Family Environments of Victims of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Child Sexual Abuse

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The family environments of intrafamilial and extrafamilial childhood sexual abuse victims were examined to determine whether characteristics of incestuous families that appear to place children at risk for abuse can also be viewed as risk factors for abuse by a perpetrator outside the family. Participants were 31 college women identified as victims of childhood incest, 49 victims of extrafamilial abuse, and 49 nonvictims. They completed a questionnaire soliciting demographic and abuse-relevant information and the Family Environment Scale (FES). A multivariate analysis of variance and descriptive discriminant analysis of FES scores revealed that both intrafamilial and extrafamilial victim groups differed significantly from the nonabused group on a family functioning dimension comprised of cohesion, active recreational orientation, moral-religious emphasis, independence, and organization. The results thus supported the hypothesis that family characteristics associated with the occurrence of intrafamilial abuse were also associated with the occurrence of extrafamilial sexual assault. Implications of the findings as well as suggestions for further research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: child sexual abuse; incest; family environment.

INTRODUCTION

To date, the majority of professional articles on child sexual abuse have been concerned with intrafamilial abuse, and particularly with sexual activities between fathers or step-fathers and daughters. Based primarily on observations of such incestuous families during treatment and on the retrospective reports of adult psychotherapy patients, a number of writers have argued that inces-

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tuous families exhibit characteristic patterns of structure or functioning. These families have often been described in systems theory terms as enmeshed, with a blurring of role boundaries (e.g., Will, 1983). Parent-child role reversal, wherein the daughter assumes a maternal role and the mother enters the child subsystem, has also been noted (Cohen, 1983; Lustig et al., 1966; Will, 1983). From a feminist perspective, Herman (1981) has noted that incestuous families often represent an exaggerated form of the traditional patriarchal family. In such families there is a striking inequality between the parents, with the father dominating the family. Social isolation of incestuous families has been noted by numerous writers (Finkelhor, 1979). Finally, a certain, perhaps small, subset of incestuous families has been described as “chaotic” (Will, 1983). That is, they seem to have few rules and little organization internally, and few external controls.

The validity of these observations and their generalizability to nonclinical or undetected cases of intrafamilial abuse have only recently begun to be examined. Only a few published studies have been conducted that use standardized measures of family structure or functioning, nonclinical samples, and appropriate comparison groups. Alexander and Lupfer (1987) examined traditional family ideology, cohesion, and adaptability in families of female college students who reported histories of childhood sexual abuse. Those abused by a father or step-father described their families as more traditional (i.e., patriarchal) relative to families of women abused by another family member or someone outside the family and to families of nonabused women. Cohesion and adaptability were lower in all victim families compared to nonvictim families, a finding replicated by Harter et al. (1988). Jackson et al. (1990) also found evidence of low cohesion in families of college women with histories of intrafamilial abuse. Consistent with previous findings (Alexander and Lupfer, 1987; Harter et al., 1988) of less adaptability, victims’ families were also reported to be more highly and rigidly controlled. Further, this study also provided evidence of less concern with family members’ personal growth, as evidenced by less involvement in active recreational pursuits and less emphasis on moral-religious education in victims’ families.

These recent studies provide some support for earlier views of incestuous families as inflexible and controlled, while lacking cohesion, concern for personal growth, and community involvement. The association between intrafamilial abuse and family dysfunction can, however, be variously interpreted (Finkelhor and Baron, 1986). In one view, the family dysfunction is seen as a result of the incest. For example, secrecy and feelings of betrayal or lack of emotional support that often accompany incest might be expected to result in isolation of the victim and thus in perceptions of low family cohesion by victims. A variant of this view would be that family dysfunction is merely a correlate, not a result, of abuse. For example, if