The Role Relationship Between Victim and Perpetrator as a Predictor of Characteristics of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT: It is hypothesized that the closeness of the relationship between the perpetrator of sexual abuse and the victim will determine the number of instances of sexual abuse, the duration of the sexually abusive relationship, the level of coercion necessary to gain compliance, and how long it takes the victim to tell. Differences for cases where the perpetrator is the victim's father and married to the victim's mother, the victim's stepfather or victim's mother's live-in boyfriend, and the victim's noncustodial father are explored. It is argued that in the first case type, the relationship is the closest, the second case type falls in the middle, and in the third, the relationship is the most distant. Hypotheses regarding number of instances of sexual abuse, its duration, and the delay in telling are supported by the data.

In recent years clinicians and researchers have noted that the characteristics of sexual abuse vary depending upon the role relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The most global distinction and one made by most professionals is between sexual abuse which is intrafamilial and that which is extrafamilial (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979; Finkelhor, 1984; Russell, 1983; Russell, 1986; Groth, 1979; Faller, 1981; Faller, 1988; Mayer, 1985). For example, although some offenders abuse both within and outside the family (Sanford, 1988), there are differences between persons who sexually abuse their own children and those who seek out and sexually abuse children who are unrelated (Gebhard et al., 1965; Groth, 1979; Mayer, 1985; Kempe & Kempe, 1984). Further, the characteristics of the sexual abuse itself
are likely to vary depending upon whether the perpetrator is within the family and has ready access to the victim or is someone outside who sees the child rarely or perhaps on only one occasion. Thus intrafamilial sexual abuse may occur frequently over a period of months or even years, while extrafamilial abuse is more likely to consist of a single or small number of incidents during a short-time period. The reaction of the child is likely to vary depending upon the relationship of the perpetrator to the child and family. For instance, a child may more readily reveal sexual abuse by someone who is outside the family system but be reticent about a family member (Faller, 1981; Faller, 1987). In addition Mrazek and Mrazek (1981) note that one of the factors that needs to be taken into account in assessing the effect of sexual abuse on the child is the degree of relatedness between the victim and the offender. The source and extent of trauma from intrafamilial sexual abuse can usually be distinguished from that caused by extrafamilial. For example, Landis (1956) in a sample of college students and Anderson, Bache, and Griffith (1981) in a sample of adolescents receiving treatment, found being sexually abused by a relative was more traumatic than being victimized by a nonrelative.

Furthermore, differences have been noted in the characteristics of various types of intrafamilial sexual abuse. Russell (1984, 1986) in a study of sexual abuse in a representative sample of 930 San Francisco area women, found that the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship to be one at grave risk for sexual abuse. Thirty-four point five percent of women who had stepfathers were sexually abused by them as opposed to 2.3% by biological fathers. Moreover sexual abuse by stepfathers was more serious than that inflicted by biological fathers: it occurred more frequently and involved more genital intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, analingus, and anal intercourse. Similarly, in a study conducted by the Tufts New England Medical Center (1984), sexual abuse by a stepfather was found to have had quite a traumatic impact upon the victim, but comparable trauma could not be documented for situations involving biological fathers. And recently MacFarlane (1986) has described the special characteristics of sexual abuse by a father who is divorced from or in the process of a divorce from the child’s mother, hypothesizing that the stress of marital dissolution and changes in physical circumstances may heighten the risk for sexual abuse.

In the study to be described here, the impact of the role relationship of perpetrator to victim upon the characteristics of the sexual abuse will be explored for three types of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The hypotheses are as follows: