influence on her preferences for aggressive formidability will similarly remain open. Ideally, future studies will employ crime rate data that is more localized than that to which we had access, and, moreover, will use archival rather than contemporary data in reconstructing the risks to which women were exposed during childhood.

While operating at cross-purposes to the aforementioned pragmatic objectives, future studies would ideally also explore actual behaviors rather than stated preferences, and would address a wider range of sociocultural systems than that tapped through our samples of U.S. women. With regard to the latter, both levels of violence and cultural framings thereof vary dramatically across societies, hence it is important to identify the various sources of information that contribute to preferences for aggressive formidability. Specifically, we expect women to be sensitive not only to the direct benefits and costs of selecting an aggressive-formidable mate, but also to the indirect ones that flow from the cultural meanings attached to such behavior,
meanings that vary dramatically across cultural groups. Granted, some such variation does exist within the U.S. However, on the scale of the world’s cultures, U.S. women responding to Internet calls for research volunteers may be relatively extreme in their consistent ranking of prestige-linked traits far above dominance-linked traits. That we have nevertheless been able to detect in such samples individual differences in preferences for male aggressive formidability that correspond with subjective vulnerability to violence underscores the potential explanatory utility of viewing such preferences as the product of evolved mechanisms that evaluate the costs and benefits of different types of partners. This leads us to conclude that it is time to abandon perspectives that pathologize preferences for dominance-linked traits, and instead adopt a functionalist approach that views all women as capable strategists, agentic actors who will seek
References


Chapter 2: Reexamining Individual Differences in Women’s Rape Avoidance Behaviors

2.1. Introduction

A number of evolutionary theorists have proposed that, because heterosexual coital rape can substantially reduce a woman’s biological fitness, and because such assaults likely occurred with some frequency in ancestral human societies, natural selection has favored the evolution of dedicated psychological mechanisms that serve to shape women’s behavior in ways that, in the ancestral environment, would have reduced the likelihood of such victimization (Chavanne & Gallup, 1993; Navarrete, Fessler, Fleischman, & Geyer, 2009; Petralia & Gallup, 2002; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1990). Seeking to add to a growing empirical literature that addresses this issue, McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, and Riddle (2011) recently employed Floridian university women’s self-reported behavior in testing four predictions that they derived from this perspective.

We share McKibbin et al.’s view that an evolutionary approach can shed substantial light on human sexual behavior in general, and on the domain of sexual coercion in particular; likewise, we concur that the basic logic of the evolved rape-avoidance thesis is both cogent and compelling (see, for example, Bröder & Hohmann, 2003; McDonald, Asher, Kerr & Navarrete, in press; Navarrete, Fessler, Fleischman & Geyer, 2009; Snyder, Fessler, Tiokhin, Frederick, Lee, & Navarrete, 2011). Importantly, however, because evolutionary endeavors posit novel mechanisms above and beyond those long-documented in general psychology, such efforts must be held to a high standard of rigor. We therefore evaluate the logic of McKibbin et al.’s argument, and present new empirical results regarding women’s fear of rape that speak to the rape-avoidance behaviors addressed by McKibbin et al. We find that McKibbin et al. do not
adequately test alternative explanations, some of which do not require the existence of postulated evolved rape-avoidance mechanisms. Using our data to more fully explore these possibilities, we find only partial support for McKibbin et al.’s conclusions, thus highlighting the limitations of their methods, and underscoring the need for high evidentiary standards in work of this type.

McKibbin et al. present four discrete predictions, each derived from the premise that human female psychology includes evolved rape-avoidance mechanisms. We will first explain each prediction, then evaluate the logic of the prediction, and finally test the prediction using our own data. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to first consider the relationship between the dependent measures used by McKibbin et al. and those that we employ.

Members of the same research group previously published a survey instrument, the Rape Avoidance Inventory (RAI; McKibbin, Shackelford, Goetz, Bates & Starratt, 2009), designed to measure self-reported rape-avoidance behaviors; the instrument is composed of actions that Floridian university women reported employing in order to reduce their risk of sexual assault. McKibbin et al. (2011) use the RAI to test their four predictions by comparing participants’ responses with independent variables collected using an auxiliary survey.

An evolved rape-avoidance mechanism could conceivably operate without involving the conscious mind. However, given that many aspects of fear are explicable in functional terms (e.g., Öhman and Mineka, 2001), it is plausible that such an evolved mechanism would shape overt fear, where such fear then motivates actions taken to avoid rape. If so, measuring women’s fear of rape would constitute an alternate means of testing the same predictions that interest McKibbin et al. Indeed, given that the RAI was developed from actions that women explicitly described as aimed at rape-avoidance, whether or not some aspects of rape avoidance operate
outside of conscious awareness, we should expect that women’s fear of rape corresponds with
the extent to which they engage in the actions addressed in the RAI. Toward that end, we sought
to both replicate and reexamine McKibbin et al.’s findings, employing both the RAI and
additional methods that include two measures of fear of rape; in so doing, we also sought to
employ a more diverse sample that that used by McKibbin et al., as there is reason to believe that
some aspects of their findings are parochial to university women.

2.2. Details of Sample

Using an Internet-based survey, we collected data from 333 women ranging in ages 18-79
(Mean = 31.59; Standard Deviation = 12.79). The study was advertized to women on
craigslist.org in 160 regions across the U.S.; additional postings appeared on two websites used
to advertise on-line psychological research, socialpsychology.org and
psych.hanover.edu/research/exponent.html. Attrition and incomplete responses (particularly on
the demographics section) were quite high, presumably because of the length of the
questionnaires. To be included in this study, persons had to verify their sex as female, and
indicate that their age was at least 18. The resulting sample of 225 women included 57.4%
heterosexuals, 7.5% bisexual, and 2.1% homosexual women; 33% of participants declined to
indicate their sexual orientation. Homosexual women were excluded from the analyses that
follow because homosexual women are less likely to encounter the risk of date-rape, a common
form of sexual assault. This left a final sample of 212 women. With regard to race, 53.2%
reported being White, with 12% reporting being either African-American, Hispanic/Latino,
Asain/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Native American or “Other;” and 34.8% declined to
indicate their race. The sample was well-educated: 23.7% reported having some college
education short of a degree, 16.5% reported having a bachelor’s degree, and 9% reported having a master’s or professional degree.

We asked women to report their level of concern with sexual assault and harassment, along with their concern regarding other forms of crime, on a modified version of the British Fear of Local Crime Survey (The Crime Reduction Centre, 2000). Using a scale of 1-4 (1 = not at all worried, 2 = not very worried, 3 = fairly worried, 4 = very worried), participants were instructed to “indentify your level of concern about the possibility of this happening” for each of a variety of crimes and other forms of victimization. Relevant to the current discussion are the items “Being sexually assaulted” and “Being sexually harassed (unwanted advances such as ‘cat calls’ or unsolicited sexual propositions).” In addition, participants were asked to complete the Fear of Rape Scale (FORS; Senn & Dzinas, 1996) and McKibbin et al.’s (2009) RAI. Correlation analysis reveals the following relationships between the three main dependent measures: the single item, “Concern with sexual assault” is weakly correlated with the RAI and moderately correlated with the FORS; the RAI and FORS are strongly correlated with one another (see Table 2.1).
Table 2.1

*Correlations between Dependent Measures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Fear of Sexual Assault</th>
<th>Fear of Rape Scale</th>
<th>Rape Avoidance Inventory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Sexual Assault</td>
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<td>.443**</td>
<td>.244**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Rape Scale</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>.722**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape Avoidance Inventory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

2.3. Critique of McKibbin et al.

2.3.1 Prediction 1. Reasoning that, “because attractiveness in women more than men is an indicator of fertility and expected future reproduction,” (344), McKibbin et al.’s first prediction is that women’s rape avoidance behaviors will vary according to individual attractiveness: “If women’s psychology includes mechanisms that motivate rape avoidance behaviors, then more attractive women may be more motivated to perform rape avoidance behaviors” (344). The authors imply the existence of a specialized evolved cognitive mechanism that processes rape risk based on own attractiveness. Although McKibbin et al. do not fully articulate their reasoning, we believe that it is indeed logical to suggest that a well-designed rape-avoidance mechanism would be sensitive to input concerning the actor’s level of risk. That is, a
woman’s perceived risk, indexed by fear, should allow her to calibrate her behaviors toward the optimum, balancing the benefits of rape avoidance against the costs of cautious behaviors that restrict potential mating opportunities and resource acquisition behaviors. Indeed, it is precisely this type of calibration that seems to underlie changes in rape-avoidance behaviors as a function of conception risk across the menstrual cycle (compare Cahavanne & Gallup, 1998 and Durante, Li, & Haselton, 2008).

Unfortunately, while it is logical to postulate that evolved mechanisms calibrate rape avoidance as a function of risk, the test employed by McKibbin et al. is not compelling. Although such a specialized mechanism might well exist, finding that attractiveness correlates with rape avoidance in no way offers support for this postulation, as such a correlation would be expected given nothing more than the ability to learn from past experience. Attractiveness is likely to be positively correlated with having previously experienced unwelcome sexual attention, hence it is simply common sense that more attractive women will be more cautious in this regard.

Unsurprisingly, McKibbin et al. find that self-reported attractiveness is positively correlated with rape-avoidant behaviors. We do not take issue with the empirical finding itself. However, our results suggest that this pattern is indeed driven by past experience. Female attractiveness is highly age-dependent (Kenrich & Keefe, 1992; Menken, Trussell & Larsen, 1986). Correspondingly, in our sample, concern with sexual harassment is negatively correlated with age, $b = -.022, t(208) = -4.426, p < .001$. Age also explains a significant proportion of variance in reports of concern with sexual harassment, $R^2 = .086, F(1,208) = 19.588, p < .001$. (Lower N’s are due the number of women that skipped questionnaire items). In short, women who are younger, and thus presumably more attractive, appear to suffer greater harassment,
experiences that would readily provide the basis for simple learning. When simple learning suffices, parsimony demands that we not postulate complex evolved calibration mechanisms. We therefore find the question of the relationship between attractiveness and rape avoidance to be unilluminating as regards the theory at issue.

2.3.2 Prediction 2. Thornhill and Thornhill (1990) argued that, in addition to costs intrinsic to sexual assault, women who are in relationships face an additional potential cost of sexual assault not faced by single women, namely that their partner may abandon them if the partner misinterprets the sexual assault as infidelity. Correspondingly, Thornhill and Thornhill (1990) provided evidence that women in long-term relationships report more psychological pain following rape than do unpartnered women. Adhering to Thornhill and Thornhill’s position, McKibbin et al. reason that women in relationships will evince higher scores on the RAI than those who are single. In contrast to Prediction 1, we find this prediction to usefully test a theory derived from an evolutionary perspective. However, our results do not support this prediction.

McKibbin et al. report that relationship status is positively correlated with rape-avoidant behaviors. This effect appears to be driven by the correlations between being in a long-term relationship and the Awareness of Surroundings/Defensive Preparedness and Avoid Appearing Sexually Receptive subscales of the RAI. In contrast, using data from heterosexual women in our sample and Independent Samples t-tests, we find that women who state that they are in a relationship report neither more nor less fear of sexual assault than do those who state that they are single \( (p = .589) \), nor do scores on the FORS differ significantly between these two classes \( (p = .298) \). Similarly, failing to replicate McKibbin et al.’s finding, relationship status does not yield significant mean differences in RAI scores \( (p = .135) \).
While useful, for a variety of reasons, relationship status is a crude variable when exploring issues of rape avoidance, one that is improved by also considering coresidence. First, because of the threat of infidelity, a male partner may seek to mate guard, that is, to regulate his partner’s opportunities to interact with other men (Wilson & Daly, 1992); proximity likely plays a key role in this regard, hence coresidence is a better index than simple relationship status. Second, for many cultural groups in the U.S., coresidence marks an important increase in the degree to which the couple views their relationship as durable and exclusive (indeed, the act of coresiding is itself something of a commitment device), hence there will likely be important differences in degree of commitment between women who coreside with their partners and those who do not. Degree of commitment can influence actions, such as seeking new male acquaintances and interacting with newly-acquainted men, that are addressed by the RAI. Finally, due to time constraints, the extent to which women engage in a variety of activities may be contingent on the amount of time that they spend with their mate, and the latter will generally be greater when the two coreside than when they do not. In light of these considerations, unlike McKibbin et al., we differentiated between women coresiding with a romantic partner, those in a relationship but not coresiding, and those not in a relationship.

