

SEPARATENESS AS A RELATION: THE ICONICITY, UNIVOCALITY AND CREATIVITY OF KOROWAI MOTHER-IN-LAW AVOIDANCE

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A Korowai mother-in-law and son-in-law avoid seeing and touching each other, sharing food, speaking of each other in the singular, and uttering each other's names. I argue that these different avoided actions are understood as analogous forms of contact and impingement, and that the avoidances embody a qualitatively distinctive vision of social existence, according to which separateness, obligation, and uncertainty can be conjoined as positive bases of social connection. Avoidance practices epitomize and shape the broader institutional character of affinity as a relation of contingent accommodation and obligation. Korowai register these aspects of avoidance practice explicitly in their ideas about the consequences of transgression, and in their creative adjustment of the degrees of avoidance that they uphold.

'Mother-in-law avoidance' is an old anthropological topic, but one about which there are new and worthwhile things still to say. In this article, I examine the avoidance practices of mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs among Korowai-speakers of West Papua, the Indonesian-controlled western half of New Guinea. My findings bear not only on our understanding of avoidance institutions as such, but also on two very broad social theoretical problems. The first is whether there are qualitatively different human conceptions of what a 'social relationship' is and, if so, what might the important lines of variation then be. Examples of anthropologically canonical (if also controversial) statements on this problem include, to name just a few, Durkheim's famous typification of two kinds of solidarity, Dumont's studies of European individualism and South Asian holism, Sahlins's related proposals in writings about the historical agency of Polynesian and Fijian political leaders (1985; 1991), and Strathern's model of a distinctive Melanesian sociality (1988). In this article, I argue that Korowai mother-in-law avoidance does indeed embody a qualitatively distinctive vision of what a social relationship can be. In particular, these avoidance practices enact a vision of social life as being built out of gripping, uncertain engagement with persons markedly strange to oneself. Korowai mother-in-law avoidance offers an instructive case study of how some people make 'difference' a positive basis of social connection.

The second theoretical problem addressed here is whether people are reflexively conscious of the logic and effects of their social practices and, if so,

what the nature and consequentiality of that reflexive consciousness might then be. While mother-in-law avoidance is a classic example of what anthropologists once characterized as ‘rule-governed behaviour’, I argue here that such avoidance is a highly reflexive practice, in the sense that it is dominantly structured by practitioners’ own notions of what they are doing when they carry it out. However, these reflexive notions are not primarily expressed in explicit exegetic discourse. In the latter half of this article, I show that, in their actual bodily practice, Korowai mothers-in-law and sons-in-law situationally manipulate the conventions of avoidance to create a complex gradation of qualities of mother-in-law/son-in-law bonds. More generally, though, I argue that all levels of the practice of mother-in-law avoidance – such as the multiple forms of sensory contact that people avoid, the negative emotional, medical, and political consequences that are thought to follow avoidance breaches, and the ways in which people link avoidance to the broader moral character of affinity – are all informed by a single basic reflexive sensibility about the nature of social bonds. This is the sensibility mentioned above, according to which social bonds, and the mother-in-law bond in particular, are built out of close engagement with persons who are markedly separate and different.

An overview of the Korowai social landscape

Speakers of Korowai dialects number perhaps three thousand and live sparsely dispersed across about 500 square miles of dense lowland tropical forest, between 10 and 40 miles south of New Guinea’s central mountain chain, between 50 and 90 miles west of the troubled Indonesia-Papua New Guinea border, and more than 100 miles inland from the Arafura Sea to the southwest. Their landscape is a patchwork of hundreds of territorial homelands owned by named patrilines. In the southwestern Korowai area where I have worked, the median size of these clans is about ten persons, and the maximum about thirty. Many extinct or near-extinct clans remain socially significant in memory, and in living persons’ sorrowful orientations towards their dead relatives’ empty lands. Men build elevated houses, typically on their own patrilineal homelands, and men and women together clear and plant banana gardens around these houses. The staple foodstuff is sago starch, and stands of sago palms interspersed across the forest landscape figure importantly in people’s lives as property and as sites of labour. Brothers or other close relatives frequently build their houses together in a single clearing, but groupings of more than three dwellings are rare. Houses become physically uninhabitable between one and two years after completion (the expression *xaim dem-un*, ‘house breaking apart’, is a unit of time-reckoning), and households orbit continuously from one favoured house-building locality to another, across one or more clan homelands. Households themselves vary a great deal in their size and composition, both on a day-to-day basis and at the level of long-term membership. Most houses have among their focal occupants and owners at least one mature married couple with children.

The shape of this social landscape has been shifting in the last twenty years. A Dutch Reformed missionary organization was active on the southwestern margin of the Korowai-owned lands from 1979 until 1991, initiating village

formation and construction of an airstrip (see van Enk & de Vries 1997, an ethnographically rich study of the Korowai language by mission personnel). Many southwestern Korowai families and unmarried men now maintain part-time residences in one of the new villages, and alternate continuously between these village settings and their forested homelands to the north. Growing numbers of persons are proficient in a regional dialect of Indonesian, and are engaged in sporadic and fluctuating patterns of interchange with Indonesian government personnel from subdistrict administrative seats two or three days' travel southwest and southeast, with Euro-American tourists and film-makers, with a Papuan-administered Reformed church that assumed responsibility for some village infrastructure following departure of the expatriate missionaries, and with non-Papuan traders seeking eaglewood. Owing to their intermediary geographic position far from centres of governance, transport, and resource extraction, however, Korowai are presently living in a condition of notable autarky *vis-à-vis* the Indonesian state and immigrants from other islands of Indonesia, in comparison with the situations of other peoples of West Papua (but see Stasch 2001*b*).

The central political preoccupations of Korowai life include mortuary indemnification, witchcraft, and feasting. As a mode of mourning, non-co-resident relatives of a dead person request from that person's co-residents payments of pork, shell or tooth valuables, Indonesian paper money, steel tools, or other imported durable goods. Fulfilment or non-fulfilment of these requests is deeply consequential for the tenor of ongoing social relations across the landscape. Korowai are also intensely concerned with the presence among themselves of male witches (*xaxua*), whose furtive attacks on the bodies of living humans are thought to underlie all deaths. At an opposite pole from death-related preoccupations, Korowai collective life is punctuated by celebration of feasts sponsored by single patrilines. These events revolve around transactions between particular feast-owners and formal invitees from other places, who lead performance troupes to the sponsoring clan's homeland at the time of the feast peak to consume prestations of sago starch and sago grubs. These institutions – indemnification, witchcraft, and feasting – exist in and shape an overall social environment of volatile egalitarianism. Social bonds are continuously rebuilt in new forms, and perduring structures of political hierarchy are very limited.

