

THE IMPACT OF INCEST: FACTORS IN SELF-EVALUATION

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

All research is at some level personally motivated; this study was no exception. In view of the controversial nature of the subject, I feel the reader is entitled to know some of the personal factors involved in the research reported in this chapter.

This study was motivated in part by a strong personal need to know the "truth" about incest. When I was a child I experienced an ongoing incestuous relationship that seemed to me to be caring and beneficial in nature. There were love and healthy self-actualization in what I perceived to be a safe environment. I remember it as perhaps the happiest period in my life. Suddenly one day I discerned from playground talk at school that what I was doing might be "bad." Fearing that I might, indeed, be a "bad" person, I went to my mother for reassurance. The ensuing traumatic incidents of that day inaugurated a 30-year period of psychological and emotional dysfunction that reduced family communication to mere utilitarian process and established severe limits on my subsequent developmental journey.

While acknowledging this personal desire to know if there is a "truth" about incest, I have made every attempt to eliminate, or at least minimize, the influence of the personal nature of this research on the data analysis.

This study attempts to explore the various forms of family incest-

Based on the author's master's thesis project at Antioch College. The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Larry Constantine in the analysis and reporting of this research.

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tuous behavior—from coercive, abusive incest to consensual intrafamily sexual experiences—and to examine the attitudes toward the incest as reported by the participants.

Research on incest has generally been limited to identified clinical cases (Herman and Hirschman, 1976) and criminal cases (DeFrancis, 1969). The present survey was an exploratory, descriptive study intended to reach nonpatient, nonoffender subjects as well as victims and offenders. It was designed to determine whether incest is always perceived negatively by the participants and what factors might contribute to the negativity or positivity of perception.

The research did uncover a significant percentage of incest-affected respondents who would not have been included in any criminal or clinical incest records, many of whom had incest experiences of a non-damaging nature and were able to integrate the experiences into their lives in spite of the extreme social condemnation of incest behavior.

STUDY DESIGN AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The survey results are based on data from responses to classified advertisements placed in *Psychology Today*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *New Age*, *San Francisco Sentinel*, *Association for Humanistic Psychology Newsletter*, *Berkeley Barb*, and *Bay Guardian* (listed in order of responses produced). The ad was worded as follows. "Research Project: Looking for people who have had incest experience (good or bad) for questionnaire and/or interview. Write P.O. Box ____."

Respondents were also obtained through a personal referral letter passed by hand and as a result of personal contacts and word-of-mouth referral. San Francisco and the Bay Area supplied the most respondents (41); 21 were from the Midwest; and the remainder were roughly evenly divided among the northeast (13), southeast (9), southwest (12), and northwest (8). In all, then, 104 individuals were respondents in this study.

Each subject-respondent, guaranteed anonymity, generally completed the questionnaire or interview with great care and freely gave names and addresses for follow-up. Each was promised a copy of the study results. The follow-through response was very high (92.5 percent). This was due, in part, to the self-selection factor. All interviews were completed and of the questionnaires requested and mailed out, only eight were not returned.

There are many possible explanations for a subject to fail to return a questionnaire that he or she has taken the trouble to write away for, including psychological and/or emotional resistance to the content.

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Many who did respond reported personal emotional conflict engendered by the recounting of their experiences for the study.

The questionnaire comprised a series of questions dealing with basic personal and demographic data and information about the incestuous relationship: background, participants, duration, type of behavior, amount of force used (if any), emotional impact at the time and in retrospect, perceived rewards and drawbacks, and, finally, the importance or effect of the experience on the respondent's life.

An evaluation team of three (a statistics professor, a social worker, and an intern in a sexual abuse treatment program) consensually rated the subjective evaluations and statements for data processing. They eliminated four cases as inconsistent or possibly fraudulent, leaving data from 73 questionnaires and 27 interviews to be transcribed onto questionnaire forms for analytical consistency.

It was realized that the sampling would be biased in that it would draw from a predominantly middle-class, educated population. Moreover, some distortion and memory error are inevitable in a descriptive study of this kind. Yet significant trends and tendencies were revealed.