We find a significant effect of coresidence when using the RAI as a dependent measure in a one-way ANOVA, $F(2,211) = 3.25, p = 0.041, \eta = .03$. Significance appears to reflect the mean differences between women not in a relationship (M=4.88, SD=0.09), women in a relationship but not coresiding (M=4.75, SD=0.13), and women coresiding with their romantic partners (M=5.11, SD=0.08), although pairwise comparisons of the three groups with Bonferroni correction do not yield significant mean differences. In contrast to results obtained with the RAI, however, using our other dependent measures, we find that there is no difference in fear of
sexual assault between women who live with a romantic partner/spouse and those who do not live with their partners \((p = .953)\), nor do scores differ between these two classes on the FORS \((p = .281)\).

The lack of any effect of coresidence on either or our two measures of fear of rape is striking, particularly given the high correlation between the FORS and the RAI. Importantly, McKibbin et al. rightly acknowledge that they “cannot conclusively argue that mated women perform more rape avoidance behaviors,” (348); instead partnered women’s responses to the RAI may be an artifact of the inclusion of items describing behaviors that are generally outside the realm of culturally prescribed behaviors for women in long-term relationships in the U.S.

We tested the aforementioned possibility by removing items from the RAI that had poor face validity for women in relationships. The following items were removed: “Avoiding meeting men from the internet;” “Avoid blind dates;” “Avoid leading men on sexually;” “Avoid going out alone with a man I don’t know;” “Avoid ‘making out’ with a man I have just met;” “Avoid talking to men I don’t know;” “Avoid teasing men by making sexual comments;” “When I go out, I stay with at least one person that I know;” “Let friends or family know where I am going when I go out;” and “When I go out, I go with at least one male friend.” Removing these items slightly increased the overall correlation between the FORS and RAI, \(r = .742, p < .001\). Moreover, when the one-way ANOVA was repeated using the coresidence variable as an independent measure and the modified RAI as a dependent measure, the results were no longer significant at the 0.05 level \((p = .097)\). These patterns strongly suggest that, rather than constituting support for Thornhill and Thornhill’s thesis, McKibbin et al.’s claim that women in long-term relationships take greater pains to avoid rape is simply a methodological artifact, a
consequence of the fact that the RAI is an inappropriate instrument for measuring rape avoidance in women in relationships.

2.3.3 Prediction 3. In order to protect their own inclusive fitness interests from the costs entailed by sexual coercion, a woman’s kin can be expected to attempt to both protect her and regulate her behavior so as to reduce the risk that she will be raped. Against this backdrop, McKibbin et al. predict that women’s rape avoidance behaviors will be positively correlated with the number of kin living in close proximity. Using the RAI, they find just such a correlation.

While McKibbin et al.’s interpretation of their finding is plausible, it nevertheless overlooks a potential alternate explanation, namely that women who are more fearful of rape maintain closer proximity to kin; in this model, proximity to kin is a manifestation, rather than a cause, of rape avoidance behavior. Our data allow us to test between these two possibilities. If fear drives proximity, then we can expect higher fear of rape among women living with one or more parent in comparison to women not living with parents. In addition, because, being larger and stronger, fathers can provide their daughters with greater direct protection from sexual assault than can mothers, we can expect that, if fear drives proximity, among women who live with a single parent, those who live with their fathers will be more fearful than those who live with their mothers.

We analyzed residence patterns (not living with any parent, living with mother only, living with father only, and living with both parents) as an independent measure in three univariate ANOVA tests: one with concern with sexual assault as a dependent measure, a second using the FORS as a dependent measure, and a third using the RAI as a dependent measure. In addition, because a coresident male partner can be expected to perform similarly to kin on many
of the above dimensions, so as to prevent relationship status from masking any effect of proximity to kin, we also replicated the latter ANOVA tests using only participants who do not coreside with a romantic partner. All six ANOVA tests produced null results (p’s = ns). It is possible that fear and protection cancel each other out (i.e., more fearful women live with kin, but the latter provide protection that assuages fear, resulting in no net differences in fear across residence patterns). Similarly, special pleading could conceivably save McKibbin et al.’s thesis, as it is possible that claustrating relatives restrict some women’s actions, while formidable relatives provide an umbrella of protection that allows other women to act more freely, and these two effects could cancel each other out. Such speculations aside, however, no matter how we parse the data, and whether we use their RAI scale or a proven alternative, we are unable to find an effect of coresiding with kin that McKibbin et al.’s positive correlation between kin proximity and rape avoidance behaviors would lead us to expect.

2.3.4 Prediction 4. Because fertility decreases with age and, correspondingly, older women are less likely to be the victims of sexual assault, McKibbin et al. predict that rape-avoidant behaviors will decrease with age. Following the same rationale that we presented in discussing Prediction 1, we concur that this is sound evolutionary reasoning. However, as we also noted in discussing Prediction 1, common sense generates the same prediction without the need to postulate evolved psychological mechanisms: if i) caution is a product of past experience, ii) the degree of unwelcome sexual attention is proportional to attractiveness, and iii) attractiveness declines with age, then simple learning alone would produce the predicted pattern of results.

Before comparing our findings to those of McKibbin et al., it is important to note that, for the purposes of testing predictions regarding the effects of age, our sample was notably superior
to that of McKibbin et al. Whereas the latter report that 80% of their participants were 29 years of age or younger, our sample, covering a broader age range, was also notably older -- 80% of our participants were 42 years of age or younger.

McKibbin et al. fail to find support for the predicted effect of age. Our analyses revealed mixed results. Using age as a predictor of the item “concern about the possibility of being sexually assaulted,” we found a significant decrease in fear with older age, $b = -0.017$, $t(203) = -3.157$, $p = .002$. Age also explained a significant proportion of variance in reports of concern with sexual assault, $R^2 = .047$, $F(1,203) = 9.968$, $p = .002$. However, the same pattern did not appear in an examination of scores on the FORS using age as a predictor ($p = ns$). Given that “concern about the possibility of being sexually assaulted” is a single item, whereas the FORS consists of multiple items with strong internal validity, the preponderance of evidence suggests that age likely does not diminish fear of rape. We speculate that the reduced sexual harassment that occurs with increasing age may be counterbalanced by increased sensitivity to risk, resulting in no net change with age.

How do these results compare with those obtained using the RAI? Although the effect of age on RAI scores was significant, the effect was in the opposite direction to that predicted by McKibbin et al., as RAI scores increased with age, $b = .009$, $t(210) = 2.084$, $p = .038$. Age also explained a significant proportion of variance in RAI scores, $R^2 = .020$, $F(1,210) = 4.345$, $p = .038$. McKibbin et al. found a similar trend in which the Avoid Appearing Sexually Receptive subscale of the RAI is positively correlated with age – the opposite of the predicted relationship. We therefore examined the RAI subscales, finding that age is positively correlated with both the Avoid Appearing Sexually Receptive and the Avoid Strange Men subscales (see Table 2.2).
How are we to reconcile the fact that, on the one hand, age has little effect on fear of rape, and yet, on the other hand, opposite to predictions, age has a positive effect on one or more of the purported rape-avoidance behaviors measured by the RAI? The answer likely lies in the fact that, as McKibbin et al. themselves acknowledge (p.348), many of the activities addressed by the RAI, particularly the items in the *Avoid Appearing Sexually Receptive* and the *Avoid Strange Men* subscales, are part of a lifestyle that changes with age for reasons having nothing to do with rape avoidance. Indeed, many of the behaviors included in the RAI are highly overdetermined. For example, there are many reasons why a woman might avoid staying out late, avoid using drugs and alcohol, avoid revealing clothing, and avoid teasing men by making sexual comments. Some of these reasons likely vary systematically with age, yet are not specific to rape avoidance (e.g., decreased sensation-seeking; increased concern with professional advancement; etc.). The age-bounded nature of the RAI is not surprising given that the behaviors in the RAI were nominated by young U.S. college women and, correspondingly, appear to be most relevant to young U.S. college women. In short, to the extent that it is useful at all, the RAI appears to apply only to samples that are culturally and demographically similar to that from which it sprang originally.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Avoid strange men</th>
<th>Avoid appearing sexually receptive</th>
<th>Avoid being alone</th>
<th>Awareness and Preparedness</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)  
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
2.4. Discussion

In sum, we have substantial reservations about McKibbin et al.’s recent publication. First, we question the utility of invoking postulated evolved mechanisms to explain patterns that are readily understandable in terms of simple learning and self-evidently true phenomena. While we believe that an evolutionary perspective can substantially illuminate human sexuality, little is accomplished by focusing this lantern on terrain that is already brightly lit. Second, we question the utility of the RAI, as, even holding aside issues of cultural context, many of the constituent items are only relevant to young, single women. In their original publication on this instrument, McKibbin et al. called for researchers to “investigate the psychometric properties of the RAI, including examining its reliability and validity with data from larger, more diverse samples,” (2009:340). We have heeded this call, and we find the RAI wanting. At the very least, it is clearly a mistake to attempt to test hypotheses regarding the effects of relationship status or age using such an instrument. Third, employing a more diverse sample, and a more valid instrument, to test those non-trivial predictions explored by McKibbin et al., we fail to find supporting evidence.

McKibbin et al. strive to address a vital topic -- sexual violence, and the steps that people take to avoid it, are issues of the utmost importance. We therefore urge these and other scholars of the subject to exercise their considerable expertise in the most rigorous fashion possible.
References


Chapter 3: The Costs of Rape among Married Women: Thornhill & Thornhill Reexamined

3.1 Introduction

Some two decades ago, Thornhill and Thornhill (henceforth T & T) published a series of four articles (1990a; 1990b; 1990c; 1991) addressing women’s psychological pain following rape from an evolutionary perspective. T & T’s central claim was that variation across women in the potential fitness costs of rape corresponds with variation in the psychological pain experienced following rape. T & T (1990a, 1990c; see also N. Thornhill, 1996) hypothesized that, compared with unpartnered women, women in long-term relationships face an added cost as a result of sexual assault, namely reduced investment on the part of their male romantic partner, as a woman’s partner might recalibrate his willingness to provide benefits to her and her children either due to an interpretation of the assault as resulting from extra-pair solicitation by the woman (i.e., indexing heightened risk of infidelity), or due simply to the drain on male parental investment posed by the rapist’s offspring should conception occur. A core prediction was thus that women of reproductive age who are married would experience more psychological pain than women of similar age who are not married, as T & T posited that psychological pain is a proximate mechanism motivating a functional change in behavior that decreases the probability of being similarly victimized in the future.

The T & T hypothesis has proven influential – Google Scholar lists a total of at least 117 citations to this corpus, and it has inspired work as recently as last year (McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, & Liddle, 2011). In addition, this work played a significant role in Thornhill and Palmer’s (2000) widely-discussed book on rape, which has itself been cited at least 105 times. T & T’s work is one of the few instances in which archival rape data has been used to directly test evolutionary hypotheses (see also Morgan, 1981; Rogel, 1976; Wilson and Mesnick, 1997).
However, despite both the impact of their four articles and the rarity of work of this type, to date, the hypothesis itself has been subjected to only limited scrutiny.

Paralleling their claims regarding the effects of marital status on psychological pain following rape, T & T also asserted that because rape potentially imposes greater costs on women of reproductive age than on those who are pre- or post-reproductive, corresponding differences occur in psychological pain (1990a). While authors such as Freese (2000) and Koss (2000) have extensively criticized the latter claim on empirical grounds, T & T’s important assertion that relationship status moderates the severity of psychological pain associated with rape has yet to be critically examined. We aim to do so here.

3.2 Thornhill & Thornhill Reexamined

3.2.1 The Original Studies. In the first of their four articles, T & T (1990a) sought to establish the predicted effects of age and relationship status on psychological pain following rape. As is true in the subsequent papers as well, T & T (1990a) employed questionnaire data from a longitudinal study of 790 sexual assault victims. Victims were recruited for participation from a Philadelphia, PA hospital from 1973 to 1975. In order to study their psychological adjustment following rape, the victims were interviewed quarterly over a period of one year (Mc Cahill, Meyer, and Fischman, 1979). However, apparently only the data from the initial interview, conducted within five days of the rape, were available to T & T. The data included demographic information, the specifics of the assault, and thirteen variables intended to measure the victim’s psychological adjustment immediately following the rape (McCahill, Meyer, and Fischman, 1979; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1990a).
T & T examined age effects by partitioning the sample into three groups; pre-reproductive (ages 0-11), reproductive (ages 12-44), and post-reproductive (ages 45-88). The groups were then compared on each measure of psychological trauma – such as a change in eating patterns, change in social activities, and change in fear of unknown men – with both Chi-square analysis and Kruskal-Wallis analysis. First, Chi-square analysis was used to determine if there were significant differences between the non-reproductive-aged women and reproductive-aged women. As predicted, eight of the thirteen variables of psychological trauma showed a significant change in magnitude among victims of rape within five days of the assault. However, statistical corrections for repeated tests (such as Bonferroni or Fisher’s LSD), as appropriate in cases in which multiple tests are conducted to test for a single hypothesis (Shaffer, 1995), were not employed. While such corrections can be viewed as a conservative measure, current practice typically calls for such corrective measures when there are more than three to five measures. Follow-up analysis with the three age categories (pre-reproductive, reproductive and post-reproductive) with Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric analysis of variance suggested that “in general pre-reproductive-aged girls are far less likely to [be] psychologically traumatized by rape and reproductive-aged women are far more likely to be so than expected under the null hypothesis” (1990a, pp. 164-166). Importantly, however, the strength of these conclusions is diminished when the appropriate Bonferroni correction is applied, as only six out of thirteen variables then remained significant.

To explore the effects of marital status, T & T first truncated the sample to exclude pre-reproductive victims, leaving a sample composed of women age 12-88. T & T then reduced the five marital categories (unmarried, married, widowed, separated, and divorced) employed in the original data set to two categories (married and unmarried), with the married category including
separated women on the premise that separated women were still being at least partly provisioned by mates, and hence face similar costs of a reduction in investment to those faced by married women. The remaining sample was then examined using thirteen Chi-square analyses, one for each of the psychological trauma variables. These analyses revealed a significant difference in married women’s level of trauma on six of thirteen variables – a change in eating patterns, a change in sleeping patterns, a change in frequency of nightmares, fear of being on the street alone, fear of strange men, and fear of being home alone (note the importance of fear, a topic to which we will return later). T & T also pointed to non-significant trends in indicators of worsened relationships with men, including their partners, within five days of the assault. Additionally, noting that married women were more likely to intend to seek psychological assistance following rape, T & T suggested that this similarly indicated that married women suffered more negative psychological impact than unmarried women. Likewise, T & T indicated that married women were also significantly more likely to report that they felt that their futures had been “profoundly affected by the rape” (1990a, p. 171). However, the significance of frequency of nightmares and fear of unknown men do not hold up to Bonferroni correction. Frequency of nightmares dropped from \( p = .020 \) to \( p = .26 \), and fear of unknown men dropped from \( p = .008 \) to \( p = .104 \). Again, fewer than half of the variables remained significant after the appropriate correction is applied. Likewise, it is not likely that that the nonsignificant trends described by T & T would be noteworthy after Bonferroni correction.

T & T (1990a) recognized that age and marital status are likely to be confounded. Because most reproductive-aged women in the sample were married, to ensure that marital status was not driving the age effect, the age effect – that reproductive-aged women experience greater psychological pain than women of other age groups – was retested using only the “unmarried”
subsample. This analysis yielded five significant effects out of thirteen tests; only four of these remain significant after Bonferroni correction (change in sleep pattern dropped from \( p = .036 \) to \( p = .468 \)). Moreover, despite recognizing that age and marital status were confounded, T & T did not perform the necessary converse retests – although it is likely that women in the married subsample were older than those in the unmarried subsample, no analyses were performed to ensure that the effects of age were not driving the difference between the married and unmarried subsamples.

T & T’s next three articles explore the effects of features of the sexual assault – that is, the relationship to the offender, the offender’s use of force, and the type of sex act – on the age and relationship status effects reported in their first paper. T & T (1990b) first examined the effects of the victim’s relationship with the perpetrator on psychological pain following rape. Among the married victims, 69.3% were raped by a stranger, while the same was true of only 57.8% of the unmarried victims. Given that this is a significant difference between the two groups, it is possible that the relationship with the perpetrator was a confound in their original (1990a) analysis, as T & T (1990b) found that stranger rape leads to more psychological pain than acquaintance rape. In order to test this possibility, T & T (1990b) analyzed a subsample of reproductive-aged married women who were acquainted with their assailant at the time of the attack. Here, T & T employ Chi-square and Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney mean ranks analyses, reporting that six out of thirteen psychological pain variables indicated that married women report more psychological pain than unmarried women following a sexual assault by a non-stranger. While T & T (1990b) cited this as indicating that their earlier findings were not an artifact, as they themselves acknowledge, the fact that the category ‘non-stranger’ potentially includes the victim’s husband poses a substantial problem for interpretation in this regard, as
women raped by their partners can plausibly be expected to suffer additional sequelae given that a) the rape likely marks a critical turning point in a downward spiral in the relationship, and b) by virtue of greater proximity, the victim of spousal rape is likely at greater risk of re-victimization by the same perpetrator than is the victim of other forms of non-stranger rape. Hence, to properly demonstrate that their 1990a findings were not an artifact of the greater frequency of stranger rape among married than unmarried victims, T & T would have needed to compare sequelae among married and unmarried victims of rape by a stranger, the opposite analytic tactic to that employed.

T & T’s third paper (1990c) examined the relationship between the victim’s marital status and the assailant’s use of coercion and force, including the effects of said on the psychological pain of the victim. First, reasoning that, due to the postulated higher costs faced by married victims, the latter should resist assault more forcefully, T & T predicted that assailants of married women would likely need to employ greater coercive force in order to succeed. Examining the particulars of the assaults revealed that, although married women were no more likely to be beaten than unmarried women, they were significantly more likely to be raped at gun- or knife-point. However, the latter finding did not control for differences in the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator. Other research indicated that rapes committed by strangers are more likely to involve weapons (Koss, Dinero, Seibel, and Cox, 1988). Accordingly, because, in T & T’s data set, married women are more likely than unmarried women to be assaulted by a stranger, differences in the use of weapons by successful perpetrators across these two classes cannot be interpreted as evidence of greater resistance on the part of married women. Second, reasoning that resistance necessarily results in more violent force being applied by the perpetrator, T & T predicted that married women who are the victims of more brutal beatings during a sexual
assault should experience less psychological pain thereafter, as the victim’s injuries should serve to reassure her partner regarding her fidelity. T & T tested this prediction with Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests (one-tailed) and found significant results for two of the thirteen variables – but in the opposite direction to that predicted. Although they also reported a non-significant directional trend for another seven of the variables, their summary statement on this question is unambiguous: “The data do not support the prediction,” (p. 314).

The final installment (1991) in the series of four papers by T & T addressed the prediction that, because of the added risk of conception for women of reproductive age, coital rape will be more traumatizing than non-coital rape. Examining the nature of the sex act and the age of the victim, T & T found that, among reproductive-aged women, coital rape was indeed more traumatizing than other forms of sexual assault. Importantly, neither here nor elsewhere in their four articles did T & T examine the distribution of coital versus non-coital rape in relation to the victim’s marital status. As a consequence, their finding that, for women of reproductive age, coital rape is more traumatizing than non-coital rape creates a substantial problem for their earlier findings regarding the relationship between marital status and post-rape psychological pain, as it is impossible to know whether the effects reported by T & T in 1990a, 1990b, and 1990c are driven by marital status, or simply reflect an unbalanced distribution of the nature of the sex act at issue.

In their widely-discussed book on rape, Thornhill and Palmer (2000) summarized T & T’s four articles. Recall that, with regard to the question of psychological pain, although T & T’s 1990a and 1990b papers do report significant patterns in the predicted direction for some of the variables examined, these analyses suffer from a number of potential confounds; moreover, not only do T & T’s 1990c and 1991 papers not strongly bolster these findings, the latter potentially
undermines them. Despite this, Thornhill and Palmer, stated that married women experience more pain than unmarried women as a result of rape (pp. 90-91). Thornhill and Palmer are equally unequivocal in regard to the claim that married women who have been beaten during a sexual assault experience less psychological pain, stating:

Data on victims’ self-reports of force and violence and independent evidence of violence taken by medical examiners make it possible to test whether reproductive-age victims who had not experienced violence exhibited more psychological pain than victims of the same age who had been attacked violently. In fact, this has been shown (Thornhill and Thornhill, 1990c). (Thornhill and Palmer 2000:92-93)

However, here is what Thornhill and Thornhill stated in this regard in the 1990c paper cited:

[R]eproductive-aged victims with physical evidence of violence and thus resistance during the rape are predicted to be less psychologically distressed than reproductive-aged victims without such evidence…The data do not support the prediction. Two of the thirteen psychological trauma variables, change in frequency of nightmares and change in family relationships (other than husband), reached statistical significance…Neither pattern was in the predicted direction…Seven other variables…were in the predicted direction but nonsignificantly so. (Thornhill and Thornhill 1990c: 314).

Were readers to limit themselves to Thornhill and Palmer’s account of the T & T peer-reviewed papers, they could not be faulted for presuming that T & T’s work is both more definitive and more conclusive than is the case – a potentially problematic conclusion given that there is
considerable evidence that subsequent investigators frequently repeat citations without consulting the original publications (Simkin & Roychowdhury, 2003). Given the scientific and social importance of the questions explored in T & T’s work, it is vital that their four influential papers on rape be examined carefully.

We question T & T’s work with regard to their treatment of the sample, the logic of their analyses, their decision to restrict their analyses to non-parametric statistical tests, and their omission of corrections for multiple statistical tests. While the specifics of our criticisms are new, we are not the first to criticize this work on empirical grounds (Brownmiller, 2000; Coyne, 2000; Coyne and Berry, 200; Freese, 2000; and Koss, 2000). Sharing Freese’s (2000) sentiments that the original data should be reanalyzed using superior methods, we attempted to obtain the original archival files from the Peters Institute in Philadelphia. However, not surprisingly given the many decades that have passed, it seems that the original data no longer exist (Freese [2000] indicated that R. Thornhill likewise no longer had access to the data).

Given that the original data are not available, ideally, we would be able to retest the original predictions with comparable data from other rape victims. However, such data are very difficult to obtain. Instead, we adopt a two-pronged approach in revisiting T & T’s hypotheses. First, we review relevant research on sexual assault that speaks to the predictions at issue. Second, we present analyses of our own data that provide an indirect means of assessing T & T’s assertions regarding rape among women in long-term relationships, entertaining alternate hypotheses where warranted and possible.

3.2.2 Thornhill and Thornhill Reexamined: Review of Literature. Extensive literature searches reveal very little material that supports T & T’s hypotheses regarding the interactions
between elementary demographic features of rape victims and the pain they experience following the assault. Interested scholars are encouraged to consult Freese (2000) and Koss (2000), both of whom summarize literature published prior to 2000 that provides evidence contradicting T & T’s findings – particularly with regard to the notion that pre-reproductive-aged women experience less pain than reproductive-aged women (see, for example, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Hanson, Resnick, & Walker, 1999). However, very little of this work speaks to the primary focus of the present paper, the relationship status of the victim.

Prior to 1990, perhaps the most influential work on the effect of relationship status and women’s adjustment following rape was that of McCahill, Meyer, and Fischman (1979). Their work evaluated the same data set used by T & T, albeit with an important difference: McCahill et al.’s data set included narratives and follow-up interviews assessing women’s psychological adjustment approximately one year post-rape. McCahill et al. report that “A married woman is nearly twice as likely to experience worsened relationships with her husband than is an unmarried woman with her boyfriend (45.5% versus 23.5%),” (p. 48). Qualitative interpretation of victims’ narratives led McCahill et al. to suggest three reasons why sexual assault may increase marital stress: the husband may blame the victim in a general way for simply being the source of their marital stress; the husband may be uncertain as to how best to console his wife as the victim; and, consonant with T & T’s subsequent position, the husband may accuse the wife of being complicit in the rape, or may blame the victimized wife for not offering enough resistance to the rape (pp. 47-48). In regard to the latter, McCahill et al. state “Victims who bear no overt physical injuries are most likely to be confronted with this sort of accusation,” (p. 47).

Interestingly, according to McCahill et al., an additional source of marital discord was a husband’s self-blame for a failure to protect his spouse, sometimes followed by blame-shifting.
T & T’s results are only partially consistent with McCahill et al.’s qualitative interpretations. First, as noted above, T & T (1990a) find that psychological pain within five days of the assault is higher for married women; although it need not necessarily be the case, such pain in the immediate aftermath of the assault could conceivably foreshadow subsequent elevated potential for marital discord. However, T & T did not find markedly decreased psychological pain among victims who were physically beaten in the course of the rape (see also Koss, 2000 for evidence contradicting this prediction). Finally, T & T did not explore McCahill et al.’s interpretation that the man’s sense of failure regarding his inability to protect his spouse may be one source of marital discord.

Using a different sample, Kilpatrick, Veronen, and Best, (1985) were not able to validate McCahill, Meyer and Fischman’s (1979) interpretations. Kilpatrick et al. recruited 125 victims aged 16 or older of coerced, completed oral, anal, and/or vaginal intercourse. Demographic information was obtained (age, race, marital status, number of children, living arrangements, occupational status, and religious preference), and participants were asked to complete The Life Events Inventory, The Previous History Inventory, Rape Assault Characteristics Checklist, Profile of Mood States Scale, Self-report Inventory, The Derogatis Symptom Check List 90-R, The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and The Vernon-Kirkpatrick Modified Fear Survey. Participants were initially interviewed between 6 and 21 days post-rape, and again at three months post-rape. Employing the above measures of stress and functioning, Kilpatrick et al. reported that they found no difference in psychological functioning and adjustment between married and unmarried victims. Similarly, Resick, Calhoun, Atkeson, and Ellis (1981) conducted a study of 93 rape victims ranging in age from 15-71 in a year-long longitudinal study of rape victims in which participants were interviewed initially within two weeks of the rape and
afterwards at one month, two months, four months, eight months, and twelve months. Participants responded to the Social Adjustment Scale—Self Report (SAS—SR). Although the SAS—SR includes measures of marital adjustment (level of intimacy, frequency of arguments, and degree of sexual satisfaction), Resick et al. found no impairment of marital relations. However, one limitation in this study is that the marital assessment was aggregated with overall family assessment, apparently because there were too few women in relationships in the study to perform factorial statistical analyses on the sub-sample of women co-habiting with romantic partners (see also Resick, 1993 for a comprehensive review of post-rape trauma up to that date).

Recently, McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, and Liddle (2011) reported results consistent with T & T’s core hypothesis. Extrapolating from T & T’s premise that, due to the risk of reduced investment or abandonment, women in long-term relationships face an extra cost of rape, McKibbin et al. predict that women in relationships will engage in more rape-avoidance behaviors. Using the Rape Avoidance Scale (RAI; McKibbin, Shackelford, Goetz, Bates, & Starratt, 2009), McKibbin et al. found support for this prediction in a U.S. university sample. Specifically, women in long-term relationships scored higher on the Awareness of Surroundings/Defensive Preparedness and Avoid Appearing Sexually Receptive subscales of the RAI. On the face of it, McKibbin et al.’s results thus appear to provide indirect support to T & T’s position. However, as we have argued elsewhere (Snyder & Fessler, 2012), the RAI may be an inappropriate measure of married women’s rape-avoidance behaviors, as many of the RAI items describe behaviors (such as “Avoid blind dates;” and “Avoid ‘making out’ with a man I have just met”) in which married women are unlikely to engage at baseline. When ten such items with poor face validity are removed, the RAI no longer yields significant results for women in relationships (Snyder & Fessler, 2012). Lastly, although the RAI, consisting of four
subscales, has high inter-item reliability, being a relatively new measure, there are no reports to date on its construct validity. Seen in this light, McKibbin et al.’s (2011) findings lend less support to T & T’s core hypothesis than is apparent at first blush.

To summarize the above evaluation, based only on materials available to date, we suggest the following: First, nontrivial limitations hobble the analytic methods undergirding T & T’s assertion that women in long-term relationships experience more psychological pain as a result of rape, and T & T’s own subsequent work raises the possibility that said findings derive from confounding factors. Correspondingly, subsequent investigations have not supported this claim. In addition, to our knowledge, only one study has reported evidence consistent with this claim – that is, the work of McCahill, Meyer and Fischman (1979). Although a qualitative interpretation of narrative material from the same sample is consistent with T & T’s assertion, the same interpretation also offers competing explanations to that promulgated by T & T, as McCahill et al. posited that the victim’s mate’s perceived shortcoming in the role of protector may be a source of marital discord. In light of the evolutionary importance of the male protector (a.k.a. bodyguard) hypothesis (Ellis, 1992; Snyder, Fessler, Tiokhin, Frederick, Lee, Navarrete, 2011; Wilson & Mesnick, 1997), below we will test this alternative explanation. Second, with the possible exception of McCahill et al.’s qualitative observation that accusations of infidelity – a potential source of psychological pain – are more commonly directed at rape victims who were not physically injured, there is little evidence that women who have been beaten or have sustained physical injuries in the course of a sexual assault experience less psychological pain than other victims of rape. T & T’s own findings are null in this regard, and no work before or since supports this claim. Were it not for Thornhill and Palmer’s (2000) book, the above considerations might suffice to lay all of these questions to rest. However, given the statements
therein, and the large impact that the book has had, it is important to conduct more focused tests of T & T’s core hypothesis regarding the direct effect of marital status on the affective sequelae of rape. Below we test this hypothesis by exploring prospective attitudes toward the risk of sexual coercion among women in the general population. While ideally we would also test T & T’s claim that physical injuries interact with marital status to mitigate the psychological pain of rape, as this cannot be examined using prospective attitudes, our evaluation of this claim must be limited to the observation that there is little compelling evidence, in T & T 1990c or elsewhere, that it is true.

3.3 Fear of Rape

A core tenet of T & T’s position is that psychological pain, serving as a proxy for fitness costs, shapes behavior in an adaptive manner, where the degree of pain corresponds with the fitness value of taking steps to avoid repetitions of the pain-inducing events in the future. This is a highly plausible position – indeed, such an account is doubtless the ultimate explanation of pain in general. Against this backdrop, we believe that fear of rape can speak to the issue of the cost of rape to women. If it is the case that rape is more costly to women in long-term relationships than to unpartnered women because rape increases the risk of diminished male investment, and if it is the case that taking precautions to reduce the risk of rape entails costs (in the form of time, attention, energy, and lost opportunities), then it should also be the case that women in long-term relationships are more likely to avoid circumstances associated with an elevated risk of sexual assault, i.e., partnered women should be more willing to pay the costs of precautions in order to avoid the greater costs that rape would impose on them (McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, and Liddle, 2011). The experience of fear or a fearful attitude toward sexual assault is plausibly the proximate motivator of such behaviors, as pain and fearfulness are
necessarily functionally linked, since it is the fearful anticipation of pain that allows pain to prospectively shape behavior. We thus reason that women’s fear of rape should track the costs of rape such that, the higher the cost of rape, the more likely a woman is to fear rape. This logic links T & T’s concept of psychological pain with the fear of rape construct in a manner that allows us to test T & T’s hypotheses beyond the narrow strictures of difficult-to-access samples composed of rape victims.

Following directly from T & T’s core hypothesis, we predicted (i) that partnered women’s fear of rape would be greater than unpartnered women’s fear of rape. By extension, since the costs of post-rape reductions in a male partner’s investment would be higher for a woman with offspring, we also predicted that (ii) partnered women with offspring would express more fear of rape than both partnered women without offspring and unpartnered women.

Before going forward, it is important to recognize that both of the above predictions are potentially subject to a confounding factor. Mesnick (1997) advanced the bodyguard hypothesis, suggesting that one functional benefit to females of forming heterosexual pair-bonds with males is reduced sexual harassment by conspecific males (see also Ellis, 1992; Snyder, Fessler, Tiokhin, Frederick, Lee, & Navarrete, 2011). Wilson and Mesnick (1997) tested the bodyguard hypothesis among Canadian women. Analysis of a sample of 12,252 cases from Canadian national crime reports indicated that married women were less often victimized by lethal and nonlethal sexual assaults. If married women are less vulnerable to sexual assault, then they may experience less fear of sexual assault even though, were it to occur, rape would be more costly to them than to unmarried women – in effect, with regard to fear of rape, the higher cost of rape to married women may be canceled out by the lower probability of its occurrence. However, an alternative avenue of investigation allows us to address this problem. For inclusive fitness
reasons, men living with their adult female kin should seek to protect the latter from sexual assault in a manner similar to that of husbands. However, unlike women residing with spouses, women residing with male kin do not face the potential cost of abandonment as a result of sexual assault. Given that unmarried women living with male kin enjoy similar protection from sexual assault compared to married women, yet face fewer costs should they be so victimized, we therefore predicted that (iii) unmarried women living with male kin would be less fearful of sexual assault than married women.

Finally, recall that T & T predicted that marital status and reproductive status should exercise independent effects on psychological pain following rape, and hence, by extension per our reasoning, on fear of rape. Recall also that a problem for T & T’s work in this regard is the asymmetry in their efforts to separate the effects of age and marital status, as they analyzed the former while controlling for the latter (by removing married women), but did not analyze the latter while controlling for the former. Finding an effect of age among single women does not reveal whether or not the married women who were removed from the sample were, on average, older than the unmarried women in the sample. If the latter applies, then age could have been solely responsible for the marital status effect. It is therefore important to revisit possible interactions between marital status and age. If T & T were correct that the effects of age and marital status are independent, then it should be true that (iv) the effects of marital status on fear of rape will be independent of age – that is, age will not exclusively mediate fear.
3.4 Study 1

Employing an Internet-based protocol and soliciting participants using postings on the Volunteers section of Craigslist.org, we recruited 702 women from 38 large- and mid-sized cities in 30 U.S. states. To be included in this study, participants had to indicate that they were female and at least 18 years of age. Homosexual women were excluded from the analyses that follow because homosexual women are less likely to encounter the risk of date-rape, a common form of sexual assault. In addition, multiple responses from the same IP address were discarded. Due to the length of the survey, attrition in this study was high. The resulting sample was composed of 473 women ranging in age from 18 to 61 (M=27.49, SD = 8.75); 75.5% identified their ethnicity as white. The sample was well-educated, with 93.3% reporting some higher education.

We asked participants to report household composition. They were provided with a checklist of potential forms of relationship to any persons in their household (for example, alone, roommate, mother, spouse, daughter #1, daughter #2, etc.). Women were classified as being in a long-term relationship if they indicated that they were cohabitating with their romantic partner. We argue that co-habitation is a better variable to use for this set of predictions than mere relationship status, as male investment is likely higher in the context of co-habitation, and hence the cost of abandonment to women in this context is likely higher. Women were classified as living with male kin if they reported living with their father, one or more adult brothers, or both. Fear of rape was measured with a modified version of the British Fear of Local Crime Survey Crime Scale (The Crime Reduction Centre, 2000). Participants identified their level of concern on a 1–4 scale from “not at all worried” to “very worried” with regard to being the victim of sexual assault, among other crimes.
3.4.1 Results. We tested the prediction that there would be a significant difference between partnered and unpartnered women’s fear of rape using an Independent Sample T-test. There was no significant difference between partnered women (M=2.31, SD=0.94, n = 162) and unpartnered women (M=2.41, SD=0.91, n = 276) in this regard (p = .86).

We also used an Independent Sample T-test to examine the prediction that there would be a significant difference between partnered women with offspring, for whom the costs of abandonment should be highest, and unpartnered women, for whom no such costs exist – in short, by comparing women occupying the poles of the spectrum of theorized costs, we gave maximal opportunity for T & T’s cost-of-abandonment hypothesis to be supported. Nevertheless, analysis revealed no significant difference between partnered women with offspring (M=2.37, SD=0.95, n = 114) and unpartnered women (M=2.41, SD=0.90, n = 276) (p = .54).

The prediction that women living with male kin would be less fearful of sexual assault than women in long-term relationships was tested with a one-way ANOVA. We tested the dependent measure according to a three-level variable (living with neither male kin nor a romantic partner, living with romantic partner only, and living with male kin only). No significant difference was found between unpartnered women not living with kin (M=2.32, SD=0.92, n = 256), unpartnered women living with male kin (2.50, SD=0-90, n = 94), and partnered women living only with their romantic partners (M=2.40, SD=0.95, n = 88) (p = .28).

We also computed post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction and found that all individual mean comparisons between groups (living with neither male kin nor romantic partner, living with romantic partner only, and living with male kin only) were nonsignificant (p’s >.34).
Lastly, having found no effect of relationship status/cohabitation on fear of sexual assault, it was not possible to test prediction (iv), the notion that age may be a confounding factor in any positive correlations between the aforementioned.

3.5 Discussion

None of the predictions derived from T & T’s hypothesis that women in long-term relationships victimized by rape face an extra cost of abandonment by their spouses were supported. However, caution is always in order when interpreting null results. In addition to the possibility of sampling error, Study 1 may have produced null results because our dependent measure was inadequate, as we employed a single self-report item measuring fear of rape. In addition, while this single item is straightforward, nevertheless, there are no reports of its stand-alone validity. Finally, the scale of 1 – 4 may actually encourage moderate responses, as the anchors of the scale, “Not at all worried” and “Very worried” may be perceived by participants as extreme responses. However, additional data, collected in the course of a separate project, allow us to address both of these possibilities through further tests of predictions (i) and (ii), employing a different sample and a more valid and reliable measure of fear of rape.

3.6 Study 2

Employing an Internet-based protocol and soliciting participants using postings on the Volunteers section of Craigslist.org and two web sites that serve to link participants with online psychology studies (socialpsychology.org and psych.hanover.edu), we recruited 333 women from 106 regions across the U.S. Attrition in this study too was high, again due to the length of the survey. Inclusion criteria were the same as in Study 1, and multiple responses from the same IP address were again discarded. The resulting sample was composed of 212 women ranging in
The frequency of races in this sample was as follows: 53.2% identified as white, 12% identified as either African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, Native American or “Other,” and 34.8% declined to indicate their race. The sample was well-educated, with 49.2% reporting some higher education.

