

Incestuous Abuse: A Comment

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Sexual abuse of children is an issue shrouded in ignorance and denial in our country. One of the chief reasons for this conspiracy of silence is the high value, almost idealization, of the family. The failure to protect the child is often seen as a strong indictment of the particular family's care taking function and an indelible blot on its reputation. This is especially so if the abuser happens to be a family member, which is often the case. Yet sexual abuse of children is a particularly serious offence. Of the three categories of sexual offences; offences against accepted standards of family life, offences which display the normal sexual drive in a distorted or unacceptable manner and offences which display a perverted sexual drive, sexual abuse here belongs to both the first two categories. The offence is even more serious if the abuser happens to be a parent or relative.

How widespread the child sex abuse incidence is remains a question difficult to gauge with any degree of certainty, although an informed guess can be made. In the U.S.A., according to recent reports, the number of children abused sexually is about 400,000 with the offender being a parent or a relative in about 40% of the cases, with a preponderance of fathers incestuously abusing their daughters. Although not reported to the same extent as in the U.S.A., other studies suggest that this is an international pattern which could mean a figure of 600,000 - 700,000 of Indian children who are sexually abused by their parents or relatives. In the international pattern of father-daughter incest, there is a common mean age of onset (around 11) and the abuse goes on for varying lengths of time; averaging at least six months and often years. Such sexual abuse is quite rare before the age of two years, but thereafter it increases in frequency, being maximum in the girl's puberty and adolescence.

Incestuous Fathers - Features

What do the sexually abusive fathers look like? Data from Western countries suggests that they are neither very young nor old, but overwhelmingly middle aged. Except for the age factor, sexually abusive fathers cannot be easily distinguished from the general population of fathers on any other social-economic criteria. They come from all social and economic classes and all walks of life. They also cannot be diagnosed as suffering from any common psychiatric disorder. Nevertheless, studies suggests that the sexually abusive father falls into

three personality types depending on the age of the child when the incest occurs. Here, I will only sketch the first type who commits incest with a daughter under twelve years of age.

These fathers are rather ineffectual, non-aggressive, dependent men, often heavy drinkers, who are preoccupied with sexual matters. They are generally infantile men who use their daughters for their own infantile needs. Like paedophiliacs, they are afraid of trusting adult women, who they experience as sexually threatening and turn their sexual attention towards the child who they view as pure and innocent.

The emotional consequences of father-daughter incest are extremely varied and range from the immediate to the long-range, from minimal to severe. The consequence depends on the age of the girl at the onset of abuse, her personality, as well as the personalities of the father and the mother. The consequences can include psychosis, mostly schizophrenia, and depression. The most common consequence when the girl grows up, however, is the occurrence of character disorders such as promiscuity. Lesbianism and marital difficulties are more frequently found among women who have been victims of incest. However, we must note, that these consequences are neither inevitable nor perhaps as widespread as is commonly believed. In some studies of young women who were sexually abused as children, no serious and lasting effects on personality were observed, leading one researcher to question whether we have underestimated children's capacity to adjust to early sexual experience and are over-eager in our psychological and legal need to get at the details." There is little doubt, though, that disruption of the family is the most devastating consequence of incestuous abuse.

Finally, incestuous abuse stirs up intense feelings in all those called to deal with it: counselors, lawyers, judges. These feelings are generally of hostility towards the father or the person who brings the incest to light, as well as of shock and anxiety. They can influence both our perceptions and judgments and need to be dealt with by introspection before dealing with the case.