The Incest Offender, Power, and Victimization: Scales on the Same Dragon

Rita Sommers-Flanagan\textsuperscript{1} and H. A. Walters\textsuperscript{1}

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It is contended that incest is a specific case of a larger problem, that being inappropriate use of power, resulting in victimization of a weaker person. The article is primarily an exploration of ideas regarding root causes of such victimization. It is proposed that implied ownership is present in certain traditional family constellations in our society. It is further proposed that many factors, including this implied ownership, contribute to a profound lack of empathy on the part of the offender. Numbered among these factors are our individualistic, compartmentalized culture, developmental deficits, and overt choices on the part of the offender. Concluding comments call for further reflection and attention to the issues raised, with suggestions regarding important areas for focus and investigation.

KEY WORDS: incest; power; victimization; empathy; ownership.
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INTRODUCTION

Wal, the way I figure it is like this. Ma car title's got ma name on it. The mortgage ta ma house has got ma name on it. Ma wife's got ma name, and by God, so do ma kids. Ain't no law that kin tell me how ta treat somthin' with ma name on it. That's ma business. That's the way I figure it. (Anonymous Interviewee, National Public Radio, 1984). Sexual abuse of children is a crime that our society abhors in the abstract but tolerates in reality. We tolerate sexual abuse of children because it is the last remaining component of the maltreatment of children that has yet to be faced head on. (Sgroi, 1975, p. 15).

When it comes to child sexual abuse, startling statistics abound. It has been estimated that once every 2 min a child is sexually abused in the United States (Sheehy, 1984). Between 100,000 and 500,000 children will be
molested in the coming year (Watson et al., 1984). In various studies, 20 to 26% of the women queried reported being sexually molested as children (Herman and Hirschman, 1981; MacFarlane and Bulkley, 1982; Rush, 1980; Russell, 1983).

There is no question that in exploring child sexual abuse, we are venturing into a deeply entrenched social problem of imposing magnitude. Recently, the popular media has focused a great deal of attention on various components of the problem. Opinions as to why the problem exists and what to do about it are multitudinous. Research findings generally show that violence in the family occurs when, among other things, it is easily available to the individual and legitimized by his or her cultural norms (Lystad, 1982). It is argued in this article that incest, as a violation of one human being by another, is legitimized by specific norms in our culture. Certain deficits in an individual or family, in combination with these pervasive norms, greatly increase the likelihood that incest will occur, and will continue to occur within a given family, and within our culture. A recent article exploring the sociocultural causes of family violence (Levine, 1986) is an excellent precursor to this article, in that it identifies a number of cultural changes that may be contributing to the recent increase in family violence. This article attempts a broader, deeper look some of the same points made by Levine.

Perhaps one of the most unusual things about the descriptions of the incest offender by writers, therapists, and researchers is that he is not all that unusual (Herman, 1983). In her book, Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest, Sandra Butler (1978) notes that most male aggressors are uncomfortably familiar. They have been taught that their lives should reflect societal values in masculine and sexual behavior. They often feel solely responsible for their families, and are unable to ask or receive the affirmation and acceptance they need. They are not monsters, but rather ordinary people taught, when all else fails in their attempts to live life successfully, to resort to the exercise of the power of their genitals.

There are few theories that enable us to identify causes or potential societal remediations that would lessen the occurrence of victimization in general, and incest in particular. This article is primarily an exploration of ideas regarding root causes surrounding incest and other acts of victimization involving power differentials. We propose that our ideas are both heuristic and suggestive of therapeutic directions. We also propose that the solution of such widespread social problems lies in recognizing the role of society as well as the role of each individual member in perpetuating the bases for the problem. This paper is intended to cause the reader to ask “What causes and maintains incest on both a societal and individual level?”

Basically, we believe that implied ownership rights still exist between males, and females and children, especially in certain family constellations