Demographic questions included the following: “Are you in a romantic relationship?” “Do you live with your romantic partner?” “Do any of your children live with you?” “Do you live with one or more of your parents?” Given that these questions do not allow us to create a variable measuring living with male kin that is directly comparable to that employed in Study 1, to be conservative, we restrict Study 2 to re-testing predictions (i) and (ii).

Study 2 included the same dependent measure used in Study 1, a single item in which participants identified their level of concern on a 1–4 scale from “not at all worried” to “very worried” with regard to being the victim of sexual assault, among other crimes (The Crime Reduction Centre, 2000). Importantly, in addition to this single item, participants also completed the Fear of Rape Scale (FORS; Senn & Dzinas, 1996), a standard, accepted measure of fear of rape having high construct validity and reliability. The FORS consists of 30 items such as “I am afraid of being sexually assaulted,” “I carry objects (keys, knife something sharp) when I walk alone at night,” and “I ask friends to walk me to my car/the subway if it is late at night;” participants were asked to respond on a scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree, with 4 = don’t know/not applicable at the midpoint. The FORS yields a single factor; in our sample, $\alpha = .938$.

3.6.1 Results. We re-tested both predictions (i) and (ii) in a single one-way ANOVA model of a mean comparison of four groups – women not in a relationship ($M=2.47$, $SD=0.97$, $n$
women in a relationship but not living with their partner (M=2.58, SD=1.06, n = 33); women without children living with their romantic partner (M=2.72, SD=0.87, n = 58); and women living with their romantic partner and offspring (M=2.25, SD=1.01, n = 40) – with the single-item dependent measure, concern with sexual assault. This analysis revealed no significant difference between these groups (p = .12). As in the case of Study 1, we also computed post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction and found that all individual mean comparisons between groups were nonsignificant (p’s > .11).

Next, we tested both predictions in the same manner using the FORS as the dependent measure in place of the single-item dependent variable. Again, the four groups – women not in a relationship (M=4.11, SD=1.07, n = 73); women in a relationship but not living with their partner (M=4.08, SD=1.19, n = 36); women without children living with their romantic partner (M=4.20, SD=0.98, n = 57); and women living with their romantic partner and offspring (M=4.48, SD=1.23, n = 40) – did not significantly vary from each other (p = .31). Again, we also computed post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction and found that all individual mean comparisons between groups were nonsignificant (p’s > .50). Once again, testing the independence of age and cohabitation status (prediction [iv]) was not possible for either dependent measure, as there was no effect for cohabitation.

3.7 Discussion

Testing predictions (i) and (ii) with a second sample and a better dependent measure again failed to produce significant differences in fear of rape between partnered and unpartnered women. These results are inconsistent with T & T’s hypothesis that, driven by the putative extra cost of potential abandonment as a result of sexual assault faced by women in long-term
relationships, natural selection has crafted psychological mechanisms that serve to calibrate rape-avoidance behaviors in light of relationship status.

### 3.8 General Discussion

We question the validity of existing evidence (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; McKibbin, Shackelford, Miner, Bates, and Liddle, 2011) adduced in support of the hypothesis that partnered women’s responses to sexual assault or the risk thereof reflect the added potential cost of a reduction in investment by their mate. As discussed above, the methods employed to collect said evidence are subject to multiple substantive problems. Our own attempts to verify T & T’s hypothesis consistently produced null results. Admittedly, our methods are subject to limitations, as measuring attitudinal fear of rape is an indirect avenue for testing predictions regarding the costs of rape; hence, in future studies, it would be preferable to further examine women’s attitudes post-rape. Some readers may conclude that a possible wrinkle in linking our attitudinal measures of fear of rape to the sequelae of rape is the fact that individuals can be poor at forecasting how they will feel after taxing events (for an overview of this literature, see Gilbert & Ebert, 2002). However, while the imperfect nature of people’s attempts to project themselves into the future could conceivably lead women to underestimate the costs of rape, in general, the literature addressing the former topic concerns the details of forecasters’ accuracy, not their general ability to recognize events that are or are not in their best interests. At the pragmatic level, it is difficult to imagine that women would fail to recognize that being raped is a terrifying and traumatic experience. At the theoretical level, it would be a perverse design indeed were it the case that adaptations that shape behavior in light of the relative costs of sexual assault were only operational post hoc, i.e., after rape, when the costs
have already been incurred, or are imminent. Surely, if such adaptations exist, they must be active prospectively, and, when successful, will generally preclude rape entirely.

Consonant with the above position, as noted earlier, an existing literature contradicts the notion that partnered victims of rape experience poorer adjustment than unpartnered victims. At the same time, we acknowledge that, for multiple reasons, there is a high risk of marital discord following sexual assault committed by a third party. We suspect that additional clarity in this regard may be achieved by examining the male spouse as a contributing factor in such discord, particularly the extent of his proprietary attitude toward his partner, and his corresponding sense that his rights of exclusive sexual access have been violated (Wilson & Daly, 1992), as well as his sense of failure to protect his mate from harm (McCahill, Meyer, and Fischman, 1979). Additional variation in marital discord following sexual assault by a third party may stem from the woman’s conception risk, including her use of contraception, her position in the menstrual cycle, and, perhaps, coital versus non-coital rape.

Relatedly, in our reading of the existing literature, beyond T & T’s four articles, there is no support for T & T’s highly original notion that women in long-term relationships who have been beaten in the course of sexual assault experience significantly less psychological pain or less marital discord. Rather, we endorse a simpler logic in which the greater the woman is harmed, the more difficult her recovery, and, correspondingly, the greater the potential for marital discord stemming from the stresses that such recovery places on the relationship.

In light of the analytic problems and negative or inconsistent results plaguing T & T’s four articles on the topic of the sequelae of rape, the lack of extensive support from other investigations, and our own uniformly null results in this regard, we suggest that it is time to
discard the concretizing statements of Thornhill and Palmer (2000) regarding the results of T & T’s investigations. Rape is a deeply disturbing social ill and a profound tragedy for victims and those close to them. Neither social policy nor clinical practice are advanced by accepting as proven ideas that, howsoever logical and theoretically cogent they may be, nevertheless remain largely unsupported by empirical evidence.
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Chapter 4: Narcotics Anonymous: Anonymity, Admiration, and Prestige in an Egalitarian Community

4.1 Introduction

The U.S. National Drug Intelligence Center estimates the national cost of drug abuse and trafficking at $215 billion in health care, criminal justice, lost productivity, and environmental impact (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). This staggering cost does not include suffering experienced by the victims of addiction and those around them. One of the most popular institutions supporting the recovery of addicts is Narcotics Anonymous (NA). NA is a Twelve-Step self-help / mutual-aid group patterned after, and historically derived from, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Like AA, NA is a free, long-term recovery-oriented program, frequently offered to individuals in need via referrals by healthcare and criminal justice institutions. There is evidence that Twelve-Step groups are efficacious (Fiorentine, 999; Humphreys, 2004; Kelly et al., 2009; Kownacki & Shadish, 1999), especially in conjunction with other treatment modalities (Finney et al., 1998; Fiorentine & Hillhouse, 2000; Mankowski et al., 2001). However, while volumes of clinical reports and ethnographic works address AA, NA remains woefully understudied. The goal of this paper is to fill this lacuna by presenting an account of NA informed by theoretical considerations of the relationship between prestige and egalitarianism in acephalous social bodies.

The majority of descriptive works concerning AA focus on discourse and identity change, and take at face value the claim that egalitarianism characterizes social relationships in Twelve-Step programs (Bateson, 1971; Brandes, 2002; Cain, 2009; Holland et al., 1998; Humphreys, 2004; Jensen, 2000; Wilcox, 1998). We argue that, while accurate, this characterization is superficial. In NA, below the surface of an overt ethos of egalitarianism exists
an implicit prestige hierarchy. The social terrain of an ideology of egalitarianism juxtaposed with a prestige-based social structure is navigated by members as part of their identity change, as their own social standing is inextricably linked to their identity. Members negotiate their social standing within the NA community according to the orthodoxy of the organization and norms taught and modeled by experienced members. Hence, NA relies on prestigious individuals to form the core structure of this decentralized institution, maintaining it in a relatively uniform fashion across numerous instantiations around the world. In this way, while nested within larger nation-states, NA parallels the dynamic tension in small-scale societies between egalitarianism and hierarchies based on prestige. Of particular importance, as is likely true of many small-scale societies, in NA it is largely prestigious individuals who reinforce local norms – including the norm of egalitarianism.

4.2 History and Structure of NA

The NA World Service Office (WSO) serves as the legal entity in intellectual property matters, publishes NA’s literature, and provides limited services to NA groups. In this capacity, the WSO publishes a text recounting NA’s early history (NAWS, 1998a). Additionally, Stone (1997) independently writes about his experiences with NA as a WSO employee, and includes an early history of NA based on archival information. Several historical events are widely agreed upon, the most important of which is that NA was directly adapted from AA’s organizational model.

Beginning in the 1940s, various attempts to establish mutual-aid support groups for drug addiction were made in several locations, but most failed (NAWS, 1998a; Stone, 1997). It is widely believed that NA was founded in California’s San Fernando Valley. Jimmy Kinnon is
credited with adopting and revising the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of AA with minimal changes so as to be applicable to drug addiction. Other early movements that did not follow the Twelve Traditions splintered under the influence of outside organizations and strong personalities (Humphreys, 2004; Stone, 1997).

NA’s self-produced literature has been cited as both the reason for NA’s growth and the source of its identity independent from AA (NAWS, 2008b). This literature distinguishes NA from AA with a more secular tone, a more accessible voice, and encouragement of total abstinence from illicit drugs, prescription abuse, and alcohol. Total abstinence is referred to as “being clean.” Like AA, membership in NA is voluntary and can be quite fluid, with new members attending and dropping out on a frequent basis – although most groups have a stable core of regular attendees. While attendance records are not kept, it is known that, compared to fewer than 200 groups at first count in 1978, today there are more than 58,000 weekly meetings, held in 131 countries (NAWS, 2010b).

NA’s goals for its members are abstinence, to become free of the obsession to use drugs, and to find a new way of life in the interests of long-term recovery from addiction. The latter reflects an explicit endorsement of the disease concept of drug addiction, paralleling that of alcoholism (Jellinek, 1960; see NAWS, 2008a:13), and the belief that abstinence and personal change are necessary for recovery. This process of change has the explicit goal of attaining a personal spiritual awakening, the nature of which is undefined, being left to NA members to understand in their own fashion. The main text of NA notes that an awakening can take many forms, but may include “an end to loneliness and a sense of direction in our lives,” and may be “accompanied by an increase in peace of mind and a concern for others” (Narcotics Anonymous,
As codified by Step Twelve, the spiritual awakening is believed to be the direct result of practicing the Steps themselves.

As in AA, the basic organizational unit of NA is the group, a collective of individuals who acknowledge being addicts and who come together for the purpose of helping each other stay clean. A group may hold several meetings per week, but, in most cases, one group corresponds to one meeting place and time per week. Just as personal recovery is guided by the Twelve Steps, the service structure of NA is guided by the Twelve Traditions, and, like the Steps, the Traditions are modifications of similar features of AA.

The Twelve Traditions establish the group as completely self-supporting and autonomous “except in matters affecting other groups or NA as a whole” (NAWS, 2008a:60). NA is a nonprofessional organization, and has no official stance or stake in other organizations (political, religious, clinical, etc.). Membership is open to anyone who has a “desire to stop using” (NAWS, 2008a:60). Leaders serve the organization; they do not govern over groups, service bodies, or individuals. Paramount is an emphasis on unity and anonymity (more on this below). The Ninth Tradition tells members that “we ought not create a governing hierarchy, a top-down bureaucracy dictating to our groups or members” (NAWS 1993:193). However, service boards or committees may be created to help groups achieve their purpose. This gives NA, like AA, a nested, hierarchical structure (see NAWS, 2002; NAWS, 2010). However, in principle and in practice, larger levels of the organization are accountable to, and ultimately serve, the groups. Service boards and committees support groups by providing services such as directories of local meetings, informational helplines, and interfacing with public and private organizations (healthcare, judicial, etc.) (NAWS, 2010b).
Decision-making in NA is consensus-based, taking place primarily at the group level (NAWS, 1993:134-143). Systems of communication between groups and the WSO allow this bottom-up structure to function. Central to this process is an egalitarian creed. NA states: “the conscience of a group is most clearly expressed when every member is considered an equal” (NAWS, 1993:138). In sum, NA is an acephalous, egalitarian organization relying heavily on the nonprofessional leadership of members who are accountable to groups at the local level.

