Factors That Affect a Victim’s Self-Disclosure in Father-Daughter Incest

LYNDA T. FARRELL

Out of concern about the underreporting of father-daughter incest, the author has conducted a study in Virginia to test certain observations in the literature about the relatively small number of cases that come to light voluntarily. The findings point clearly to contributory case characteristics that can sensitize practitioners to the possibility of undisclosed incest.

The underreporting of children involved in incest is a problem and a concern of child protective service workers and other professionals who work with children. The number of incidents of sexual abuse reported to child protective services agencies has increased since the implementation of the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, as protection laws and policies have been amended to place more emphasis on child sexual abuse, and service units in local departments of social services have made efforts to increase public awareness concerning this problem. The increase in reports does not necessarily mean that sexual abuse has increased; professionals believe that the incest taboo is so strong that incest is the most underreported...

Lynda T. Farrell is an M.S.W. student at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, and a Social Worker with the Prince Edward County Department of Social Services, Farmville, VA.
of all child maltreatment. Nationwide statistics indicated in 1980 that reports to agencies constituted about 7% of all child maltreatment, and only 2% of the 7% were incest cases [Mayhill and Norgard 1983]. Also, the incest cases included all types of incest, so that father-daughter incest accounted for only a portion. Kempe and Helfer [1980] note that underreporting of incest cases "is massive" because "disclosure may well result in public retribution with the firm expectation of total family disruption, unemployment, and economic disaster, loss of family and friends for the victim, and likely incarceration for the perpetrator." The incest often continues for years and is revealed only by early pregnancy, veneral disease, or a sudden change in the family situation.

Observations from the Literature

Araji and Finkelhor [1986] believe that no one theory can explain fully the reasons for child sexual abuse. They categorized abusers and the underlying motivation toward the sexual abuse of children into four types: emotional congruence, sexual arousal, blockage, and disinhibition. Some professionals believe that incest occurs because of the pathology of the father and his response to stress [Groth 1978; 1983], or because of a family structural imbalance [Herman 1981; Justice and Justice 1979; Mayhill and Norgard 1983]. Both Russell [1983; 1986] and Herman [1981] hold a feminist theory of child sexual abuse, which Finkelhor places in his disinhibition category. The feminist approach posits that certain social elements encourage this type of sexual behavior and reduce inhibitions in the abuser. For example, Herman emphasizes that a patriarchal family structure contributes to father-daughter incest. Daughters growing up in a family with a rigid, patriarchal structure take a passive role vis-à-vis their father's domination. Thus, the family dynamics of the authoritative role of the father and the passive role of the daughter could combine to allow incest to occur and also could give a possible explanation for the underreporting of father-daughter incest. When father-daughter incest finally is reported, the disclosure may be linked to the age of the victim, usually at puberty [Herman 1981], and the seriousness of the sexual abuse [Russell 1983].

In Herman's study [1981] of 40 adult women who were victims of father-daughter incest during their childhood, the women described their fathers as "perfect patriarchs" with absolute authority in the family. Eighty percent of the women were under 13 years old when the incest began, and the average age at the beginning of the incest was nine. The first incestuous incident usually began with fondling, and most abusers did not attempt intercourse until puberty. The average duration of the incest was three years, and 58%
of the females never told anyone about it. Herman also interviewed staff members at five child sexual abuse treatment centers, who indicated that disclosure was often precipitated when the child reached puberty and the father escalated his demands to include sexual intercourse. The seriousness of the abuse along with the fear of pregnancy seemed to cause the daughter to disclose the secret.

Russell studied the incidence and prevalence of intrafamilial and extrafamilial sexual abuse of female children using data obtained from 930 adult women drawn from a random sample of women living in the San Francisco area. They were interviewed during the summer of 1978 about any experience with sexual abuse they might have had. Sixteen percent reported at least one experience of intrafamilial sexual abuse before age 18, and 4.5% were father-daughter incest victims. The study identified abuse according to the degree of sexual violation by using the following categories: (1) very serious sexual abuse—forced penile-vaginal penetration to attempted fellatio, cunnilingus, anilingus, or anal intercourse; (2) serious sexual abuse—forced digital penetration of the vagina to nonforceful attempted breast contact (unclothed) or simulated intercourse; (3) least serious sexual abuse—forced kissing, intentional sexual touching. The study revealed that of all intrafamilial sexual abusers, stepfathers were more likely to abuse their stepdaughters at the very serious level of abuse, and stepfathers were more abusive than biological fathers: 47% of the cases of sexual abuse by nonbiological fathers were reported as very serious abuse as compared with 26% of the cases of sexual abuse by the biological fathers. Thirty-three percent of the cases involving biological fathers involved serious sexual abuse, and 41% of the cases of sexual abuse by biological fathers were in the category of least serious sexual abuse [Russell 1983; 1986].

Russell points out that only 2% of these were ever reported to the authorities. She comments [1986] that these "extremely low figures provide powerful evidence that reported cases are only the very tip of the iceberg."