Patterns of marriage

Of all the political preoccupations of Korowai life, the most constant are probably those surrounding marriage. Korowai hold that a given ego should not marry a member of ego's own patrilin, nor a member of ego's mother's patrilin, nor someone whose own mother is a member of ego's mother's patrilin. Hence, a person's four lineal grandparents are usually members of four different, biographically important clans, namely ego's own clan, the clan of ego's 'maternal uncles' (ego's mother's clan), and two clans of 'grandparents' (the 'maternal uncles' of ego's father and the 'maternal uncles' of ego's mother). There is a weak idealization of marriage with members of a grandparental clan, or with other persons who are likewise categorized as grandparents by

virtue of an Omaha-style kin terminology and various principles of expansive kin term application (Stasch 2001a: 190–237; van Enk & de Vries 1997: 139–47). Indeed, people develop important social connections with members of many further clans beyond the closest four, and marry in all different directions across the landscape. Clans do not usually enter into relations of stable alliance, nor even figure sharply as collective stakeholders in particular marriages.

Marriages come into existence in a great variety of ways. Sometimes couples court secretly and elope. More frequently, the parents or other senior relatives of a young woman or pre-pubescent girl betroth her to a mature man, typically at the man's initiative, and more often than not without regard for the thinking of the woman or girl herself, or even at odds with her thinking. Some young men marry widows considerably older than themselves, a pattern that (like child betrothal) is partially impelled by the fact that a fraction of mature men are married polygynously, generating imbalances between the numbers of single adolescent men and women. Occasionally, men forcibly take girls or women from their families, or from other men. Occasionally, too, women travel alone to the houses of men to whom they are attracted in order to marry them.

Across these and many other ways in which marriages are contracted, there is a notable politics of gender inequality. Marriages tend to be strongly viewed as acts of appropriation and encroachment on the part of the husband, but they tend not to be so strongly viewed as acts of appropriation and encroachment on the part of the wife. Women are subjects who think, feel, and act efficaciously in the shaping of their marital lives, but they are also frequently 'given' (*fedo-*) and 'placed' (*fu-*) by their male and female relatives, and variously 'taken' (*fō-*, the word for 'marry') and 'paid for' or 'traded' (*abolo-*) by men, in ways that men are generally not. Independently of how a marriage is forged, there is a sporadically realized ideal of reciprocal marriage, according to which a man who marries a woman should give her relatives another woman from among his own kin: a sister, daughter, niece, or other kinswoman in whose marital future he might be recognized to have some say. Much more certain is a man's obligation to pay bridewealth (*lal-xaliix*, 'daughter requital'). Over time a husband is expected to give gifts of meat and other foods, durable valuables, manual labour, feast prestations, and so on to his wife's kin. People emphasize the expectation that a man's giving will be slow, in part because accumulating valuables is a difficult process, but also because this indefinite tempo (and ongoing state of quantitative inadequacy, in the usual opinion of women's relatives) aptly registers the abiding quality of affinal obligations generally, the man's gifts not so much resolving debts as signalling an ongoing relation of indebtedness. Asked why husbands pay bridewealth (and why they should provide reciprocal brides), Korowai men and women usually cite benefits that a man may experience through living with a woman, and losses or past hardships experienced by the woman's kin. A husband gains companionship in travel and in household space, sexual pleasure, labour in provisioning a household, and labour of child-bearing and child care. The wife's parents and other kin lose her companionship and productive labour, despite the many sacrifices that her mother – and, to some degree, her father and other senior kin – endured

in raising her. Marital unity as such is embodied above all in the total activity and image of 'living together'. Men and women alike deeply value the intimacy of shared food production and preparation, shared meal-taking, shared residence and travel, shared erotic pleasure, and shared parenting that 'living together' ideally involves, though actual marriages vary greatly in spouses' comfort with each other and their common lives.

It is usually women who, upon marriage, move from their homelands to the homelands of their husbands. Typically, then, a man and his wife's relatives do not reside together. Yet affinal relations are crucial paths by which people fashion an interlocal social world in spite of their residential dispersion and their strong commitments to personal and household self-determination. In most people's eyes, one of the main criteria of a good marriage is whether or not the married couple and the married woman's relatives visit each other frequently and co-operate in day-to-day activities, as well as in special large-scale labours. Also, by one social contingency or another, affines do sometimes live together for sustained periods under a single roof. Whether taking place in contexts of short-term visiting, long-term coresidence, or something in between, the copresence of persons who are affines to one another, including persons related as mother-in-law and son-in-law, is a frequent event in the spaces of Korowai life.

The hierarchy of modes of sensory avoidance

While the copresence of mother-in-law and son-in-law is a frequent event, it is also very marked. Interaction between certain other affinal pairs (such as brothers-in-law, or father-in-law and son-in-law) is also edgy, but the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship is by far the most fraught. One indication of the relationship's prominence is the fact that people ubiquitously speak of it using the special compound, *lalum-bandaxol*, 'son-in-law/mother-in-law', a word that, through its symmetric juxtaposition of two constituents (as in 'bittersweet' or 'secretary-treasurer'), emphasizes the *sui generis* character of the entity that those constituents together compose. But this relationship's markedness is registered above all through actions of sensory avoidance.

Mother-in-law avoidance is a phenomenon of what Goffman (1983) calls 'the interaction order', and should be analysed as such. This means providing an account of people's concrete interactional practices of avoidance, an account of culturally distinctive aspects of the interaction order within which these practices are performed, and an account of the distinctive qualities of social relationship that are produced out of these concrete interactional practices.

