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School of Biological Sciences
R. Omar and Evelyn Rilett Family
Life Sciences Lecture Series



“Infectious Diseases and Human Values”

Public Seminar
Thursday, March 24th, 2010 7 PM
Prairie Room
Bone Student Center

Dr. Randy Thornhill
Department of Biology
University of New Mexico

The parasite-stress theory of human values proposes that people's lifetime experiences with infectious diseases as well as their evolutionary historical interactions with these diseases cause people's core values. Accordingly, the conservative values of out-group avoidance and dislike (xenophobia), in-group embeddedness (ethnocentrism), authoritarianism, and human inequality are defenses against infectious diseases and are characteristic of regions with high infectious disease stress. Liberal values such as openness to out-groups and endorsement of human equality are optimal under low infectious disease stress and hence are characteristic of regions of low infectious disease stress. Over the last few years, Thornhill and collaborators have published in the scientific literature several tests of the parasite-stress theory of values. Levels of parasite stress correspond to values of conservatism/liberalism, family organization, democracy/autocracy, religiosity, women's rights, marriage preferences (inbreeding and outbreeding) and to personality dimensions. Analyses have included most of the countries of the world, the 50 states of the USA, and traditional societies in the anthropological record. The research findings have been widely featured in the media including *The Economist*, *Nature*, *Science*, *Newsweek*, *BBC*, and the *PBS Newshour with Jim Lehrer*.

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