Essential tasks for the project were to clarify and redefine incest in a broad, workable manner and to identify issues important to the participants in their adult lives. The subjects themselves were asked to define incest by selecting among categories of activities and intrafamilial relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual. Relationships defined by subjects to be incestuous included those between parents and children, between siblings, and between children and other near relatives or surrogates, such as stepparents and foster parents—in other words, between children and anyone who was perceived as, or played the role of, a parent or other family figure, however indirectly or temporarily. Given the current social trend toward increasing numbers of reconstituted and extended families, it was clearly necessary to include nonconsanguinous relationships, since the family dynamics appear to be the same as in blood-related incest. The interpersonal factors are deemed to be the most crucial.

All respondents were 19 or older at the time of the survey, the oldest a 73-year-old man reporting an incident that occurred when he was 15. Women reported initial incestuous contacts occurring at ages as young as 3 and as old as 32, men, from 6 to 50. Six percent of the women were lesbians; one of them had had incest with a female, while the others had been abused in heterosexual incest. Fourteen percent of the men were homosexual; half had had incest with males and the other half with females. The high proportion of homosexual respondents

was related to the high proportion of ads placed in the San Francisco Bay area, some of them in publications for homosexuals.

The one hundred respondents reported a total of 137 separate incestuous relationships. Forty-six female respondents reported incest with 65 different partners, and 54 males reported relationships with 72 partners. The mean age of the women at the time of the incest was 15; the mean age of the men was 22.

Of the 99 respondents who reported highest educational attainment, 8 had obtained or were earning Ph.D.s, 12 had obtained or were earning master's degrees, and 17 had obtained bachelor's degrees; 24 had some college and 38 had completed only high school or less.

FINDINGS

Consistent with most previous research on incest (Meiselman, 1978), the most commonly reported incestuous relationships were between fathers (or father surrogates) and daughters. Of the 60 such relationships in this study, 37 were reported by the daughters. Sibling relationships were a close second: 32 reported by males, 23 by females. Only three mother-son relationships were reported. Six instances of father-son incest were reported. Four relationships involved grandparents and grandchildren. The remaining experiences were with more distant relatives. A detailed accounting by type of relationship and age at first incest experience is given in Table 13-1.

Subjects were given a list of activities from which they could indicate those in which they had participated. Fondling, the most frequently reported activity, was checked by 94 of the 100 respondents; in 24 instances it was the only specific act noted, the subjects responding to the survey on the basis of this foreplay activity alone. Manual stimulation was checked by 84 of the subjects, vaginal sex by 56, oral-genital sex by 53, and anal sex by 37. Under the category of "other," people mentioned kissing, masturbating, exhibitionism, sucking nipples, simulated intercourse, and urination games.

In 40 (29 percent) of the relationships reported, force or abuse was indicated. Fifty-four (39 percent) of the incest experiences were described in negative terms: 73 (53 percent) were described as positive, and 10 (8 percent) were judged incapable of evaluation by either the subjects or the evaluation team.

Six respondents reported group sex in the family. Eighteen reported incest with more than one family member, in either a group or a one-to-one setting. The high percentage of positive reports may be partly attributable to the inclusion of these groups and multiple family member statistics.

TABLE 13-1. Relationship and Age at First Incest Experience

Relationship	Number	Average Age at Time of Initial Incest Experience*
Daughters with fathers	26	7
Fathers with daughters	15	32
Stepdaughters with stepfathers	10	13
Stepfathers with stepdaughters	6	31
Foster fathers with foster daughters	2	23
Foster daughter with foster father	1	7
Sisters with brothers	19	10
Brothers with sisters	13	12
Foster sisters with foster brothers	2	8
Foster brothers with foster sisters	2	11
Stepsister with stepbrother	1	12
Stepbrother with stepsister	1	6
Brothers with brothers	13	13
Foster brothers with foster brothers	2	10
Stepbrother with stepbrother	1	10
Foster sister with foster sister	1	10
Sons with mothers	2	18
Stepson with stepmother	1	15
Sons with fathers	3	11
Foster son with foster father	1	10
Stepson with stepfather	1	11
Father with son	1	37
Granddaughter with grandfather	1	6
Grandson with grandmother	1	24
Grandfather with granddaughter	1	50
Grandfather with grandson	1	48
Nieces with uncles	2	13
Uncle with niece	1	32
Nephew with aunt	1	14
Aunt with nephew	1	22
Male cousin with female cousin	1	23
Female cousin with male cousin	1	10
Male cousins with male cousins	2	10

* Ages are approximated in some instances because respondents could not recall exact ages.