A striking feature of Korowai mother-in-law avoidance is that the different modes of sensory avoidance are not an absolutely unified package; rather, some modes of sensory avoidance are more marked than others. They are more inconvenient to uphold, and they are upheld between only a relatively small fraction of mother-in-law/son-in-law dyads. Potentially, a woman could categorize as 'son-in-law' any man who is married to someone whom she calls 'daughter'. Conversely, a man could categorize as 'mother-in-law' any woman whom his wife calls 'mother'. It is the most focal 'mothers' of a

married woman, typically on criteria of genealogical or genealogy-like connection, whom that woman's husband most strongly relates to as 'mother-in-law'. Prototypic mothers-in-law include wife's birth mother, wife's step-mother, wife's mother's co-wife, and wife's mother's sister. Other important but slightly less focal mothers-in-law include wife's mother's female parallel cousins, and wife's mother's adult female clanmates. The most focal mother-in-law and son-in-law dyads avoid each other in all sensory media. Less focal dyads avoid each other in only the least severe modes.

The most severe avoidance practice is the avoidance of catching sight of one another's bodies. Typically, a married man has just one or a few women with whom he practises this form of reciprocal avoidance. (Even pairs who look at each other's bodies, though, usually avoid gazing at one another's faces.) Staying out of each other's field of vision is not easy for a mother-in-law and son-in-law. Moving about in a single dwelling or clearing, members of a sight-avoiding pair routinely call out warnings when they are likely to pass by one another. One member of the pair might instruct the other to turn away or move inside a shelter. Even more commonly, other people notice the impending possibility of encounter and warn the avoiders to be careful. For example, when a man's coresidents spot his mother-in-law entering their clearing, they warn him immediately so he can move to the end of the house opposite from the point at which his mother-in-law will ascend. If the two travel in the same party, the son-in-law usually walks far ahead, able to call back at his wife and her mother, but remaining visually separated from them by the path's turns through the forest.

For purposes of upholding sight avoidance, most dwellings are divided down their length by a panel of flat sago leaf stem bases. Seated on opposite sides of the middle wall, a mother-in-law and son-in-law can talk to each other and perform routine household activities without risk of glimpsing one another. In this way, the middle wall is a kind of architectural correlative of the mother-in-law/son-in-law social bond. A man who for his whole married life has built houses with middle walls may, upon his mother-in-law's death, abruptly leave off the work and inconvenience of installing these walls in new houses. Similarly, on one occasion when I visited an undivided house with a party of travellers accompanying a bride to her betrothed, people in that house had temporarily hung up an orange plastic tarpaulin in one corner, so as to hide from view one man whose mother-in-law was expected to arrive with us. The house owners casually took it down once they learned that the woman had stayed at home.

After sight avoidance, the next most marked form of discretion is the avoidance of singular number. Mother-in-law and son-in-law address and refer to one another using plural pronouns and plural verb inflections (second person plural in address, third person plural in reference), as well as the euphemistic plural expression 'my people'. They also routinely refer to each other by adding a plural suffix to teknonyms and similar person-referring forms. For example, one woman refers to her daughter's husband as 'fathers of Eli', even though the form is semantically deviant since by definition a child has only one father in the sense of fatherhood operative in teknonymic constructions. Typically, a man only reciprocally avoids singular number with a few close 'mothers' of his wife, perhaps only one or two more than he avoids seeing.

Mother-in-law and son-in-law pairs additionally avoid direct or indirect bodily contact. While a man might practise sight avoidance and avoidance of singular number with only a few of his wife's closest mothers, avoidance of contact is usually observed between that man and a much larger field of women. Avoiding pairs refrain from handing each other things. For example, on an occasion when I was interviewing a woman named Gia, the man married to her step-daughter came to the door of the shelter we were in and asked for his fishing gear, which was tucked away in the ceiling above us. Gia quickly took down the articles, but placed them on the floor near the door for her son-in-law to pick up, rather than giving them to him directly. A mother-in-law and son-in-law are also careful to avoid contact with things that the other routinely touches, such as sleeping panels and pillows, since these are imbued with the other's skin oils.

Mothers-in-law and sons-in-law also avoid eating portions from the same food object, drinking from the same vessel, or smoking from the same bamboo pipe. Amidst day-to-day food arrangements, an avoiding pair and their coresidents keep careful track of who is eating portions of what. For example, if two sizeable fish become available in a household where an avoiding pair is present, people take care to cook the fish separately, so that the mother-in-law can partake of one and the son-in-law can partake of the other. Avoiders may seek to defer to one another in food matters. Once when a python was cooked where I was staying, a male visitor refused to take any because his mother-in-law was expected back later in the afternoon, and he wanted her to be able to eat some of the meat. When she returned and was told that snake flesh had been saved for her, she immediately asked whether her son-in-law had eaten any, to confirm that the meat was really suitable for her to consume.

Finally, mother-in-law and son-in-law pairs avoid uttering each other's names. As with avoidance of singular number, this mode of linguistic avoidance is upheld continuously, and not just when a pair are in each other's interactional presence – or rather, by virtue of each person's name-based relation to language, the two are always in each other's presence in an extended sense. Korowai-speakers tend generally to avoid referring to one another by name. Between a man and his affines, though, there is a formal prohibition on name utterance, and mother-in-law and son-in-law pairs are the most careful observers of this prohibition. Since many people's names are high-frequency words with independent meaning, avoidance of a son-in-law or mother-in-law's name often involves artful work of circumlocution.

The iconicity of the senses and the univocality of keeping separate

What motivates these forms of avoidance, and what effects do the avoidances have? I shall cite several replies that Korowai offer to these linked queries. But explicit Korowai statements are not the only evidence that can or should be taken into account in giving an overall answer to the questions. There are important aspects of avoidance practice that Korowai do not comment on in directly exegetic ways (as far as I have been able to learn), but on which they

none the less do ‘comment’ in oblique implications of their discourse and in the organization of their bodily practice.

The bundling-together of the heterogeneous modes of sensory avoidance, not only under the single verb *laxap-* ‘avoid’, but also in the bodily conduct of a single category of social relationship, strongly implies that Korowai understand looking at someone, referring to someone in the singular, touching someone, sharing food with someone, and saying someone’s name to be partially analogous forms of interaction. The different forms of interaction are suggestive of each other. What these different modes of sensory interaction seem to have in common is that they are all understood as forms of touch-like contact in which one person impinges intimately on another, or in which two persons impinge intimately on one another.

