

Mother-Child Incest: Characteristics of the Offender

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Studies of the childhood, adulthood, and parenthood of women who sexually abuse their children are rarely found in the literature. The characteristics of 26 such mother-child incest offenders are explored by the author and compared to the characteristics found in other studies and in clinical experiences with incest offenders of either sex.

There are few references to mother-child incest in professional literature. Wahl presents the case histories of two patients in a psychiatric hospital who had intercourse with their mothers during their adolescence [Wahl 1960: 188]. Mathis [1972: 53] wrote that reports of female pedophilia were so rare as to be of little significance; he commented that in our society, women are viewed as sexually harmless to children: What harm can be done without a penis? Walters [1975: 122] speculated that mother-son incest was so rare probably because of the purely physical aspects of intercourse. The Justices [1979: 193] dedicated three pages of a book to mother-son incest. In a chapter on incest, Groth [1982a: 230] included one page on mother-child incest, qualifying his comments because of his limited experience in these cases. That same year Renevoize [1982: 120] referenced mother-child incest, including some cases of mother-daughter incest, and lamented the lack of studies in this area.

The Dallas Incest Treatment Program, a child protective service of the Texas Department of Human Resources, identified 29 mother offenders during

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a three-year period. Mothers constituted 4% of the offender population. Twenty-six offenders were the victim's biological mother, one was a stepmother, one was an adoptive mother, and one was the lesbian lover of the victim's biological mother. All of these cases had been validated by a protective service investigation. The Dallas investigative model has been published [McCarty 1981: 679] and is compatible with the validation process outlined by Sgroi [1982a: 39].

The author reviewed the 29 case records. Three cases (biological mothers) were eliminated from further study because their role in the abuse could not be clearly determined. After much deliberation, five mothers whose role was that of an accomplice were kept in the study, but were evaluated separately. These mothers' roles in enabling the abuse were so extensive that law enforcement officials treated them as offenders. Four were convicted and one received a 99-year prison sentence. Nine of the mothers in this study were co-offenders with a male partner. Twelve were independent offenders, but a male offender was also identified in half of these instances. Eleven of the mother offenders chose female victims whose average age at the time of the report was 6.4 years (range: 2–15). Eight mothers chose male victims whose average age was 9.6 (range: 4–17). Two mothers abused both male and female children.

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of women who abuse their children. Available information on their childhood, adulthood and parenthood was compared to the characteristics found in studies and to clinical experiences with incest offenders of either sex presented in professional publications.

Childhood

The psychological bases of pedophilia (both "fixated" and "regressed" offenders) are the feelings of inadequacy, immaturity, vulnerability, helplessness, and isolation [Groth 1982b: 136]. These self-esteem issues are established primarily in childhood. Of the 21 mother offenders, only two spoke positively of their childhood. One said her childhood was "good" and gave no details. The other painted an idyllic picture of having had warm, loving parents. Her psychological evaluation said she had a "conflicted relationship with her family of origin." Most of the mothers who talked about their childhood used terms like "rough" or "horrible" and went on to give details of sexual and/or physical abuse (95%), multiple caretakers (29%), traumatic breakup of their parents' marriage (41%), and alcoholic parents (29%). One woman was

the only one of her siblings who grew up outside her parents' home. One woman had a mentally ill mother. Two women had brain surgery in their childhood, resulting in epilepsy.

Childhood information was available on two of the mothers who were accomplices. Both seemed to have had better family relationships, including supportive extended families. One was sexually molested by her father but didn't internalize it as abuse. She had (and still has) a close relationship with her mother.

Sexual Victimization

Groth [1982b: 138] said that the majority of child molesters that he has worked with have themselves been sexually abused as children; he singles this out as a factor in contributing to the evolution of mother-child incest [1982a: 231]. Fowler, Burns, and Roehl's study on incest offenders [1983: 97] found that 80% had been sexually or physically abused as children. In our study of 21 mother offenders, some childhood information was available in 17 cases. Thirteen (76%) of these 17 offenders reported childhood sexual victimization. There were strong indications in two additional cases (12%) that the women had been incest victims. Two women denied being sexually abused, but reported serious physical abuse.