For the purpose of the study, each relationship in the case of group or multiple relationships has been counted separately.

It is possible to count 23 of the 100 subject-respondents as reporting no damage or harm whatever from their incestual experiences. Three failed to address the issue of such problems, the remainder reported problems of varying degree, from mild discomfort to severe disturbance. Many of those who reported problems indicated that their incestuous relationships had included use of power, such as physical beating, inducements, promises, and seduction. Many felt they had been trapped in relationships they did not enjoy. Others reported problems with self-image and primary relationship dysfunction later in life, which they felt to be associated with having been involved in incest. Many who described consensual, positive sexual experiences nevertheless reported problems regarding family and community opinion—guilt, shame, fear of discovery, and feelings of isolation.

Regarding the feelings toward the other person at the time of the incest, the most frequently checked word was *warmth*, which was mentioned in the context of both positive and negative reports. Less frequently checked emotions were, successively, *compassion*, *sympathy*, *love*, *fear*, *joy*, *contempt*, and, least often, *hate*. Considering the incest experience itself, respondents most frequently indicated feeling *glad*, although the next most frequently checked reactions were *guilt*, *shame*, and *anger*, successively. *Joy* and *sorrow* were least often checked.

The most commonly cited reasons for termination of the relationship were *changes in life-style*, *fear of discovery*, and *fear of social disapproval*, followed by *respondent found unpleasant*, *partner found unpleasant*, and *actual discovery*. Incarceration of respondents or partners and death of partners were also mentioned.

EVALUATION OF THE INCEST EXPERIENCES

Of the 137 incest relationships reported by respondents, more than half were evaluated positively. From Table 13-2 it becomes clear that, overall, males were substantially more likely to evaluate their experiences positively than were females. Only slightly more than one-fourth of the relationships reported by female respondents were evaluated as positive. Male respondents were, on the average, older at the time of the incest; therefore, it is useful to separate out age as a factor contributing to outcome. Table 13-3 reveals a relationship between age and the respondent's assessment of the experience. Only 18 percent of experiences prior to age 10 were evaluated positively. Forty-two percent of experiences of preteens were evaluated positively, and for young teenagers the proportion rises to 60 percent. Among older teens

TABLE 13-2. Self-Evaluation of Incest Experience by Males and Females

Sex	Positive	Uncertain*	Negative
Males	56	4	12
Females	17	6	42

*Judged incapable of evaluation by either the subject or the evaluation team.

and adults, the fraction is 85 percent. This trend holds for female respondents and males taken separately. The same table uncovers an exception to the general rule: that more males than females reported positive experiences, although a higher proportion of late-teen females were positive.

When the respondent was the older partner in the incest liaison, the experience was more likely to be reported positively, as shown in Table 13-4. However, in only one case was a female respondent the older partner; therefore, it is not possible from these data to separate out the effects of the sex of the respondent from whether the respondent was the older or younger partner. Looking at the data from males only, then, it becomes clear that gender is not a sufficient explanation in itself.

A smaller proportion of the experiences of males who were the younger partners were reported as positive (62 percent compared with 87 percent) than was reported for males who were the older partner. It would seem safe to assert that incest is much less favorable viewed by the younger partner than by the older one, regardless of gender. This relationship in the data is confounded, however, by the fact that the average age of the younger partner is also a function of the type of incest relationship. For example, the average age of girls reporting incest with fathers or father surrogates was only about 7½, while the age of those reporting incest with brothers was nearly 10.

