

Sister-Sister Incest as a Manifestation of Multigenerational Sexual Abuse

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Incestuous child sexual abuse has received increasing attention recently, but relatively little attention has focused on the multigenerational dimensions of this problem. The case presented places incest into a multigenerational context and demonstrates how quickly family relationships may become eroticized in an uncommon form: between sisters.

KEY WORDS:

Incest
Sexual abuse
Family patterns
Child abuse
Sexual deviancy

Incest as a special type of child sexual abuse has received increasing attention in recent years. Initially, much was written about the origins and functions of an "incest taboo," while the more recent literature has attempted to draw a motivational picture of the perpetrator, the perpetrator's spouse, and the victim. Other studies have attempted to delineate the social and familial values that are intrinsic to the maintenance and breaking of this taboo (1-4).

Of the large number of possible types of incestuous relationships, the most frequently reported is father-(or father figure) daughter incest. Other types of incestuous relationships within the nuclear family, such as father-son, mother-son, mother-daughter, or sibling-sibling are reported with lesser

frequency. We report here a case of sister-sister incest arising in a family with several, multigenerational incestuous relationships.

Case Report

The principal subjects were a thirteen-year-old and her nine-year-old sister. Neither had a remarkable medical or psychiatric history. The older sister had been sexually abused, including intercourse, by her biologic father from ages 5 to 12 years. After she reported the abuse to a school counselor, the father was removed from the home by legal authorities, and sexual contact with his daughter ceased. At this point, the daughter began sexual relations with her sister in order to "... get my sexual fix." The nature of this relationship was revealed after the younger sister attempted similar sexual acts with a schoolmate at school. This was reported to a teacher. Both sisters reportedly responded well to treatment, modeled after the Giaretto program in San Jose, California (5).

The family history revealed a multigenerational pattern of incestuous, sexually abusive relationships (Figure 1). The father of the sisters, in addition to the long-term sexual abuse of the oldest, had also initiated sexual relationships with his two younger brothers during his adolescence. In addition, he reported being sexually abused by his grandmother and by an unrelated neighbor at age seven. His father, according to his wife (herself a child incest victim), had sexually abused his daughter and was physically abusive to all four of his children. Before the paternal grandparents' divorce, precipitated by the discovery of the father-daughter incest, he had had numerous sexual relationships with other men and women, had risked his professional career by nighttime "peeping" on the wives of company subordinates, and was a heavy user of film and magazine pornography. The mother of our two subjects was also sexually abused as a child by her older brothers from ages 8 to 12 years. In addition, her father later exposed his genitals to her while riding in the car, under the guise of "sex education."

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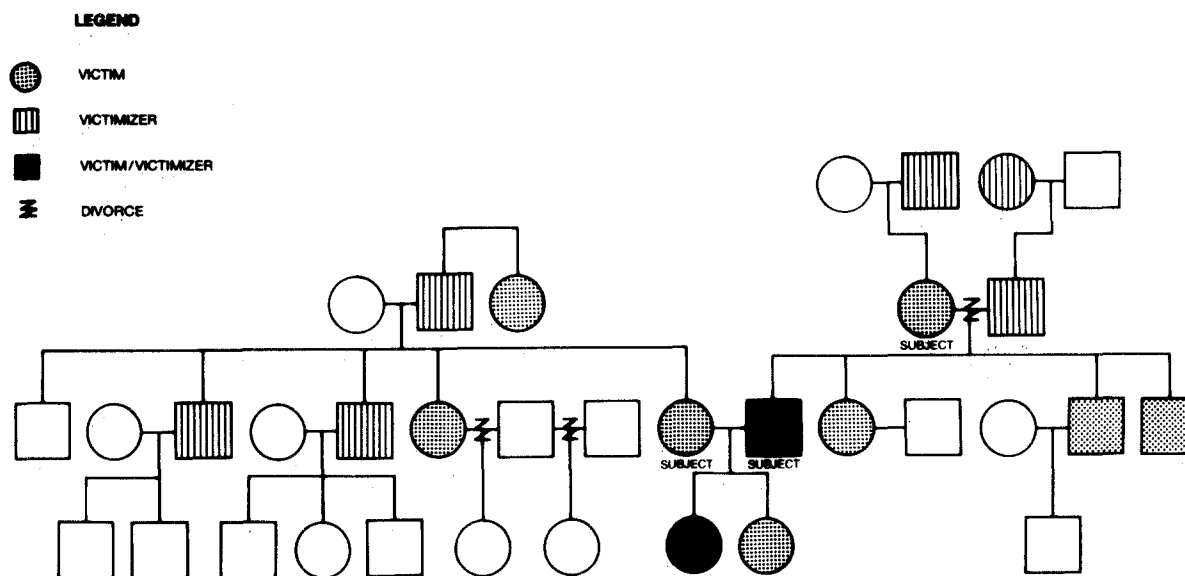


Figure 1. Multigenerational sexual abuse in a family. (SUBJECT refers to sources of family history data.)

Discussion

To our knowledge, sister-sister incest is previously unreported and has been felt to be extremely rare (6). It is possible that the initiation of sibling incest after cessation of father-daughter incest represents a learned sexualization or erotization of interpersonal relationships, which has previously been noted in young incest victims (7,8). It is not the unique manifestation of incest that occurred in these subjects that makes them remarkable but the multigenerational, perhaps "transmitted," pattern of sexual abuse that may be of major importance.

Intergenerational transmission of incest is a commonly observed but poorly understood phenomenon. Only a few cases have been documented in detail. Raphling et al. (9) reported an extensive, multigenerational genealogic study of an incestuous family in 1967 and commented that incest seemed to be a familial value, transmitted between generations. Several other writers have commented on the multigenerational aspects of incest (6, 10-13). Likewise, Gelinat (14) has identified intergenerational transmission as an important long-term negative consequence of child sexual abuse. The critical elements in the apparent transmission of sexual abuse have not been defined, although some parallels have been noted in physical abuse of children and in other forms of family violence (15,16). The concept of the "revolving slate," where deficiencies in a parent-child relationship of one generation are shifted into the parent-child relationship of the subsequent gen-

eration, may be of value in the understanding of incest occurring in the children of incest victims (14).

Several implications of this pattern for therapy and policy merit attention. First, the effects of incest may extend to family members not directly involved in a central incestuous relationship and should be considered as a possibility. Second, child custody or placement procedures that leave children in the care of the mother or other seemingly "safe" family members may not adequately protect those at risk. Third, there appears to be a significant possibility of sexual abuse transmission to subsequent generations if interventions are not effective.

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