Below we present a description of NA meetings, followed by an analysis of the tension between the selflessness and egalitarianism prescribed by the organization’s codified norms and implicit prestige hierarchies. This account is based on the first author’s (JKS’) interactions with NA in varying contexts and locations since 1984, familiarity with hundreds of NA members, attendance at many hundreds of NA meetings, and reading of NA’s literature. In addition to observing as a visiting anthropologist, JKS was able to observe many meetings in his capacity as a mental health professional escorting clients to NA meetings. Observations are recounted from memory, as recording meetings or taking notes would violate norms of anonymity and privacy that are foundational to meetings. All names listed are pseudonyms, meeting locations are redacted to protect the privacy and anonymity of informants, and specific events recounted are a mosaic constructed from multiple NA meetings. These observations are supplemented by short semi-structured interviews that JKS conducted in the spring of 2012 with thirty Southern Californian NA members (fifteen men and fifteen women) using a snowball sampling method. Informants were recruited at NA meetings and later interviewed by phone, with the understanding that written notes were being taken. Twenty-four informants agreed to be quoted verbatim. Per recommendations of the UCLA IRB, the sample was restricted to those who reported being a member of NA for at least seven years (and hence were unlikely to be current
users of illicit substances). Open-ended interviews focused on three questions: What attributes (traits / characteristics) do you find to be admirable in NA members? How much do you value time clean as an important attribute in other members? What attributes in other NA members do you find to be contemptible?

4.3 The NA Meeting

Just as groups are the primary unit of social organization, meetings are the primary context of social interaction among members. NA meetings are structurally similar to AA meetings (Brandes, 2002; Jensen, 2000; Wilcox, 1998). Meetings begin and end with a ritual invocation, typically recited in unison by all members. Invocations mark the sacredness (Brandes, 2002) of the temporal space, or at least the formality of the context. Meetings open with several two- to three-minute readings from NA texts, generally intended to inform newcomers – and make experienced members mindful – of the basic structure and tenets of NA. Most meetings take one of two forms: speaker meetings and open discussion meetings (see NAWS, 1997). A speaker meeting consists of one relatively experienced member presenting a verbal narrative of their experiences as an addict, why they decided to get clean, and how they got clean. A goal of this format is to evoke identification between the speaker and the other members. In open discussion meetings, members take turns presenting shorter narratives. Discussions may be topical or freer in content. Narratives may include briefer versions of personal experiences akin to those presented at speaker meetings, but can also be expressions of pain, or accounts of difficulties. These narratives are often intended to be cathartic and / or elicit the support of other members. Narratives may also be intended to be inspirational. Meetings have strong norms governing participation (cf. Mäkelä et al., 1996 regarding AA): turn taking is cardinal, individuals should only speak about themselves, individuals should not directly
contradict previous speakers’ statements, nor should direct advice be offered, and members should not endorse outside entities (therapeutic, religious, etc.). Members introduce themselves before sharing with a stereotypical statement, “My name is X and I am an addict.” The norm is for everyone in attendance to respond in unison “Hi X!” To provide a feel for the experience of participating in meetings, a description of one typical open discussion meeting follows:

Members begin to arrive at the community room of a local church – rented by the group – in urban Southern California at 7:30p.m., half an hour before the start of the meeting. Designated members (“trusted servants”) set up the meeting space, arranging chairs in a circle and making coffee. The meeting space fills with members; some outside smoking cigarettes, others inside the meeting area; most exchange greetings and catch up on recent events in their lives. A few individuals sit sullenly, waiting for the meeting to begin. Almost thirty members arrive by the start of the meeting. From past interactions with this group, I [JKS] know that membership spans lower-income to upper-middle class individuals, but all members are dressed quite casually, and most sport conspicuous tattoos. Conversations inside and outside are loud and jovial. The secretary of the meeting steps outside and informs others that the meeting is about to begin.

The leader announces that it is time to begin the meeting and states: “Hi! My name is Barbara and I am an addict.” The group responds loudly in unison, “Hi Barbara!” “Let’s begin with the Serenity Prayer… God…” The group responds “God… Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” The leader continues with a format that has been adopted by this group: “Welcome to the Wednesday Night Hope group of Narcotics Anonymous. This is an open discussion meeting and all are welcome to attend.” She continues, asking visitors and new members to introduce themselves. A young man meekly raises his hand and, with an air of recalcitrance,
reports “My name is Jack and I’m an addict” – the words barely discernable. The room erupts, with most members responding to the greeting with “Hi Jack!” while some members call out “Welcome!” “Keep coming back!” and “You’re in the right place!” simultaneously. I [JKS] introduce myself as an anthropologist observing the meeting. The group responds with “Hi Jeff” and “Welcome!”

The leader asks someone to read a brief selection from the NA Basic Text (2008a:13) that addresses addicts’ prior inability to accept responsibility for the harm they were doing to themselves and others, the failure of other treatment avenues, and their acknowledgment that they suffer from a disease that can be arrested but not cured. There are several announcements, including the availability of literature at the meeting, local recovery-related social events, and the announcement of a group conscience meeting after the meeting itself in which matters of group business will be discussed. In addition, while the Twelve Traditions are read, a basket is passed in which most attendees place a dollar (collections to cover a group’s expenses are customary at NA meetings).

One member is designated to recognize milestones in recovery. Michael stands and asks members “Does anyone have one to twenty-nine days clean? … Is anyone celebrating 30 days of recovery?” etc. (The WSO provides colored key-fobs commemorating early milestones in recovery [30 days, 60 days, 90 days, etc.] and bronze medallions commemorating yearly milestones.) No one accepts a key-fob, but Michael goes on: “I know we have one birthday to celebrate tonight…” (a “birthday” being the commemoration of a yearly milestone) “Bob is celebrating six years clean!” The group claps and cheers for Bob as he walks to the front of the room where a cake with six lit candles awaits. The group sings “Happy Birthday” with the refrain at the end “…keep coming back … CLEAN!” and claps again. Bob holds up the
medallion for the group to see while bowing his head slightly, in apparent deference, then says softly: “I’d like to thank my sponsor Michael for giving me the cake, all his support and putting up with me…” [The group laughs lightly.] “I’d also like to thank my Higher Power and the group. Thank you for my recovery.” The group cheers and applauds again as Bob returns to his seat, and then focuses again on Barbara.

Barbara reports that she has selected the topic of gratitude for the meeting and, according to the agreed format of the meeting, “shares” for approximately ten minutes, introducing the topic. She recounts the desperation she had experienced as an addict; waking in the morning and having to fix, dreading the things she would have to do that day in order to obtain the drugs she needed just to prevent herself from becoming physically ill. Her words are delivered without evident shame or regret, but the message is clear – she had been miserable the way she was living and was trapped by addiction. She goes on to recount several previous attempts to get clean in NA that were unsuccessful, taking responsibility for those failures, and noting that she did not follow such suggestions as going to meetings regularly, obtaining a sponsor, or working Steps. After a few minutes, she shifts to a tone of hope, acknowledging gratitude for the desperation she experienced, as it made her willing to try all the suggestions of the program. She plainly expresses gratefulness for freedom from active addiction, the ability to be a member of her family again, and the friendships she has made in NA. She is able to work again and support herself and her children. Barbara concludes after ten minutes by reporting that her life is not perfect and neither is she, but NA allows her to be solution-oriented, progressing in her life and personal growth. Having set the tone, she then opens the meeting for other members to take turns sharing.
Members raise their hands to share and are selected, in turn, by Barbara. Most echo the structure and sentiment of her presentation, “sharing” for three to five minutes; beginning by recounting how bad their addiction had been, and contrasting that experience with their current lives in recovery. Jack, the newcomer, remains quiet and sullen throughout.

The tone of the meeting changes abruptly when a member named Claudia introduces herself curtly. She becomes tearful as she recounts having difficulty negotiating a personal relationship with her employer. She expresses anger and frustration with herself for her self-perceived failure. She adds that, in general, she is grateful to be clean, but is not feeling grateful lately because of the challenging situation she is in.

The tone of the meeting changes just as abruptly when Scott introduces himself. His tone is loud – possibly intended to be inspirational – and, seemingly in response to Claudia’s remarks, borders on preaching, although he restricts himself to sharing his personal experiences. Scott reports that when he encounters challenges or personal difficulties, he does not always experience gratitude as a feeling. Rather, his gratitude is expressed as action. He expounds on this, reporting that when he does not feel well, he is of service to NA and other addicts as an expression of gratitude for the recovery he was freely given in NA. Scott adds that this action helps him stay clean until he feels better.

Just before 9:00 p.m., Barbara announces that time has run out for sharing, thanks everyone for doing so, and notes that the meeting will close with a moment of silence for the addict who still suffers, followed by the Third-Step Prayer. The room becomes silent for several moments as many members bow their heads. Members stand in a circle with their arms around one another’s shoulders. Barbara begins the closing invocation “Many addicts have said…” The
group responds in unison “…take my will and my life; guide me in my recovery; show me how to live.” Then the group states loudly, again in unison, “Keep coming back! It works if you work it!”

The group breaks up into knots of members engaged in conversation, with an abundance of smiles and hugs about the room. People gravitate to the newcomer, Jack, and to Claudia, who reported having difficulties, in order to offer sympathy and support. Some members clean the meeting space. As is typical, members talk after the meeting for approximately half an hour.

The group business meeting is open for anyone to attend and all are encouraged to do so; however, only six core members of the group and I are present. Group business is quickly addressed, primarily concerning how much of the month’s donations should be allocated to rent, literature, and contributions to the area body (the next level in the organizational structure).

Immediately following the conclusion of monetary matters, Carolyn, a regular attendee with substantial clean time, rather eloquently raises a concern and suggests a solution. Carolyn reports that she has noticed several members monopolizing the meeting time with exceptionally long narratives. Carolyn notes that this violates both the letter and the spirit of the Twelve Traditions, as, when a narrative goes on too long, fewer members are able to take their turn speaking, including newer members who often need to share their progress and struggles. She makes a motion that members be asked to conclude their narratives within three to five minutes, with a change in the meeting format so as to include an announcement of this; a trusted servant would keep track of how long someone is sharing. The secretary of the meeting accepts a second to the motion and opens the floor for discussion.
Bob, who accepted a medallion earlier, somewhat less eloquently supports the motion, singling out a member named Carrie, not present, as being particularly guilty of such actions. He complains that Carrie “takes the entire meeting hostage” with long diatribes intended to chide and advise newcomers, rather than “sharing experience, strength, and hope.” Other members, speaking out of turn, noisily agree with Bob.

The secretary brings the meeting back to order and focuses on the motion on the floor, calling for a vote; there is unanimous support for the motion. Then the secretary asks informally for a volunteer to speak to Carrie about the length and content of her narratives. Carolyn acknowledges having a good relationship with Carrie, and volunteers to talk to her in private regarding the concerns raised by the group.

4.4 Orthodoxy & Anonymity

As evident in the exclusive use of first names, the self-revealing nature of statements, the extensive turn-taking, and the emotional, social, and physical support offered by members to one another, NA meetings are overtly egalitarian. For example, the “leader” of a meeting simply serves to set the tone and facilitate the meeting in an orderly fashion. Importantly, egalitarianism is a central feature of NA orthodoxy, articulated at length in NA’s literature (1991, 1993, 2002, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a). As we will explain in detail, egalitarianism is valued for three reasons. First, participation in the fellowship among members of equal footing is idealized as part of the process of individual recovery from the disease of addiction. Second, egalitarianism is viewed as the foundation on which mutualism (relations in which both participants benefit) rests. Third, egalitarianism, codified as anonymity, is believed to be necessary to the structural
integrity of the organization. In short, egalitarianism is thought to be good for the individual, necessary for mutualistic aid, and good for the institution. We address each aspect in turn below.

In deconstructing the dimensions of egalitarianism, we turn first to NA ethnopsychology as articulated in NA’s literature. This ethnopsychology holds that addicts are a type of person characterized by an intense desire for gratification, and, indeed, many addicts report that they went to great lengths to manipulate those around them in order to try to fulfill their desires, often weaving elaborate stories, justifying their behaviors by casting themselves as the victim of circumstance or some vague persecution (NAWS, 2008a). When those around them confront the addict regarding their dishonesty and manipulations, and consequently withdraw financial or emotional support (for example, many families refuse to offer bail monies after several instances of incarceration), the addict often feels betrayed and isolated. In addition, individuals who were acquainted with or intimate with the addict often offer unwanted advice and pressure them to behave differently, to stop or control their substance use. Addicts often recoil at this and choose to withdraw or strike back at those trying to intervene. Intervening institutions (such as the justice system or the health care system) may be deeply resented by the addict. Many NA members report that, as stigmatized and marginalized individuals, they previously experienced extreme resentment toward, and resistance to, society. Addicts often state that they felt both profound inferiority and superiority – sometimes simultaneously. One quipped to JKS that “an addict is the only person who can be laying in the gutter and still stare down their nose at someone.”

Either through the result of self-imposed withdrawal or institutionally or individually imposed marginalization, the end result is the same: isolation and alienation. NA literature
(NAWS, 2008a) presents a characterization of members’ collective experience while in active addiction:

Our disease isolated us from people except when we were getting, using and finding the ways and means to get more. Hostile, resentful, self-centered, self-seeking, we cut ourselves off from the outside world. …Our world shrank and isolation became our life. We used in order to survive. It was the only way of life that we knew. (4)

Most NA members relate deeply to this assessment – that at the core of their problems is a deluded desire for gratification, the pursuit of which yields a deep sense of isolation. Many addicts report that, even when they were surrounded by a community of other addicts, their social network was unreliable, and other addicts were not true friends. Many are fond of saying: “I had acquaintances that I used with – not friends.”

One of the prescribed solutions to the above maladies is to find humility. Humility is conceptualized as a central spiritual principle for recovery (NAWS 2008a). One route to humility is achieving accurate self-assessment through the process of practicing Steps Four and Five – taking a thorough inventory (a systematic self-appraisal) and sharing it with another person. Often this other is another addict because “[w]e recognize that one addict can best understand and help another addict” (NAWS, 2008a:59). Intrinsic to this process is the realization that one suffers an affliction – an affliction for which the individual is not responsible, but that has a solution for which one can be responsible (NAWS, 1993). Fundamental to humility is a creed of egalitarianism. The member’s acceptance that he or she is neither the worst nor the most important person is based on the equality of addicts. NA literature states: “[w]e found that no matter what our past thoughts and actions were, others had felt and done the same. Surrounded
by fellow [recovering] addicts, we realized that we were not alone anymore” (NAWS, 2008a:15). Exemplifying this, when asked about admiration of other members, an informant reported that “NA has helped me see people eye-to-eye; nobody is above me or below me.”

As noted above, NA also suggests to addicts that they have an intrinsic problem with a selfish notion that all their desires must be immediately gratified; NA characterizes this as self-will or self-centeredness (NAWS, 1993:26). NA literature states a refrain that is familiar to all members, that “[w]e seemed to be incapable of facing life on its own terms” (NAWS, 2008A:13). To address this malady, NA suggests that another route to humility comes in the form of intentional ego deflation – the eventual realization, and acceptance, by the member that their expectations are largely unrealistic and that they may not be the most important person in any given context. Members are encouraged to replace self-centeredness with “selfless” aid to other members, as codified by the Twelfth Step; this admonishment is taken seriously as a basic tenet of the program and is uniformly practiced by NA members. Central to this practice is the acknowledgement that all members are of equal status. Hence, egalitarianism is viewed as the starting point of ego deflation and the diminution of self-centeredness.

Another prescribed solution to the maladies described above – particularly the addict’s sense of isolation – is for members to integrate themselves into and participate in the fellowship. Participation may consist simply of attending meetings, but can also include socializing before or after meetings, and participating in other activities with NA members. More experienced members typically suggest that new members get as involved in the fellowship as possible – especially early on in the recovery process, as intense feelings of isolation can make abstinence difficult. Some of the materials read before the vast majority of meetings speak directly to new members and highlight an egalitarian ethos:
Anyone may join us regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion or lack of religion. We are not interested in what or how much you used, who your connections were, what you have done in the past, how much or how little you have, but only in what you want to do about your problem and how we can help. (NAWS, 2008a:9)

These words are important to members because addicts can often be deeply suspicious and mistrustful of any institution. In addition, NA explicitly prescribes identification with other addicts as the solution to the feeling of isolation, and describes NA meetings as “a process of identification, hope and sharing” (2008a:11). NAWS (2008a) states: “From the isolation of our addiction, we find a fellowship of people with a common bond of recovery. NA is like a lifeboat in a sea of isolation, hopelessness and destructive chaos” (98).

NA codifies egalitarianism as necessary to mutualistic endeavors. In the abstract, mutualism is not contingent on egalitarianism. For example, agricultural patron systems are mutualistic arrangements with a clear status differential between landowner and farmer, wherein the landowner serves as the interface with larger market and governmental systems, while the farmer provides labor (Causi, 1975). However, despite the logical possibility of mutualism without egalitarianism, NA orthodoxy holds that the characteristics of the addict are such as to necessitate egalitarianism if addicts are to help one another in mutualistic interactions. NA (2008a) admonishes its members: “The temptation to give advice is great, but when we do so we lose the respect of newcomers;” rather, “[w]e share from our own personal experience what it has been like for us” (51). Consonant with their portrait of the addict as isolated, aloof, and recalcitrant, all of NA’s prescriptions for personal recovery are presented as suggestions. The comments introducing the Twelve Steps exemplify this: “If you want what we have to offer and are willing to make the effort to get it, then you are ready to take certain steps” (NAWS,
Many members repeat a common observation that NA is not a program for those that need it, it is a program for those that want it (cf. Holland et al., 1998, ch.4 on AA).

While individuals’ accrued experience is overtly valued, that valuation is tempered by the notion that the NA fellowship is based simply on *any* one addict helping *any* other addict. NA literature explicitly states: “Even a member with one day in the NA Fellowship can carry the message that this program works” (NAWS, 2008a:50). Exemplifying this, a 33-year old woman with ten years clean reported that she has been more inspired by a person with one year clean sharing at a meeting than by a member with twenty years clean. NA explicitly admonishes its members: “We don’t set ourselves up as gods… we help [new people] feel welcome and help them learn what the program has to offer” (NAWS, 2008a:50), and “[f]or anyone that wants our way of life, we share experience, strength, and hope instead of preaching and judging” (NAWS, 2008a:58).

A special mutualistic relationship among NA members is that of the sponsor and sponsee. A sponsor is a member who helps another member, the sponsee, to practice a daily program of recovery and negotiate/practice the Twelve Steps. Exemplifying the value placed on experience, the sponsor is almost always a more experienced member than the sponsee. The transmission of information is usually unidirectional – from sponsor to sponsee. Sponsees typically solicit input from the sponsor by presenting a particular difficulty or question to the sponsor; importantly, however, orthodoxy dictates that the sponsor’s response is to consist of recounting the sponsor’s relevant past experiences – the sponsor is not to provide direct dictates to the sponsee. Although the flow of information usually travels from a more to a less experienced member, this is still viewed as a mutualistic relationship. While sponsors sometimes receive help from sponsees, even if this never or only rarely occurs, NA nevertheless considers the relationship to be
mutualistic because the sponsor is thought to profit from the opportunity to provide selfless service to another. As outlined in Step Twelve, selfless help provided to another member is viewed as beneficial to the provider. Consonant with NA’s ethnopsychological model of addicts as suspicious of authority, the mutualistic nature of the relationship is explicitly framed in egalitarian terms – describing the sponsorship relationship, NA states: “We’re developing a give-and-take relationship based on equality and mutual respect” (NAWS, 1993:56), and “we can help best by not managing that person’s life, but by sharing our own experience” (NAWS, 1993:119). Even if a sponsor has professional training, direct advice, with its connotations of authority and inequality, should not be offered in the context of the sponsorship relationship: “the value in the message we share with one another lies in our personal experience in recovery, not in our credentials, our training, or our professional status” (NAWS, 1993:186). Hence, mutualistic aid is viewed as necessarily rooted in egalitarianism – one member helping another, with both being on equal footing.

Egalitarianism is also considered essential to the working service structure of NA, and is explicitly codified by the Twelve Traditions. Traditions are rules intended to be followed: “The Twelve Traditions are not negotiable. They are the guidelines that keep our fellowship alive and free” (NA 2008a: 61). Central to issues of egalitarianism, Tradition Twelve states: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all of our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities” (NAWS, 1993:209). Indeed, anonymity is considered to be a spiritual principle by NA and its members.

Though largely ill-defined, according to NA, spirituality is divorced from any particular religion. NA intentionally leaves spirituality under-specified in order to allow for a diversity of personal experience – members are encouraged to pursue and define the spiritual experience for
themselves (including the identification of a power greater than themselves). NA spirituality can be understood as an acknowledgement that certain aspects of the human experience are non-tangible and non-material. Anonymity as a spiritual principle thus does not mean that members will be uniformly devoid of defining characteristics. Rather, framing anonymity in spiritual terms, NA endorses putting one’s own desires aside in the interest of personal recovery, in the interest of mutualistic aid to other members, and for the good of the group. NA states:

In personal recovery, we seek to replace self-will with the guidance of a Higher Power in our personal affairs. In the same way the Traditions describe a fellowship that takes its collective guidance from spiritual principles rather than individual personalities. That kind of selflessness is what the Twelfth Tradition means by the word “anonymity” (NAWS, 1993:209).

Highlighting the contrast between self-will and anonymity, NA literature states: “Self-will still leads us to make decisions based on manipulations, ego, lust and false pride” (NAWS, 2008a:80), but “[t]he drive for personal gain in the areas of sex, property and social position…falls by the wayside if we adhere to the principle of anonymity” (NAWS, 2008a:76), and, when helping others “[we] place the principle of anonymous, selfless giving before whatever personal desires we may have for recognition or reward” (NAWS, 1993:212). This “namelessness” and putting aside of self-serving desires is intended to create a state of equality among members. Hence, anonymity, a central tenet of the organization, translates into egalitarianism.

Consistent with the ethos of egalitarianism and the principle of anonymity, leaders are intended to serve – not guide, direct, or dictate. Leaders are selected by consensus, and
leadership is explicitly guided by the principle of anonymity. NA states: “When we ask members to serve, we don’t set them apart as being somehow better than the rest of us. Leadership in NA is a service, not a class of membership” (NAWS, 1993:139), and “our leaders are not governors but servants taking their direction from the collective conscience of those they serve” (NAWS, 1993:193). As such, leaders are equal members, and all members are encouraged to serve in some capacity.

NA acknowledges that its “trusted servants” will have both personalities and individual talents or skills relevant to service. However, more important than any specific skill set, leaders should have humility and integrity (NAWS, 1992; NAWS, 1993; NAWS, 2008b). Leaders are dissuaded from pursuing personal agendas and personal desires in service to NA. NA states: “Although individual ambition and personal purpose may provide motivation for our development as human beings, our fellowship is guided by its collective purpose… we leave our personal agenda at the door” (NAWS, 1993:211), and “Those who serve on our various boards and committees are expected to do so not to seek power, property or prestige for themselves, but to selflessly serve the fellowship” (NAWS, 1993:213). With regard to personalities, NA states: “We enjoy the color, the compassion, the initiative, the rough-and-tumble liveliness that arises from the diverse personalities of our members,” but cautions that “[t]he principles of selfless service and collective guidance come before the personalities of our trusted servants” (NAWS, 1993:210). In addition, trusted servants are expected to serve limited terms in every service position, with rotating leadership; this constraint is explicitly aimed at limiting personal ambitions and resulting inequality “so that no one personality dominates” (NAWS, 1993:193). Trusted servants are admonished to be open to new ideas, cultivate good listening skills, and, above all else, heed the consensus of the members and groups that they serve or represent. NA
literature clearly states that, despite the appearance of hierarchy introduced by the organizational structure, “[w]e are equal in NA membership” (NAWS, 1993:215). NA orthodoxy thus explicitly prescribes an egalitarian ethos in all domains of the organization.

4.5 Prestige in Narcotics Anonymous

4.5.1 Prestige and Reverse Hierarchies. Having reviewed the orthodoxy of an egalitarian ethos in NA, we turn to the attainment of prestige by members. Before doing so, however, it is important to first provide a theoretical framework for understanding prestige. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) usefully define prestige as freely conferred deference; following Barkow (1989), they distinguish prestige from dominance, two conceptually distinct routes to status. Dominance-based status is social position achieved through force or the threat of force. In contrast, prestige-based status is achieved through others’ recognition of the prestigious individual’s skill, accomplishments, or expertise. Henrich and Gil-White argue that others defer to an accomplished individual because deference is an avenue for access, allowing deferring actors to observe, and thus learn from, the successful model. Hence, whereas dominance is the foundation of social structures in other social animals, because humans rely on cultural transmission to a far greater extent than other species, prestige, being an outgrowth of the desire to learn from successful others, is the basis of many human hierarchies. Consonant with this perspective, we argue that members of NA have goals, including long-term personal recovery and cultural competency within the context of the organization; they identify knowledgeable members; and, consequently, they admire, elevate, and emulate them in an effort to achieve those goals.
Examining the tension between egalitarianism and hierarchical structure in small-scale societies, Boehm (1993; see also 1997, 1999; Fried, 1967) argues that many such groups are characterized by reverse hierarchies wherein followers control their leaders through leveling mechanisms, including disapproval, ridicule, disobedience, and extreme sanctions including deserting, deposing, or assassinating the leader. Boehm suggests that humans have an evolved ambivalence toward leadership such that they attend carefully to whether the benefits of submitting to authority outweigh the costs, leading them to frequently resist being controlled by others. While the extent to which this assessment characterizes all groups remains uncertain, the concepts of reverse hierarchies and leveling mechanisms are nonetheless frequently applicable to egalitarian groups. Importantly, as individuals attain status through the prestige dynamics outlined by Henrich and Gil-White, opportunities arise to employ such status in the pursuit of self-interested goals, including translating prestige into dominance by marshaling followers in coercive actions against others. The propensity to pursue status is thus doubly threatening to egalitarian groups, as even seemingly innocuous competitions for prestige can ultimately translate into concrete inequality, a persistent problem addressed by the leveling mechanisms described by Boehm. We suggest that the principles and guidelines that structure NA are designed (whether intentionally, by architects of the institution, or, absent intention, via cultural evolution) to preempt this problem. However, they are only partially successful in this regard.