The tendency for incest experience to be reported positively more

TABLE 13-3. Self-Evaluations of Incest Experiences by Age at Experience

Age		Positive		Uncertain*		Negative	
		Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Under 10	(33)	4	2	0	1	1	25
10-12	(38)	15	1	0	2	6	14
13-15	(20)	7	5	2	2	1	3
16-19	(13)	4	7	0	1	1	0
Over 20	(33)	26	2	2	0	3	0

* Judged incapable of evaluation by either the subject or the evaluation team.

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TABLE 13-4. Self-Evaluation of Incest Experience by Older and Younger Participants, Male and Female

Participants	Positive	Uncertain*	Negative
Older male	40	2	4
Older female	0	1	0
Younger male	16	2	8
Younger female	17	5	42

* Judged incapable of evaluations by either the subject or the evaluation team.

often at higher ages, when the subject is the older of two partners and when the subject is male, is consistent with a conventional view of sexual behavior, with the initiative usually presumed to be taken by the male and by the older partner. Females older than their partners who were the initiators in incest are probably fewer in number as a result of social conditioning, which militates against female initiative and sexual aggressiveness and also may inhibit self-reporting of such behavior.

It is generally believed that all adult-child sexual relations are bad and that for incest, particularly, sexual contact across generations is likely to be more damaging than is sibling incest. Finkelhor in particular (1979, and Chapter 11 in this volume) has focused on the age difference between partners as the criterion for defining abusive relationships. Table 13-5 reports evaluations for adult-child and peer relationships separately. For both types of relationships, the older partner is substantially more likely than the younger partner to consider the experience as having been positive. However, it should be noted that while only slightly more than 25 percent of younger partners in adult-child situations reported positive evaluations, exactly half of the younger partners in peer relationships saw their experiences as positive. Thus, it is not the matter of evaluation by older versus younger partner alone that accounts for positive reports, but the question of age differences between partners as well.

TABLE 13-5. Self-Evaluations of Incest Experiences by Older vs. Younger Partners in Adult-Child and Peer Relations

Partner	Adult-Child Relations: Number Reporting			Peer Relations: Number Reporting		
	Positive	Uncertain*	Negative	Positive	Uncertain*	Negative
Older	22	2	2	18	1	2
Younger	14	3	36	19	4	14

* Judged incapable of evaluation by either the subject or the evaluation team.

Respondents' evaluations of their experiences were also related to the specific sexual activity. Fewer than half of coital incest experiences were reported as positive (19 of 40), but 62 percent of non-coital experiences were said to be positive (49 of 79), the remaining cases could not be classified.

A panel of judges independently evaluated the reports for the presence of exploitation, based on the use of power or objectification of the partner. Respondents were identified as victims in an exploitive experience, exploiters, or participants in a nonexploitive experience. Victims and exploiters were almost equally likely to describe their experiences positively (8 of 26 experiences reported by the victims and 9 of 28 reported by the exploiters). But more than three-quarters of non-exploitive incidents were reported as positive. As other investigators have found (see Chapter 17), participants in incest often feel guilt after their experiences even if they are victims of exploitation. This study found that victims were substantially more likely than exploiters to feel guilt. More than half of victims but only one of 28 exploiters felt guilty about their incest experience.

In another approach to the issue of self-evaluation, subjects were asked whether or not they would repeat the incest experience, knowing what they knew about it at the time of completing the interview or questionnaire. In general, the responses were a function of age at the time of the experience and were nearly identical to those in Table 13-3. Ten respondents who evaluated their experiences positively nevertheless indicated that they would not repeat the experience. Of the 63 respondents who were certain they would not want to repeat the experience, many had been little girls who felt they had had no choice but who, with adult hindsight, would not want to repeat the experience.

Table 13-6 indicates that the majority of responses in this study dealt with long-term incestuous relationships. Twelve of the relationships were still going on at the time of the survey and are included in the data on length of time elapsed at the time of report. No relationship was found between duration of the experience and positive or negative evaluation of it; the percentage of positive reports is nearly the same in all categories, ranging from a low of 48 percent for relationships enduring more than four years to a high of 69 percent for those lasting three to four years.