Discussing avoidance, Korowai do not speak of ‘contact,’ ‘touch,’ and ‘impingement’ in the cross-cutting ways that I do. Yet these interpretative terms approximate to categories that are immanent across a range of concrete Korowai practices and images. For example, support for the idea that intimate contact and impingement are the central issue in name avoidance in particular can be found in the prohibition’s sanction. Korowai routinely say that someone who utters an affine’s name will have his or her feet sliced open by sharp sticks on forest paths, be bitten or stung by animals, be scratched by thorns, or be cut and bruised in falls. Korowai do not attribute these misfortunes to any particular agent, but say rather that they follow automatically from the verbal transgression as such. Nor do people elaborate on why these particular misfortunes should follow from name utterance. However, the skin-puncturing form of these punishments in itself strongly suggests that the crime of name utterance is understood to be, in a sense, one of touching the affine too sharply, impinging on that person in the manner of bodily injury.

I claim, then, that in their avoidance practices, Korowai understand sight, singular reference, touch, commensality, and name utterance to be reciprocally ‘iconic’ acts, meaning that the acts are understood to resemble each other (Peirce 1955), and further that these sensory acts are in their different ways iconic (meaning that they stand as concrete images) of a more abstract, cross-cutting problematic of bodily and personal impingement. In general, Korowai vest much significance in bodies and bodily surfaces as markers of social states. Thus, for example, *dain-lax fu-*, ‘put upon (someone’s) backside’, and *xal-lax fu-*, ‘put upon (someone’s) skin’, are prominent idioms by which Korowai speak of one person criticizing or acting meanly towards another person. The word *xal-lax*, literally, ‘on the skin’, also doubles as the Korowai word for ‘shame, embarrassment’, and as such is very prominent in the description and shaping of social relations (cf. Strathern 1975). Much as has been documented for some other New Guinea settings (e.g. O’Hanlon 1989; Robbins 1997), Korowai broadly consider judgements about a person’s body to be tantamount to moral judgements about that person’s being and his or her social ties (e.g. Stasch 2002: 340–1). Given this wider social momentousness of bodies, it makes particular sense to examine not only the interactional quality of avoidance practices considered in their own right, but also the more general quality of social relationship which the avoidances produce and portray (Merlan 1997; Wagner 1977).

A mother-in-law's and a son-in-law's ways of interacting define the two as strange and abstract to one other. Each person's avoidance of singular number, for example, makes the other greater than one person, and less definite than a single object of perception. In the space of the bodily sensorium, the two are distant and out of touch. They are even disembodied voices to one another. By 'strange', though, I do not mean socially unacquainted or distant on an absolute scale. Some mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs are closely acquainted prior to being related by marriage, and some are not acquainted at all. Most become more closely acquainted after being related by marriage, but some do not. What I mean by 'strange' is something closer to Freud's notion of the uncanny, an experience of visceral unfamiliarity in that which is nearby and familiar (Freud 1955: 241, 245), or something closer still to the Daribi idea that 'To look at one's mother-in-law is like looking at the sun' (Wagner 1967: 173). Besides mentioning expected bodily consequences of transgression, one common Korowai statement about why they practise avoidance is that mothers-in-law and sons-in-law are 'scared, spooked, panicked, made uncomfortable' (*xonio, golo*) by one another, and particularly by the prospect of sensory encounter. Yet in this context of fear, the elimination of an affinal counterpart as an object of perceptual contact does not eliminate that person as a social interactant. Rather, avoidance involves two persons in a relation of intense reciprocal engagement (Arno 1976: 74-5; Merlan 1997: 106). The practices of separation upheld by a mother-in-law and a son-in-law brusquely intrude on everything else in the social scene. Any other activities that the two undertake in each other's presence are dominated by the care they have to take over such things as staying out of each other's sight. Avoidance of commensality similarly sets a pair's bond sharply apart from the imperatives of sharing that inform most Korowai interaction in the presence of food. The separateness of mother-in-law and son-in-law, then, is closely and carefully upheld. The intrusiveness of their avoidance practice makes their relationship gripping and qualitatively 'univocal' in the sense suggested by Merlan (1997), who states of avoiding pairs in some Aboriginal Australian communities that 'avoidance practices emphasize one aspect of their potentially multiple social relations as having overriding determination of their conduct towards each other' (1997: 106), such that 'a man in his mother-in-law's presence finds it difficult to behave towards her in any way other than as her son-in-law' (1997: 108). Constantly upholding the avoidances, a mother-in-law and son-in-law emphasize the depth and implacability of their relationship as mother-in-law and son-in-law. Even as the two tend to shun explicit verbal labelling of one another as 'mother-in-law' and 'son-in-law', their practices of sensory interaction signal and create this categorization more profoundly, across the layers of each person's bodily field all the way from eyes to stomach. When they are in each other's vicinity, the voice and abstract presence of each surrounds the other, and the affinal relationship surrounds each of them as an intangible, invisible, and transcendent condition of their lives.

In thus supporting a social quality of engaged separation, avoidance practices also correlatively support a quality of personhood. In one another's presence, two avoiders are each defined above all by the dyadic social bond in which they are involved (cf. Strathern 1988).

The links of avoidance to spousal intimacy, maternity and affinal debt

Thus far I have considered mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs' avoidance practices in isolation from other categories of persons, and in isolation, too, from aspects of the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship apart from how the two comport themselves towards each other in sensory interaction. I turn now to the question of how the qualities of engaged separateness that are registered in interactional avoidance are embedded within other social considerations. The theme of the articulation of avoidance with other social considerations dominates the existing literature on mother-in-law avoidance. For example, Freud (1950) suggests that the mother-in-law/son-in-law relation is coloured by the earlier family romance of the man's relation to his own mother. Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 90-104) finds mother-in-law avoidance to be motivated by the politics of marital alliance. Merlan (1997) similarly links the mother-in-law/son-in-law pair's interactional relation of conjoined 'distance' and 'obligation' to the larger institutional organization of marriage as a Maussian gift, while Heald argues (1990) that Gisu mother-in-law avoidance practices exist within a broader association of cross-generation relationships with respectful avoidance in counterposition to same-generation relationships' linkage with joking familiarity (again reminiscent of Radcliffe-Brown). Finally, Wagner (1977) argues that Daribi mother-in-law avoidance is a generative act of separation, setting in motion the further field of differentiated, inter-transforming kin bonds. Despite their heterogeneity of approach, all these authors throw light on the problem of locating Korowai mother-in-law avoidance within a broader field of structural processes.