One difference was noted in the relationship of the persons who abused the women in this study. The independent offenders were victimized primarily by older brothers (67%) while the co-offenders were victimized primarily by adult caretakers (86%).

Groth [1982: 138] believes that the former incest victim becomes an offender in an effort to resolve the unresolved sexual trauma he or she experienced as a child. In our study, there were several close parallels in the abuse experienced by the co-offenders and the abuse being inflicted on their children. The most profound examples of working out unresolved sexual trauma, however, were in cases of independent offenders. This is Mrs. N's story, for example:

Mrs. N was the youngest of four children and the only girl. She was three when her brothers started molesting her. They later invited neighborhood boys to molest her. When she told her mother, she remembers being told that she was dirty "down there" and that her mother took no protective action. As an adult, Mrs. N., a Hispanic, dated only black men; she said Mexican men reminded her of her brothers. She had a brief marriage at age 23, followed quickly by another short-term relationship. She chose to have a child by this man. After her daughter was born, Mrs. N. dressed her up like a

doll. As the baby got older, Mrs. N. had no tolerance for any autonomous behavior on the child's part. At two and a half, the child told her babysitter about being given douches and enemas, and that her mother inserted soapy fingers in her vagina and anus. Initially it was difficult to determine if this mother's behavior was sexual in intent or just an obsession with cleanliness. Later she described her daughter in sexual terms and admitted to sexual fantasies about her.

Adulthood

Marriage

Groth [1982a: 229] characterizes incest offenders as having intrinsic feelings of isolation, separateness, and apartness from others; they experience themselves psychologically as loners, lacking any consistent sense of intimate attachment, belonging, or relatedness to others. These statements especially seem to fit the independent offenders in this study. Most of the 26 women in the study lacked nurturance from their family of origin and rushed prematurely into marriage: eighty-five percent were married as teenagers and eight (31%) were 15 or younger. This is a characteristic shared by all three groups. The independent offender, however, typically had had only one marriage, usually brief, while the co-offender was in her second or third. The average age of these two groups of offenders was the same.

When the mother is an independent offender, Groth [1982a: 231] believes that her need for nurturance and control is prominent. None of the 21 offenders in this study had the characteristics of "fixated offenders." That is, none seemed to prefer sexual relationships with children, and none had a history of such involvement during their adolescence. Eight of the independent offenders were experiencing a crisis at the onset of the abuse, as is typical of the "regressed" offender [Groth, 1982a: 216–218]. Mrs. S had just come out of a stormy 15-year marriage, having lost her husband to another woman. Mrs. I was still stinging from having her husband leave for her best friend. Mrs. R's husband had recently committed suicide. Mrs. V was recuperating from a divorce and a hysterectomy. Mrs. F's marriage had ended and she had moved away from family and friends. Mrs. N had lost still another short-term relationship. The remaining two independent offenders were experiencing crises in their marriages.

Groth [1982a: 231] noted that when the mother is a co-offender or accomplice, her dependency on her spouse is the major contributing factor. This

turned out to reflect accurately those women in our study. Only one of the accomplices was willing to leave the offender in order to keep her child from being removed. Mrs. C had known about the abuse since its beginning and took no actions to prevent it. She even took her 15-year-old daughter to get an abortion. It was not until agency intervention made the placement alternative clear that she left her boyfriend. Only one of the other accomplices made any effort to get her children back. Mrs. D had known about the abuse of her three daughters shortly after it began and even in court supported the abuse as good for the girls. Despite her husband's imprisonment, she vowed that she would wait for him.

None of the co-offenders separated voluntarily from their partners. Two were separated by imprisonment. All of them permanently lost their children. Mrs. J is a typical example.

Mrs. J described her childhood as "rough." When she was two, her mother had the first of many nervous breakdowns. She was raised by various relatives. While she was still young, she was sexually abused by her cousin's husband. When the children played hide and seek, he would insist on hiding with her and would molest her. She never told anyone because she was embarrassed, felt guilty, and liked the offender as a person. As soon as she was old enough, she moved home with her father and assumed responsibility for running the household.

Mrs. J. married her first husband when she was 19. He was physically and emotionally unavailable to her and could not hold a job. The marriage ended only after he abandoned her. She then became involved with Mr. J. She liked him because he seemed committed to her and was a good provider for her and her children. He liked to play sex games involving Mrs. J, her seven-year-old son and five-year-old daughter in vaginal and anal intercourse. When confronted by the agency, Mr. J confessed immediately to his abuse and was arrested. The children told of their mother's involvement and were removed. Mrs. J seemed too embarrassed to talk about the abuse. She expressed guilt for not protecting her children and relinquished her rights to them; at that time she was seven months pregnant with Mr. J's child and seemed committed to a relationship with him. After a tearful farewell visit with her children, she fled the state to avoid arrest.

Like most of the women in this study, Mrs. J. was looking for someone to take care of her. The Justices [1979: 147] point out that the incestuous father and the collusive mother are both looking for an all-loving mother.

Sexual Indiscretion

Groth [1982a: 216] characterizes the father-daughter offender as unable to negotiate sexual relationships with adults. This offender turns to his daughter because she is less demanding and more compliant. In mother-child incest; however, Groth lists "a history of indiscriminate or compulsive sexual activity on the part of the mother" as a factor that may contribute to the evolution of mother-child incest [1982a: 231].

Wahl [1960: 192] said that the witnessing of a primal scene might intensify incest wishes on the part of sons, as would overt parental sexual promiscuity in the presence of the child. Such exposure, at the very least, could have made the children curious about sex and this curiosity could have made them more vulnerable.

Our case records contain unvalidated reports that two co-offenders and one independent offender had histories of prostitution. One co-offender and two independent offenders were known to pick up men indiscriminately from bars. One co-offender and one independent offender were bisexual and had a series of relationships while the case was open for services. One co-offender participated in what may be termed "sex orgies." One independent offender was described by a psychologist as having sexual pathology. Other women in the study displayed poor judgment in the selection of sexual partners and/or had lived with a series of men. Not including them, 42% of the independent offenders and 56% of the co-offenders had histories of sexual indiscretion. Only one accomplice had a history that could be considered indiscriminate.

Mental Illness

Mayer [1983: 21] says that in mother-daughter incest, the offender is often extremely disturbed, manifesting infantile and/or psychotic behavior. Our study included 11 women who abused only female children. Five of the seven independent offenders (77%) suffered serious emotional disturbance, as documented by psychological testing or a history of psychiatric hospitalization. The other two independent offenders were not tested but were not considered mentally ill by their social workers or therapists, and the prognosis for re-abuse was considered minimal at the time the cases were closed.

Four co-offenders abused only female children and none had documented emotional disturbances. Three were not viewed by their workers as disturbed. Mrs. Y, the fourth, was thought to be a "psychopath" by the therapist who treated the victim.

Mrs. Y was deserted by her mother when she was very young and she lived with her grandfather until she was nine, when her father

remarried and she joined him. Her grandfather regularly had intercourse with her. When asked how she felt about the abuse, Mrs. Y had an unusual response. She said she knew it was a sin. After a pause, she said it didn't cause her any problems until she told her new stepmother, who turned it into a family dispute.

Mrs. Y felt unloved and mistreated in her father's family. She said she didn't socialize much in high school because she had to take care of her younger siblings. She described herself as the class clown. She quit school in the tenth grade and got married at age 18. After six years she left her husband because she wanted to "grow."