FAMILY AND PERSONAL DYNAMICS

Several incest "carriers" were identified in the survey. These are people who come from families-of-origin in which incest occurred, and who knowingly or unknowingly set up incest situations as adults. In

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TABLE 13-6. Self-Evaluation of Incest by Duration of Experience

Duration of Experience	Positive	Uncertain*	Negative	Totals
One time only	6	1	4	11
10 or fewer times	5	1	3	9
Under 6 mo	4	1	3	8
6 mo-1 yr	7	1	4	12
1-2 yr	12	1	7	20
2-3 yr	16	3	14	33
3-4 yr	9	0	4	13
over 4 yr	13	1	13	27
Did not report	1	1	2	4

* Judged incapable of evaluation by either the subject or the evaluation team.

our survey, they were usually mothers with low self-esteem, living in dysfunctional family settings. There were several who had had what they perceived to be positive incest with one family member, and who repeated the experience with other relatives.

It is often thought that incest occurs in families where there is disruption or pathology. In this study there were only 10 instances where family breakdown was reported and nine in which it was inferred by the evaluation assistants. Although no particular question addressed this issue, the questions were designed to elicit such information, if it was there. Family breakdown never appeared as a result of the incest without being recognized as existing before the event. Although the evaluation team agreed it was impossible to find a direct measure of family dysfunction, they also agreed that approximately one-third of the subjects reported incest occurring in family settings that would otherwise be considered to be functional, normal, and healthy. Actual family breakup was reported by five respondents, caused by institutionalization of a parent or by divorce or separation. One of these respondents reported the incest involved as positive and consensual; in the other four it was regarded as negative and as a symptom of the family breakdown rather than a cause.

From their comments on the questionnaires and during interviews, many of the respondents appeared to be still working out conflicts in regard to their incest experiences, some of which had terminated many years past. Some told of years of personal struggle in order to assimilate the experience into their lives. It is significant for those in the human services professions that only one of these 100 incest situations was ever reported to police. Nine had been reported to friends and relatives only and 20 to psychiatrists or professional counselors only;

seven respondents said they had told both friends or relatives and professional helpers. On some questionnaires the question was answered unclearly. At least 53 of the 100 respondents had never sought help, at the time of incest or later, either professionally or by turning to a friend's guidance, and had never told spouses or other intimate partners.

A number of respondents thought that incest laws should be changed to allow consensual relationships because they felt that rape laws adequately covered prosecution of criminal or abusive incest. But others recommended stiffer penalties for child abusers.

This phenomenon indicates a serious and possibly damaging result of long-held social attitudes and current legal reporting requirements as they apply to helping professionals. Although many of the people who did not report their incest experiences were not in conflict regarding the incest, others, in the midst of intense personal struggle, feared turning to anyone for help because of threat of punishment, incarceration, or social condemnation of themselves or loved ones.

CONCLUSION

As is true for more accepted sexual relationships, incest is more practiced than understood. It will not be understood rationally as long as we continue to cloak it in the attitudes and language of taboo.

Whether acknowledged or not, erotic feelings and needs exist within families. Sometimes these feelings are misunderstood, suppressed, or acted out inappropriately. At other times they are perceived as healthy responses to normal life situations and are acted upon or not, according to individuals' social or moral judgment. Often feelings associated with the incest situation are the cause of confusion and family dysfunction. There is always the guilty knowledge that one has broken, or thought about breaking, a serious taboo, whether or not the sexual desire is acted out or the experience is beneficial or damaging.

It is impossible to draw definitive cause-and-effect conclusions regarding the significance of age, gender, type of sex activity, duration, and personal evaluations of incest experiences from information obtained from the limited sample and methods utilized in this study. However, definite trends in these data do indicate possible contribution factors to the impact of incest. When incest occurs at an early age or with a partner of an older generation, it appears to be substantially more likely to be a negative experience. That the younger partner, even in essentially peer relationships, is more likely to have a negative experience suggests that issues of power and freedom of choice are

factors in participants' evaluations of the experience. Finally, that the majority of older teenagers of both sexes could consider their incest experience to be positive certainly challenges conventional assumptions.

This study was intended to frame critical issues surrounding contemporary incest practices and to stimulate further investigations. We now know it is possible to locate and study nonclinical, noncriminal incest situations and that, in such populations, not all instances of incest are negative or damaging.

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