In contrast to most of these authors, though, my starting-point is the link between the mother-in-law/son-in-law relationship and that between husband and wife (but see Heald 1990: 380; also Pans 1998). One reason for this is that Korowai themselves draw explicit connections between mother-in-law avoidance and the intimacy of spouses. People make particularly notable statements in this vein when sight avoidance is transgressed. A woman whose son-in-law catches sight of her typically thinks or says, in anger, 'You married my daughter, so why are you looking at me? Aren't you having sex with my daughter?' Similarly, a woman who learns that her husband has glimpsed her mother may say to him something like 'Since you've just been looking at my mother, why are you wanting to have sex? Don't have sex with me, it's my mother you should have sex with.' Such statements imply that sight avoidance is an act of repressing social acknowledgment of the possibility of sexual intimacy between mother-in-law and son-in-law. Ethnographers have reported similarly explicit assertions of the sexual underpinnings of mother-in-law avoidance from dozens of other societies (see e.g. Heald 1990: 380, and citations in Pans 1998: 80-2). Such statements require that the erotic dimensions of people's lives be recognized in the interpretation of mother-in-law avoidance as an institution, as Freud (1950) and Hiatt (1984) sought to do.

There are at least two reasons, however, why the Korowai statements cannot be construed as posing repression of sexual intimacy between mother-in-law and son-in-law as the basic 'function' of avoidance practices. The first is that these statements are embedded within a complex total corporeal field which

is composed of many different independent, mutually suggestive, and interacting sensory channels. Connections that people make between sight avoidance and repression of the possibility of sexual intimacy draw on a broader set of cultural associations between vision and erotic attraction, or vision and desire generally. So, too, avoidance of touch is partially motivated by very focused cultural links between clasping and seduction (Stasch 2001a: 159–61). What these and other facts of ambient cultural association between the senses and sexuality indicate is not that avoidance of genital sexual intimacy is the hidden foundational meaning or function of mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs' overt avoidance of sight, touch, commensality, and certain forms of verbal reference, but rather that sexual intimacy is itself part of the chain of reciprocally iconic, reciprocally suggestive forms of personal access and intimate contact. Sex itself is a mode of sensory interaction avoided by mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs. Sex or marriage between people who categorize each other as mother-in-law and son-in-law, based on some other marriage on the man's part, is prohibited (*ayul*). Usually, though, the prohibited interaction is so obvious, or so frightful to contemplate, that people do not even overtly mention it as a possibility being avoided. Sexual intimacy is a charged pole in the spectrum of morally fraught forms of contact, but this does not make sexuality a self-evident, determinate fact to which everything else refers. Sexual intimacy is one penumbral mediation of a broader state in which affinal and spousal relations are made, marked, and uncertain.

The second, related reason for rejecting the idea that avoidance practices function to repress sexual intimacy is that such a leap does not come seriously to terms with links between mother-in-law avoidance and spousal intimacy. The most interesting thing about statements like 'Aren't you having sex with my daughter?' or 'Don't have sex with me, it's my mother you should have sex with' is not that they construe sexual interest to be a latent, fraught possibility between mother-in-law and son-in-law, but rather that the statements are so clear about the close articulation between the quality of a married man's relationship with his mother-in-law and the quality of his relationship with his wife. The statements register a kind of direct trade-off between the sexual intimacy of a husband/wife pair and the husband's visual separation from his wife's mother. The quality of each relation is a sign of the other. I suggest that this 'trade-off' generalization applies to the whole scale of forms of contact. A mother-in-law and son-in-law avoid each other in sight, touch, commensality, speech, and so on because the man is so close to the woman's daughter in those same modes of sharing.

This articulation between the separateness of mothers-in-law and sons-in-law and the intimacy of spouses is embedded in a broader moral structure, this being the structure of affinity as a qualitatively distinctive type of sociopolitical relation. I earlier noted that Korowai partially understand affinity to be an asymmetric relationship of giving. It is common, for example, for a woman to characterize her son-in-law as 'the man to whom I gave my daughter' (*ne-lal fedo-b-ale-xa-abül*). The intense social intimacy of a husband and wife is dependent on the woman's relatives' toleration, recognition, or even encouragement of the husband's impingement on the space of their own differently intimate social bonds with their daughter or sister. This is a point made by Merlan (1997), when she argues that in Australian Aboriginal

communities mother-in-law/son-in-law bonds exemplify a particular pole in a field of qualitatively different types of ways in which people relate socially to each other. Mother-in-law/son-in-law bonds are among those social relationships characterized, in Merlan's terminology, by the conjoined features of 'distance' and 'abiding obligation', and as such they contrast with other social relationships characterized by 'familiarity' and the possibility of making casual demands. The quality of engaged separateness that mothers-in-law and sons-in-law enact in their bodily practices is embedded in a broader gift relationship. My findings here resemble those of Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 90-104) and also call to mind Lévi-Strauss's (1969) reading of marriage as fundamentally a relation of dependence on others. Yet, like Merlan, I recognize interpersonal intimacy and bodily interaction as constitutive media of the economy of distance, engagement, and obligation. They are not merely secondary to some more determinative processes of an exclusively sociocentric, subjectivity-free order. All these authors, of course, owe much to Mauss (1950; see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 101, 113; Merlan 1997: 119), whose concern with 'obligation' as a type of moral force is discussed below.

The figure of the mother-in-law is a particular attraction point for the acknowledgment of the qualities of obligation created around a marriage. The reasons for this lie most proximately in the make-up of the mother/daughter relationship itself. The bond between mother and child, for some reason, is the relation that is most potentially violated by the relation between husband and wife. The sharpest evidence of this comes again in the form of sanctions. What people most often say in explaining why a mother-in-law and a son-in-law must avoid looking at each other, referring to each other in the singular, touching each other, or sharing food is that, if the two interact in any of these ways, the woman to whom the man is married will grow sickly or die, or else the couple's children will grow sickly or die. Indeed, avoidance is often practised more stringently once a married couple has had children. If a marriage has resulted in children, and the husband then outlives his wife, the man and his various mothers-in-law continue to avoid each other after the wife's death, since the children of the marriage would still be medically affected by indiscretions.