Her second husband was from an Asian country. He was sexually conservative, barely able to talk about the subject. That marriage lasted six years and she left him with the primary responsibility for raising their daughter. When the daughter was six, she offered to teach a neighborhood boy how to play "sexy." Upon questioning by her stepmother, the daughter reported that when she visited her mother, she was involved by her mother in a series of nude parties where drugs were used. Each time, her mother would molest her and then allow other adult guests to do the same. This became ritualistic.

Unlike Mayer, Mathis [1972: 135] found that almost all mothers who abused their sons had an emotional disturbance of psychotic depth. In our study, only two of the eight women who molested only male children have documented emotional disturbances: the lesbian woman had recovered from a nervous breakdown just before the molestation; the other was the woman noted above as having sexual pathology.

There were two cases where the mother offender molested both a male and female child. Mrs. J was seen as having impaired reality testing and some emotional disturbance. Two years before the sexual abuse was known, Mrs. Z was considered to be only mildly disturbed; it was noted that she depended heavily on denial as a defense mechanism.

Drug Abuse

Mayer [1983: 29] mentions substance abuse as a common characteristic of offending fathers. Bess and Janssen [1982: 42] said that incest victims reported parental alcoholism in 40% of their cases. In fact, there seems to be a general agreement that in at least a third of incest cases, alcohol is consumed in excess [Renevoize 1982: 79]. Groth [1982a: 231] specifically lists a history of alcohol or drug abuse as a factor in the evaluation of mother-child incest. Wahl [1960:

192] believed that a loss of maternal control, as in alcoholic stupor, operates as an unconscious seduction on the part of the mother. While only two (22%) of our co-offenders and one (20%) of the accomplices had a serious drug abuse problem, six (46%) of the independent offenders did. In one case, the alcohol may have been the major cause of the abuse.

Mrs. Q was a neglectful and physically abusive mother to her 13-year-old son. Most nights she would come home drunk, yell at him, beat him, and then pass out. One night she came home drunk and seduced him. The next day, she was so shocked at her behavior that she checked herself into an inpatient alcohol treatment program, telling them what she had done.

Intelligence

Incest offenders are generally believed to be of average intelligence [Renevoize, 1982: 84]. In our study all of the independent offenders and 80% of the accomplices were considered at least average. However, 56% of the co-offenders were considered borderline.

Work History

It would be difficult to draw work history comparisons of women offenders to male offenders because our society has different employment expectations for men and women. In our study, 75% of the independent offenders and 80% of the accomplices maintained regular employment, mostly in clerical positions, but one independent offender was a partner in a computer company. However, only one (11%) of the co-offenders and one (25%) of the independent offenders living with a partner worked outside the home. The latter was the 21-year-old lesbian who had assumed the provider role in their relationship and managed a fast-food restaurant. The co-offender who worked was Mrs. Y; she was a data input operator, and each of her three husbands had had well-paying jobs.

Parenthood

Age of Parenthood

Groth [1982: 231] listed a relatively small discrepancy between the ages of the parent and child as a possible factor in the evolution of mother-child incest. Although Groth didn't explain his reasoning, Wahl [1960: 192] felt

that the slight age discrepancy between parents and children might intensify incest conflict. The Justices [1979: 193] characterize typical mother-son incest as including an adolescent son who assumes the role of an absent father. In our study, the average age of all three groups of women when they gave birth to their oldest child was 20. In only one case did a slight age difference seem to result in the son's taking on adult responsibilities.

Mrs. Z became pregnant at age 13 and married "to give her child a name." She never lived together with the father and divorced him shortly after her son's birth. We don't know at what age she initiated sexual activity with her son, but his behavior at school became disturbed before he reached puberty. His brother, a year younger, did not display victim behavior [see Sgroi 1982: 35]. The agency became involved initially because of the physical neglect of a young niece being raised by Mrs. Z. The oldest son was the child's primary caretaker. Despite confrontation, Mrs. Z minimized her son's disturbed behavior and insisted that he was capable of being a caretaker. She treated him at age 14 as if he were an adult. Three years later the case was re-referred when it was learned that the boy had been sexually abusing the now six-year-old niece. After she was removed from the home, the niece reported being sexually abused by Mrs. Z also and observing intercourse between Mrs. Z and her oldest son.

