Chapter 23

Sibling Incest Offenders

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Introduction

Nearly every known society has some form of “incest taboo” or rules of behavior that prohibit sexual relationships and marriage between certain specified relatives (Henslin, 2001). In the United States, for example, it is illegal for certain specified relatives to interact sexually. The list of specified relatives includes parents and children; brothers and sisters; and in some states, first cousins. It has been only in the last 30 years that the issue of incest started receiving attention in the United States (Gupta & Cox, 1988). Even so, the origins and scope of incest are still not well understood.

Some researchers assert that the origin of the incest taboo is “instinctual”: where humans inherently feel and demonstrate an aversion for engaging in sex with a parent or sibling. Freud (1955b) postulated that the incest taboo has its roots in early human patriarchal society where men held absolute power and control over their family members, which extended to include a sexual right to their daughters. Sons revolted against their fathers and set up an incest taboo as a form of protection from future revolts against themselves. Some sociologists, however, generally concur that the incest taboo has a social basis. If societies allowed incest, then disruptions in the socialization of a group’s children would occur (Malinowski, 1927), and the prescribed role of family members would be conflicted. Parents who violate the taboo and have sex with their children may be unable to determine the best interests of their children, be appropriate role models to them, or pass down family values. Moreover, the incest taboo may serve a specific social function in that children are steered to marry outside the nuclear family, resulting in the forming of new families and enhanced social networks (Henslin, 2001). Thus, having an incest taboo serves the best interests of the family, of the children, and of society.

The Westermarck theory is another theoretical perspective regarding the incest taboo. This theory is based on an evolutionary paradigm and has been applied specifically to sibling incest—one form of incest (Westermarck, 1889). According to this
theory, incest avoidance rather than being socially constructed evolved in humans because of the ostensibly harmful effects of close inbreeding. Through the process of natural selection, humans developed an aversion to incest. Early association between siblings is critical to the establishment of incest avoidance; it is thought that children raised in close proximity are less likely to develop later sexual interest (Bevc & Silverman, 1993). The theory further posits that incest avoidance between siblings can be disrupted if siblings are separated at birth or separated for a significant period of time. Some evidence to support the Westermarck theory has been provided by research that shows children who were not siblings but were raised together (e.g., in communes) were less likely to select each other as marital partners (Shepher, 1983), or if they did marry, then their marriages were characterized as sexually dysfunctional with high rates of divorce (Wolf, 1995). Research among 500 college students that examined the Westermarck hypothesis among sibling relationships found that separation of siblings of a year or more in early childhood was positively related to completed or attempted genital, oral, or anal intercourse postchildhood (Bevc & Silverman, 1993). However, separation was not related to whether siblings engaged in other less extreme forms of sexual activity (i.e., touching, fondling, exhibitionism). Thus, based on these findings, close proximity may not inhibit sexual interest per se, but may serve to inhibit sexual reproduction, which is considered an adaptive function from an evolutionary perspective.

In the United States and in other societies, violating the incest taboo is considered a form of family sexual abuse. But, what constitutes a violation? As far as behaviors are concerned, a violation would occur by engaging in a sexual relationship (i.e., having anal, oral, or vaginal intercourse) or partaking in sexual activities such as exposure, fondling of breasts and genitals, and oral-genital contact. In addition to the specified “blood relation,” violating the incest taboo can also occur when sexual activity happens between family members who are not blood relatives (e.g., stepfather and stepdaughter; stepbrother and stepsister, an uncle through marriage and his niece) and between quasi-family members (e.g., foster parent and foster child, godparent and godchild).

Although these violations are unequivocal when the abuse involves an adult and a child, there are fewer consensuses however when the violation of the taboo involves siblings. For example, is “sex play” considered sibling incest? When the sex play entails the showing or touching of each other’s genitals (e.g., “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”) and is harmless, then it is generally not considered sibling incest. Harmless sex play is characterized as of short duration and excludes sex engaged in by force, sex among older children or among children of significant age differentials (Finkelhor, 1980). Thus, some aspects of the definition of what constitutes a violation of the incest taboo mentioned previously may not be applicable to sibling incest.

To distinguish between age-appropriate curiosity or sex-play and sibling incest, some researchers and practitioners have redefined sibling incest more specifically as “sexual interaction beyond age-appropriate exploration such that older siblings, who differ significantly in age or by virtue of their power and resources, may also be considered abusive” (Tower, 1996, p. 134). Yet, what age is considered “beyond age-appropriate exploration,” and what is the number of years that should be considered as a significant difference in age? Some researchers and professionals have attempted to use Freud’s (1955a) stages of psychosexual development as a guide (Finkelhor,