As we will discuss at length, a number of factors lead to the subversion of the prescribed ethos of anonymity and equality among NA members. First, as the organization recognizes, it takes time for members to fully grasp the relationship between egalitarianism and anonymity. Second, members may understand anonymity yet fall short in practice, or simply ignore it in the pursuit of self-interest. Third, despite its extensive textual corpus, NA relies on the experience -
based transmission of knowledge from more to less experienced members: members note that they could have read NA’s literature and still died – it was another addict that saved them. This reliance on experienced-based transmission encourages both the identification of experienced members and clear differentiations based on such experience. Subsequently, experienced members may be sought out for advice in both personal and group matters, creating a context in which reputations are evaluated and become a source of social capital. Lastly, the formal relationship between sponsor and sponsee, being generally premised on a disparity in experience and success in abstinence, inherently lends itself to the model / learner dynamic central to the generation of prestige. Below we first detail the vital constructive contributions of experienced members, then consider how the organization’s reliance on them opens the door to prestige competitions.

4.5.2 The Roles of Experienced Members and the Emergence of Prestige. At the organizational level, experienced members play a key role in maintaining NA as an institution, as they are looked to to keep groups and service bodies functioning according to codified principles, or take it upon themselves to do so. Likewise, experienced members start new meetings more frequently than newer members, and play the primary role in specifying the format of a meeting, including decisions about which invocations and readings will be used and the nature of opening remarks; the format, in turn, shapes the tone of a meeting. Indeed, the critical role of experienced members is evident in natural experiments when they are absent. Some meetings are composed primarily of those having minimal experience with NA. Such meetings can deteriorate into litanies, as members share their struggles and discomfort without sharing any resolutions, hope, or core principles of NA. This is not a case of norm violations – new members are doing what is expected of them. However, if experienced members are present,
they interject hope when a meeting takes a negative turn, pointing to NA core principles; without such management, meetings often fail to achieve their purpose.

In addition to their public roles, experienced members make vital contributions at a dyadic level. It is common for someone who has recounted difficulties during a meeting to subsequently seek the counsel of more experienced members. Likewise, experienced members are often adept at gauging someone’s discomfort and connecting it conceptually to a codified principle combined with their own experience, doing so after nearly every meeting. Many members state that this informal process is as important to personal recovery as the meetings themselves.

Dyadic exchanges following the meeting are an ephemeral form of the relationship that is formalized in sponsorship. In spite of the fundamentally equivalent status in principle of the sponsor and sponsee, in practice, the sponsor teaches the sponsee to work the Steps the same way the sponsor learned from her own sponsor. Likewise, sponsors play the primary role in teaching sponsees the Twelve Traditions and norms of behavior in the context of the service structure, subjects discussed less in meetings than other aspects of personal recovery. The sponsee is thus a protégé of the sponsor. Correspondingly, sponsees often report feeling indebted and grateful to their sponsors. Members often share about their positive experiences with their sponsors in the public context of meetings – sometimes referring to their sponsor by name despite proscriptions against this. Naming and extolling the virtues of a sponsor in meetings appears to reflect the sponsee’s desire to pay public tribute to the sponsor, and has the consequence of enhancing the sponsor’s reputation. More broadly, paying tribute to a member during a meeting is not restricted to the sponsor / sponsee relationship: mutual aid is common, hence members often feel indebted to each other, and gratitude for another’s help is sometimes acknowledged publicly. Generally,
these tributes appear not to be initiated, suggested, solicited or even endorsed by the target thereof.

As noted above, many groups publicly recognize milestones of clean time during meetings. Members report that this ritual is enacted with the express purpose of encouraging newer members in their recovery, demonstrating that long-term recovery is possible. However, this ritual also has the (perhaps unintended) consequence of drawing attention to clean time. When a member is recognized for multiple years in recovery, others often offer congratulations, accolades, or brief tributes at the meeting. In addition, public tribute is similarly paid to members who perform service functions. Meeting formats regularly include thanking the trusted servants, sometimes by name, followed by applause and “pats on the back.” Within the context of service boards or committees, new volunteers are usually welcomed and mentioned by name.

Importantly, as is common in many egalitarian societies, whenever a member is offered public tribute, in any context – as a sponsor, a helping member, someone celebrating a milestone, or for services performed – the recipient of the tribute responds stoically, as if the incident never occurred, with deferent gestures or postures, and expressions of self-effacing gratitude and humility if asked to speak. Overt self-aggrandizement in this context would constitute a serious norm violation, and we have never witnessed it. Nevertheless, despite this prescribed humility, because both formal and informal practices can generate disparities in prestige among members, competition for status is an ever-present threat to the egalitarian principles central to NA orthodoxy.

4.5.3 Prestige Competitions and Leveling Mechanisms in NA Meetings. The codified orthodoxy in NA’s literature serves as the basis for leveling mechanisms intended to limit the
pursuit of personal prestige. Members frequently remind each other of NA principles in every context of interaction – during service meetings, during fellowship social activities, and in informal conversation. Particularly during group business meetings, members are quick to point out self-centered behaviors or personal agendas that threaten to conflict with the group’s primary purpose. Although this practice can reflect a genuine effort to teach less-experienced members the norms of conducting group business or practicing personal recovery, it can also reflect a calculated effort to negatively sanction members who are attempting to exert control over others.

Ironically, voicing the codified norms of NA can serve as a display of expertise in an attempt at self-aggrandizement. Some speakers memorize passages of NA literature and integrate them into their narratives at meetings; less frequently, speakers compose narratives almost entirely from passages of NA literature, reciting verbatim and quoting page numbers. This practice yields mixed results: some are impressed with the speaker’s familiarity with literature, while others remark that they find the recitation of literature to be pretentious or insincere. Pejorative colloquialisms such as “book thumping” and “NA Nazi” connote disdain for perceived excessive attention to textual material and dogma.

Meetings sometimes appear to digress from the transmission of norms and experience into an implicit competition to voice the most enlightened viewpoint on a given topic. On such occasions there is a sense of rising tension in the meeting as each person shares; each member building on, and sometimes contradicting, viewpoints expressed by those who have shared previously – contravening the norms of conduct at meetings (cf. Wilcox, 1998:52, on AA). At such times, near the end of the meeting the most senior, or most respected, member in the room may be selected by the leader from among those volunteering to speak, in order to give them the final say on the topic – indeed, some groups make this an unspoken norm (some members
appreciate this practice as providing a positive dynamic; however, consonant with the tension between prestige and egalitarianism, others resent it on the grounds that it entails singling out individuals for special treatment). This exemplifies how the voices of experienced members rise above those of others with the help and appreciation of deferent individuals. However, if a group has a member who consistently poses as an authority, others may begin to avoid attending that group.

It can be difficult to distinguish between a member seeking admiration and one who is simply very knowledgeable about NA – indeed, they can be one and the same. Members seeking admiration often allude to having long periods of time clean, or baldly announce how long they have been clean – ostensibly to give newcomers hope that recovery is possible. Such members may also speak with great authority or spin narratives that demonstrate how successful they are in recovery. Although newcomers may fail to perceive displays of expertise as self-aggrandizement, experienced members are quick to see through veiled attempts to gain recognition and admiration. More than one-third of interviewees reported that they find this practice contemptible. A middle-aged woman with ten years clean remarked “Some people carry clean time as badges and derive ego from it.” Describing what he finds contemptible, a 52-year-old man with nineteen years clean stated “Power hungry people; people who are looking for a following.” It is in this context – a member intentionally seeking social position – that leveling mechanisms are most often employed. Negative gossip is circulated, or others may directly confront the member, citing orthodox NA principles. However, despite such efforts, some members succeed in gaining local fame, and have a small group of admirers. This interaction of a prestigious member with deferent followers is often formalized in sponsor / sponsee relationships.
Some individuals seek out sponsors who are well known in the local NA community, or have noteworthy clean time. These sponsees often advertise their association with well-known members, sometimes in contexts in which such information is extraneous. Contravening norms of anonymity and selflessness, the sponsor / sponsee relationship can thus provide a bilateral platform for self-aggrandizement – status-seeking sponsees gravitate toward prestigious sponsors in order to “bask in their reflected glory” (Cialdini et al., 1976), while the latter can, in turn, enhance their reputations by attracting a coterie of sponsees.

Consonant with the relationship between status and opportunities for self-interested behavior, a frequent violation of NA norms involves an experienced member (typically male) using his influence and social ties to attract a vulnerable newer member (typically female) into a romantic relationship. This is such a common occurrence that in the parlance of Twelve-Step programs it is called the “Thirteenth Step.” Individuals may present themselves as a helpful member offering the newcomer advice and assistance, invoking a sentiment of reciprocity in the latter, then rapidly shift the relationship towards romance. This strategy is often effective because new members tend to experience significant isolation, confusion, and discomfort, and are looking for emotional solace or simply distraction from the intensity of early recovery. In addition, relatively unrestricted sexuality is common among individuals in active addiction. Nevertheless, because it is difficult to keep secrets in such an intimate group, other members often quickly become aware of the situation. Experienced members thus enact such behaviors at their peril, as they are gossiped about, are usually confronted directly, and frequently suffer reputational damage. Additionally, if particular individuals or groups gain a reputation for predation, they may consequently be avoided by newer members.
Overall, the most common leveling mechanism utilized is direct confrontation (cf. Hoffman, 2006, on AA). Confrontations may occur in the context of playful banter – common between men – phrased as competitive exchanges of codified norms. Although such banter is often intended to test another’s wit, mettle, oratory skills, and command of norms, it can also include aggressive ridicule intended to cut another down to size. Alternately, confrontations sometimes take place in private, and can be delivered as either compassionate reminders or direct criticisms. In the privacy of business meetings, experienced members may also decide to act in consort during public meetings to limit the self-aggrandizing actions of an errant member. As a last resort, members may “vote with their feet” by shifting their attendance to another meeting in order to avoid a self-aggrandizer. In sum, paralleling ethnographic descriptions of many acephalous egalitarian societies as reviewed by Boehm (1993, 1999), gossip, direct confrontation, and, in extreme cases, desertion of a group may be used as leveling mechanisms in response to self-aggrandizement, attempts at control, or efforts to leverage one’s position for personal gain.

4.6 Conclusion

Be they hunter-gatherer bands or mutual-aid groups, all egalitarian social entities suffer the problem that successful performance in culturally-valued domains of action and the underlying possession of valued knowledge create the basis for voluntary deference by learners, generating inequalities in prestige that, in turn, threaten the egalitarian basis of interactions. For two reasons, this problem is particularly noteworthy in NA. On the one hand, sharing past experience is the cornerstone of aid – it is explicitly believed that recovery from addiction is premised on learning from others’ accounts. Likewise, lacking institutionalized mechanisms for enculturation, cultural competence is achieved primarily via tutelage by more senior members.
Yet, on the other hand, NA is premised on an ethnopsychology wherein addicts are seen as suffering from a critical personality flaw, egocentrism, which must be combated through the practice of selfless giving and the suppression of self-interest. Accordingly, viewed with regard to the containment of threats, leveling mechanisms are required to preserve the larger institution in the face of the corrosive effects of prestige competition. However, viewed with regard to the function of the institution, it is not obvious that prestige competition is an unalloyed bad. Minimally, mild competition motivates individuals to deepen their knowledge of textual orthodoxy and take on prescribed social functions. More broadly, the ever-present opportunities for pursuing prestige afforded by NA allow members to practice exactly that selflessness that NA prescribes. The experienced member who is able to serve anonymously, gently return meetings to an even keel, and provide sponsorship without self-interest, is, in so doing, exercising precisely those attributes that are believed to be the foundation for continued recovery. Hence, even as it proscribes self-interest, by inherently affording the pursuit thereof, NA continually presents its members with the opportunity to practice selflessness – an elegant, and effective, arrangement indeed.
References


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