Independent Offenders of Males

In mother-son incest, Mayer says [1983: 21], the father is often absent or out of the home, and the mother seeks substitute gratification with her son. This seems to fit the situation of Mrs. Z, described above, and of two women who turned to seven- and nine-year-old sons shortly after the loss of their husbands. These women seemed to treat the boys as age mates.

Independent Offenders of Females

Four of the independent offenders who lived alone abused very young daughters. They maintained an attentive parent role with their children, perhaps because their children were so young, but treated their daughters like extensions of themselves. Mrs. N is a typical example. This type of relationship also held true for the two independent offenders who were married; their daughters were both 15-years-old at the time the sexual abuse was reported. Here is the story of a mother and daughter who were in therapy:

Mrs. M readily admitted enjoying the physical closeness she had

with her daughter. She had showered and napped with her since she was a young girl. There was a lot of physical touching during both activities. She admitted watching with pride as her daughter grew into womanhood. After a shower one day, she insisted that her daughter show her stepfather how beautiful she was becoming. The daughter had become increasingly uncomfortable with the physical contact, and was unnerved by being required to model nude. She began to interpret what was happening to her as sexual abuse and asked the agency to remove her from the home.

Mrs. M openly expressed resentment that her daughter's therapy included learning to be more assertive in resisting her mother's physical approaches. She interpreted this as a sign that her daughter didn't love her. Her therapist pressed her to see her daughter as a separate person and to understand her daughter's needs. She also established clear limits for the touching. After several months of mother-daughter counseling, the daughter returned home.

Co-offenders and Accomplices

Groth [1982a: 231] suggested that a factor in mother-child incest could be the absence of the mother during the child's formative years. While this was true for the stepmother and for the lesbian lover, it was also true for the biological and adoptive mothers. Although they were physically present and were their child's caretaker, only two of the co-offenders and one of the accomplices could be viewed as having been good parents. The three women were nurturing to the children although they were extremely needy themselves (Mrs. J's story has been told earlier). The remaining 12 mothers had been emotionally and physically neglectful. A few were also physically abusive. Their need for a man took priority over the needs of their children.

Conclusions

The Offenders

In this study, the typical independent offender had a troubled childhood (92%) during which she was sexually abused (78%), usually by a brother. She is of average intelligence (100%) and is able to maintain steady employment (67%). She married as a teenager (83%) and that was her only marriage (75%). She is now living independently (67%). She may abuse drugs (46%) and may be seriously emotionally disturbed (50%). Her victim is most often a daughter (60%), whom she views as an extension of herself (67%). The average age

of the female victims is 6 and the male victims 10.

The typical co-offender had a troubled childhood (100%) during which she was sexually abused (100%) usually by an adult caretaker. She is borderline in intelligence (56%) and does not work outside the home (78%). She married as a teenager (100%) and is now in her second (44%) or third (44%) marriage. She has a history of sexual indiscretion (56%). She has a strong need to be taken care of and that need takes precedence over the needs of her children (100%). Her victim was as often her son (average age 9) as her daughter (average age 7), and she was a neglectful parent (66%).

The typical accomplice is of average intelligence (80%) and is employed outside the home (100%). She married as a teenager (60%), and had a strong need to be taken care of; that need took precedence over the needs of her children (100%). The victim was most often a daughter (75%) whose average age was 13.

The Victims

The victims in this study suffered similarly to victims of male offenders. When the abuse was reported early and the victim was supported and protected, the effects were reduced. Most of the children in this study, however, also suffered the permanent loss of their biological mother (73%). Temporary removal was usually necessary due to the lack of a nonabusive parent in the home. Since only three mothers engaged themselves in therapy (14%), permanent removal typically ensued. In six cases, the children went to live with their biological fathers; in five cases, to other relatives. Eight cases included children growing up in foster care or adoption. ♦

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