These ideas about consequences of non-avoidance do not seem to be backed by any further exegetic notions about the exact paths of causation by which the mother-in-law and son-in-law's interactional practices affect other people's bodies. Yet the form of the sanction, considered in itself, seems to suggest that failure to avoid amounts to an affront against maternity and mother/child relationships. The sanction of a daughter's death and the sanction of her own children's death are interchangeable kinds of attacks on reproduction and mother/child links. They follow from the attack on reproduction and a mother/daughter link wrought by lapses in avoidance between mother-in-law and son-in-law. A woman whom a man marries is herself a relational nexus, embodying a history of social ties to other people, particularly the history of her relation to her mother. More accurately, she embodies maternity as itself one category of intimate, corporeal social relation. The capacity of a spousal relation to violate a mother/daughter bond testifies to a basic situation of simultaneous categorial affinity and antipathy

between maternal relations, including parturition, and spousal relations, including sexual intimacy.

This analysis, as far as it goes, is broadly parallel to that of Heald (1990: 379 ff.), who links Gisu same-generation familiarity and cross-generation avoidance to a broad cultural concern with separating ‘conjugal sexuality’ and ‘generative consanguinity’. These findings also bear comparison to the categorial spirit, but not to the egocentric and universalistic letter, of Freud’s (1950) formulation. The analysis can be cast, too, in terms akin to Wagner’s (1977) account of Daribi kinship as a problem of introducing difference into a plenitude of relatedness. Mothers encountered in the spousal union of a man and woman embody, as ‘maternity’, such a plenitude. Avoidances upheld between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law open up spaces in this plenitude that are true to marriage and affinity as people understand them, namely as relations of intimacy with strangers. Here the bond between mother-in-law and son-in-law is not just antipathetic to the spousal bond but also appears as another version of it. The mother-in-law relationship and spousal relationships are at their respective levels forms of forging powerful and affectively important ties with people who are separate and different.

The theme of difference and separation as a basis of social connection is my main interest. There is more for me to learn about the exact shape of Korowai understandings of the interplay of maternity and matrimony, as categories of intimate relationship. But I have established here in a general way that matrimony is particularly dependent on and creates the possibility of mothers’ accommodation of an intrusion into the space of their ties with their daughters. Avoidance practices, in registering the state of distance and abiding obligation in which mother-in-law and son-in-law live, amount to social recognition of the mother-in-law’s solicitous and positive accommodation. These practices exemplify the importance that Korowai place on conjoined distance and obligation as a qualitatively distinctive mode of relating to people socially. In a mother-in-law and son-in-law’s relationship, separateness, accommodation, and obligation run together in a continuous framing of social life as a labour of maintaining connections to strange alters. What Harrison (1993: 148) says of a very different scale of Melanesian social process – whole societies’ concern with having architectural and religious styles that distinguish them from their neighbours – also rings true of Korowai mother-in-law avoidance at the level of personal interaction: ‘in these processes of mutual differentiation, in the deliberate mutual heightening of each other’s “otherness”, there was the creation of a particular kind of value.’

The creativity of avoided interactions

I have so far treated variation in the extent to which different mother-in-law/son-in-law pairs avoid each other as a descriptive fact that is incidental to the ethical character of mother-in-law relationships as bonds of conjoined alterity and obligation. I now look anew at this variability, and at some related ways in which Korowai practices of mother-in-law avoidance make an issue of their own contingency. I argue that performative uncertainty and variability

are integral to the character of mother-in-law relationships as gripping engagements with separate others.

The intensity with which particular dyads avoid each other is underdetermined. There is no simple mapping between genealogy and strength of avoidance. Frequently, for example, two women standing in exactly the same type of genealogical relationship with a married woman practise different degrees of avoidance with that woman's husband. In the early stages of a marriage's development, one or both protagonists in a potential avoidance relationship often actively decide which ways they will avoid each other, or whether they will avoid each other at all, and many avoiders reflect on and revise their avoidance practice over time.

In particular, mothers-in-law commonly use avoidance practices to comment on the moral quality of a man's fulfilment of his son-in-law role. For example, women may decline to practise sight avoidance with a man because they object to his having married their daughter by elopement rather than betrothal. These same pairs may later begin practising sight avoidance as the mother-in-law grows more comfortable with the union, and as she begins to approve of her son-in-law's character and his ways of relating to her. Conversely, one of my acquaintances stopped practising sight avoidance with her son-in-law when the man married a second wife against the expressed desires of his first wife and her kin. Another woman attributes her laxity of avoidance to her son-in-law's failure to build her a fire when she once arrived at his house in a state of illness.

A woman's willingness to engage in sight avoidance with a son-in-law is influenced above all by whether the man has been adequately recognizing her with gifts of bridewealth. Women routinely speak of their chest being bare, unadorned by shell or tooth necklaces, as an elliptical rationale for why they do not practise sight avoidance with some particular son-in-law, just as they speak of the fact that they are 'eating' (the son-in-law's gifts of game) as an elliptical rationale for why they avoid carefully. Occasionally, a woman who has been practising sight avoidance with her son-in-law even deliberately looks at the man, as a way of disparaging him. One woman I know, for example, peeked at her son-in-law's face from within a house. Others saw this and scolded her, prompting her to explain that she was angry with him for not providing her with clothes, fishing tackle, or food, and for mistreating her daughter. The son-in-law was shocked and angry, but soon brought her a skirt, a shirt, fishing tackle, and a small axe. A man's mothers-in-law, or his wife's relatives generally, may similarly say his name among themselves in deliberate violation of the name utterance prohibition, as a way of spiting the man for his failure to provide bridewealth or join them in labours of garden-creation and the like. Here people are quite explicit in viewing avoidance practices as registering people's involvement in bonds of reciprocally recognized obligation: no fulfilment of obligations, no avoidance.

Bridewealth and avoidance parallel each other in shaping mother-in-law/son-in-law relations as conjunctions of distance and obligation. One indication that the two institutions have similar motivations is that they have overlapping sanctions. Korowai hold that if a man fails to meet bridewealth obligations in an adequate manner, the children of his marriage will become sickly or die – though in this instance people often explicitly say that the

medical effects follow, in a causally unclear way, from the ‘rotten talk’ (*aup-laxul*) of the disaffected affines, rather than directly from the malfeasance as such (as in the case of children’s illness or death following avoidance transgressions). There are also ways in which the specific symbolism of bridewealth articles and their manipulation construes the objects as markers in the same politics of intimacy with the bride’s body that are at issue in mother-in-law avoidance (Stasch 2001a: 163). Similarly, the contrast between a son-in-law’s unilateral gifts of game or other food to his mother-in-law (or the lack of restriction on the two cooking food for each other), on the one hand, and the pair’s avoidance of food-sharing, on the other, is exemplary of their relationship’s character as one of simultaneous solicitousness and separation. Given the two institutions’ common wellsprings in a problematic of affinal obligation, then, it makes sense that people’s avoidance practices would be affected by their bridewealth practices, and vice versa.

Another factor that commonly leads pairs to moderate their avoidance practices is the existence of a prior non-affinal kin tie between them. For example, one woman told her son-in-law, a man of Yengel clan, that they should not practise sight avoidance because she herself was raised by a Yengel step-father, on which basis she had previously always called the son-in-law her ‘younger brother’. A man and his mother-in-law of a classificatorily tenuous kind might forgo avoidance altogether if they have some other tie. People say that to avoid someone who is ‘not different’ or ‘not a different person, not a stranger’ (*be-yanı-yanop-da*) would be awkwardly inconsistent with the pleasurable tenor of their existing kin tie. This pattern of moderating avoidance due to independent kinship bonds highlights the fact that mother-in-law and son-in-law are figures of difference, and that the avoidances observed by the pair express and create that sense of difference. When the mother-in-law or son-in-law category is occupied by a person who, on independent criteria, is ‘not different’, that person less fully embodies the type.

While transgression or moderation of avoidance imperatives is a way of expressing a relationship’s divergence from the fully appropriate character of affinity, positive fulfilment of avoidance imperatives is also a constructive mode of relating. On an *ad hoc* basis, one person can make a point of avoiding another, as a way of inclusively projecting a connection to that other by way of some marriage in which both persons have a stake: one as husband, and the other as recognizable relative of the wife (cf. Haviland 1979: 389).

Besides deliberately transgressing, moderating, or inflating their avoidance practices, participants in an avoidance relationship also make accidental mistakes, such as when both members of one pair I know tried to leave a house at the same time without calling out and suddenly encountered each other at the house’s ladder, or when another man entered a house silently and was startled to come upon his mother-in-law sitting on the balcony. On such occasions, a mother-in-law and son-in-law typically become very embarrassed, fearful, and angry, and chastise one another as they retreat from their encounter. To keep a transgression of sight avoidance from causing the death or illness of the linking wife or her children, the pair conventionally carry out a reciprocal token payment of identical valuables. Each gives the other a single cowry shell or dog canine, suspended on the tip of an arrow and transferred between the two by an intermediary. This act reinstates a situation

of proper reciprocal deference communicated not in bodily interaction but in the medium of hard valuables, transmitted on arrows that are the opposite of flesh and similarly convey the absence of bodily contact.

From these descriptive materials we begin to see that elements of decision, modification, and transgression are not epiphenomenal to the total mother-in-law avoidance phenomenon, but are integral to the organization of avoidance practices and the value that people place on them. For example, the fact that a conventional procedure exists for ameliorating a transgression of sight avoidance indicates the degree to which the contingency of avoidance practice is central to people's understanding of that practice. The same can be said of the existence of a complex discourse of sanctions that are held to follow avoidance transgressions. The hierarchical ranking of different modes of sensory avoidance similarly means that every pair's practice is coloured by the possibility that the two could avoid each other less carefully than they do, or more carefully. The senses themselves are organized in a manner foregrounding the contingency of people's separateness in them.

These points are an elaboration of an aspect of the Maussian tradition of thought on exchange. The notion of obligation, as in Mauss's 'obligation to give' and the like, focuses on the agentive quality under which an act is carried out: namely, in the mode of acting towards one's commitments to the desires and recognition of a separate other, rather than, for example, in a mode of acting towards one's own desires to possess and consume. The transactant's alterity is foundational to the character of 'giving' or 'obligation' as a type of moral relation. Hence, paradoxically, in a relation of obligation of the Maussian sort, transactions are the opposite of automatic. They unfold in an atmosphere in which the timing, uncertainty, and size of the transactions dominate people's political deliberations and are the very media of the transactions' efficacy in constituting a social world. In giving, transactants dramatize a condition of being others to each other. They cannot take for granted where they stand, but they then in greater or lesser degree succeed in meeting would-be obligations and achieving some bond from afar in the act of stand-offish transaction itself. This aspect of exchange institutions has received important theoretical development from numerous authors. For example, Bourdieu (1990: 98–111) argues that delay and uncertainty in reciprocation are constitutive of the value of gift transactions. Wagner (1986: 61) finds that marriage and much else in Usen Barok life is organized in the manner of 'surrounding the very act with the acknowledgment of its potential non-fulfillment'. Keane (1997) explores the centrality of 'hazard' to Anakalang ritual performances surrounding the conduct of alliance.

With respect to mother-in-law avoidance in particular, the under-determination, variability, and creative effects of avoidance practice have frequently been noted in the literature (e.g. Haviland 1979: 379–80; La Fontaine 1962: 94, 96; Lowie 1956: 30–2; Rumsey 1982: 160, 162, 179; Wagner 1986). What we lack, however, is a theoretical account of systemic links between the variability of avoidance and the qualitative character of sensory avoidance itself as a kind of practice. My earlier analysis of avoidance practices as shaping social relations in a mould of conjoined distance and obligation, or of gripping engagement with a markedly separate alter, offers a basis for such an account. There is a convergence between people's experiences and models of the

pragmatics of avoidance, on the one hand, and the qualitative kinds of sociological relationships that are the foundation and purpose of avoidance practice, on the other. The very same qualities of social relationship that are conveyed and supported by participants' marked restraint from sensory contact with each other are also conveyed and supported by the uncertainty and variability of pairs' performance of that restraint. The performative dimensions of avoidance practices – their voluntary and defeasible character, their difficulty and inconvenience, the constant vigilance required to uphold them, the built-in risks that avoidance imperatives could be accidentally transgressed through clumsy indiscretion or deliberately transgressed through a partner's disparaging intent, their constant potential for minor intensification or loosening – all facilitate endless restaging of the larger drama of powerfully distant social bonds: will separate persons actually converge satisfactorily in their mutual recognition of obligations? The spectrum of actual affinal ties in Korowai life is heterogeneous, ranging from non-existence to enmity, to close amity and co-operation. In drawing continuous attention to its own uncertain pragmatics of performance, mother-in-law avoidance sharply epitomizes this larger field of uncertainty and variability in social connections.

A note on similar social bonds in other contexts

Conjoining of separateness, obligation, and transactional uncertainty into a valued mode of social connection is not limited to mother-in-law relationships but, rather, occurs in diverse contexts of Korowai life. Certain social relationships even mimic formal details of mother-in-law avoidance. For example, I have elsewhere (Stasch 2002) described a Korowai genre of nickname partnership that seems to be in part a parody of affinal name avoidance, and which has similar effects of shaping partners' social bonds in a 'univocal' mould. (In that study, I also document a broad Korowai model of the potential physical impingement of language on objects and persons. This model is part of the background to the continuity between speech and other modes of sensory contact in mother-in-law avoidance.)

Other prominent parallels to the mother-in-law relationship occur in contexts of feasting. One specially named genre of feast transaction again closely mimics mother-in-law relationships. The genre is initiated when one person, in the course of trying to procure or consume some particular food object, suffers a serious injury, and then another person from elsewhere hears about this injury and decides to renounce consumption of that food species. This act of sympathetic renunciation obliges the injured person to promise the renouncer a food prestation the next time the injured person's clan holds a feast. During the months or years during which the second person maintains his or her renunciation, the two protagonists avoid uttering each other's names, sharing food, and touching each other's bodies and possessions. These avoidances are sanctioned by the same list of skin-puncturing misfortunes that are said to underpin affinal name avoidance. On the feast day, the two stage a transfer of a token component of the feast prestation, in which the transactants stand back to back out of each other's sight and pass the food packet across a small temporary fence, using tongs rather than their hands.

Most Korowai whom I have asked readily agree that in all these respects the transactants replicate a mother-in-law's and son-in-law's practices of separateness, though many people I spoke with also said that they had not thought about the similarities before. The similarities do not figure in any common exegetic statements about why the feast transactions take the form they do. Yet the avoidances upheld in these transactions, like mother-in-law avoidance, have the effect of making the transactants' relation univocal in character. Over the period of waiting, the two persons' relation is univocally summed up by the tie of food-based sympathetic renunciation and expected feast transaction.

The particular parody of mother-in-law avoidance that is enacted in the special genre of feast transaction exists in the first place only thanks to much broader and more significant parallels between mother-in-law relationships and all feast exchanges. Every formal feast transaction revolves around a dyad of geographically separate counterparts, whose entrance into a promise of food makes their relation fraught with suspense. Over the course of the two or three months of hard labour that are required for feast owners to produce the food prestations (during which the invitees simultaneously set about organizing their performance troupes), the two transactants, along with the wider audience to their transaction, are reflexively preoccupied with the uncertainty of the transaction's size, timing, and overall success. Yet it is precisely the uncertainty of these transactions that is also the basis of the pleasure and sense of accomplishment generated by successful prestations. Feast transactions are a dense mediation of the more general Korowai concern with making geographic alterity a positive basis of social connection (cf. Munn 1986), and this specifically geographic dimension to feasting is also parallel to the residential organization of most affinal relations. The two forms of social relationships are broadly similar in temporal character as well. The verb that is used in speaking of the act of promising a prestation of grubs is *dale-* or, literally, 'designate', and this root's other main use is to speak of betrothal. This small formal parallel between two acts of suspensefully prefiguring a gift is symptomatic of the more general typological similarity between bonds of marriage and feasting as modes of making separation and its uncertainties into foundations of social engagement.

Conclusion: avoidance embodies a philosophy

Heald (1990: 378) suggests that Gisu avoidance patterns amount to 'an implicit philosophy, a metacommentary on the nature of social life and its possibilities'. On several interlinked levels, the arguments presented here suggest that Korowai mother-in-law avoidance is a similarly reflexive practice (cf. Wagner 1977: 629; 1986: xv on Daribi and Barok views of avoidance as an *Ur*-custom).

First, the very fact that similar patterns of social relationality appear in other areas of Korowai life strongly suggests that the avoidance practices I have encountered in my fieldwork and describe in this article are indeed something akin to a 'philosophy'. I hope that my account of feast transactions helps to make Korowai speakers' preoccupation with relations conjoining separateness and contingent fulfilment of obligations stand out, as a way of being social

that is not specific to mother-in-law relationships alone (cf. Merlan 1997: 116-19 on links to trade partnerships).

Secondly, I have been at pains to show that, in mother-in-law avoidance, the connection between wary separateness and uncertain fulfilment of obligations is systematic, not incidental. These qualities of relationship joined together meld into something solid in its own right, a *sui generis* type of social bond that people deliberately engage in and that contrasts with other possible moral modes in which people can be connected to each other.

Thirdly, and perhaps most convincingly, the reflexive dimension of Korowai avoidance is patently apparent in avoiders' acts of explicit negotiation, adjustment, and manipulation of the intensity of their avoidance. These are moments of actors' explicit meta-recognition of their own constructionist theoretical understanding of the nature of affinal kin categorizations, according to which acts of sensory interaction make or, in Wagner's (1986) term, 'elicit', the categorial quality of relationships.

This constructionist model may be in tension with some aspects of the total avoidance institution, such as people's understanding of the automatic character of the sanctions underpinning the various avoidances, or the naturalized bodily character of many aspects of avoidance practice generally. But I have sought to show, too, that even at these corporeal levels, the routine day-to-day affinal conduct of actions of looking or not looking, uttering or not uttering, touching or not touching, and the like is organized by an immanent and cross-cutting theory of the corporeal field, and of the possible alterity-focused qualities of persons and social bonds within that field.

NOTES

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La séparation comme relation: iconicité, parole à sens unique et créativité Korowai dans l'évitement de la belle-mère

Résumé

Une belle-mère et son gendre Korowai évitent de se voir et de se toucher, de partager la nourriture, de se tutoyer et de prononcer leurs noms respectifs. Je suggère que ces différentes façons de s'éviter sont entendues comme des formes analogues de contact et d'empiètement,

et que s'éviter ainsi, caractérise une vision qualitativement distinctive de l'existence sociale, selon laquelle la séparation, l'obligation et l'incertitude peuvent, ensemble, former des bases positives de connexions sociales. Ces pratiques d'évitement donnent lieu et forment le caractère institutionnel de l'affinité en tant que rapport contingent d'accommodation et d'obligation. Les Korowai manifestent explicitement ces aspects d'évitement dans leurs idées concernant les conséquences de la transgression et dans leur ajustement créatif des degrés d'évitement qu'ils soutiennent.

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