The Study

This study examined founded father-daughter incest reports received by Child Protective Services (CPS) units in Departments of Social Service (DSS) in Virginia during the 1985–1986 fiscal year. It sought to increase knowledge of the factors related to victims' reporting of the abuse experience by investigating the age of the victim, the duration of the abuse, and the seriousness of the abuse.

Father-daughter incest was defined as "any sexual relationship between a
child and an adult in a position of paternal authority" [Herman 1981]. The definition includes stepfathers and adoptive fathers as well as biological fathers as perpetrators. The research focused on surveys of child protective services agencies in Virginia to determine the number of self-disclosed and nondisclosed reports of father-daughter incest. The two main categories of disclosure used in the study were (1) self-disclosure—the victim tells someone about the incest, and then the case is reported to child protective services; (2) nondisclosure—another person or agency that suspects abuse because of certain signs and symptoms reports the case to CPS; in this instance, the victim did not tell about the abuse before the CPS investigation.

The Method

A questionnaire was mailed to the 124 DSS agencies in Virginia. Of the 46% response rate (57 agencies), at least four agencies were represented from each of the seven different DSS geographical regions of the state, and 11 of the returned questionnaires were from independent cities. The responding agencies had DSS classifications of class I through IV, which means that the agencies had between 1 and 160 permanent employees. No responses were received from the five class V DSS agencies that have from 161 to 360 employees.

Information was sought in the following areas: (1) the number of founded reports of father-daughter incest; (2) the number of founded reports of nondisclosed father-daughter incest; (3) the number of founded reports of self-disclosed father-daughter incest; (4) a categorization of founded reports of father-daughter incest by age groups for both nondisclosed and self-disclosed reports; (5) the number of founded reports of father-daughter incest according to the duration of the abuse in nondisclosed and self-disclosed reports; and (6) the number of founded reports of father-daughter incest according to the seriousness of the abuse to the victim in nondisclosed and self-disclosed reports. In addition, agencies were asked to provide the total number of child sexual abuse reports, including incest and other sexual abuse, that the agency received and investigated during the 1985–1986 fiscal year.

Study Results

The respondent agencies had a total of 589 reports of child sexual abuse, with a range from none in three agencies to 43 in one agency, for a mean of 10.3 (s.d. = 9.8). Of the total, 106 (18%) were founded reports of father-daughter
incest. The number ranged from none in 21 agencies to 14 in one agency, with a mean of 1.86 (s.d. = 2.64). Twenty-one (20%) were reports of non-disclosure, and 85 (80%) were cases of self-disclosure.

The largest number of nondisclosed and self-disclosed reports occurred in the 12 to 15 year age range, with 38% of the nondisclosed reports and 51% of the self-disclosed reports in this category. Self-disclosed reports increased as the victim’s age increased, until the 16 to 17 year age range: zero to three years old = 3% of self-disclosed reports; four to seven years old = 5% of self-disclosed reports; eight to 11 years old = 28% of self-disclosed reports; 12 to 15 years old = 51% of self-disclosed reports; 16 to 17 years old = 13%.

In regard to the duration of father-daughter incest, 38% of the self-disclosed reports had a duration of 24 or more months; 27% had a duration of six to 11 months; 18% had a duration of 12 to 23 months; 9% had a duration of one to five months; and 7% had a duration of less than one month. Of the nondisclosed reports, the six to 11 month and the 24-or-more month ranges each were 33.3% of the total nondisclosures. The six to 11 months duration and the 24-or-more months duration in both self-disclosed and nondisclosed reports had the largest percentage of the reports.

Examination of the statistics in regard to the seriousness of abuse in self-disclosed reports revealed that the largest percentage (39%) were categorized as least serious abuse; 28% were serious abuse, and 33% were very serious abuse. Nondisclosed reports followed the same pattern in that 43% were listed as least serious; 24% were serious; and 33% were very serious.

The principal limitation of this study was that the larger DSS agencies, which have large CPS caseloads and many CPS workers, had difficulty researching the answers to the questionnaire. The majority of the respondents were from the smaller agencies, and generalizations from this narrow scope cannot be made. Also, since the questionnaire asked for responses by categories, the researcher could not conduct a cross-classification or bivariate analysis of the data obtained. Further research might involve such a study.

Conclusions

This study revealed that a relationship exists between the victim’s age, the duration of the abuse, the seriousness of the abuse, and the self-disclosure of father-daughter incest. The data indicated that there was an increase in a victim’s self-reports of abuse with age up to and including the 12- to 15-year-old age range, and that the largest percentage of disclosures are from the 12- to 15-year-old range. It also indicates that a victim’s self-disclosure of abuse is more likely to occur if the duration of abuse was 24 or more months. Least
serious abuse was reported more frequently than serious or very serious abuse both in cases of self-disclosure and nondisclosure.

The study findings in regard to age of the victim at disclosure are similar to Herman's study [1981] in which she found that disclosure was tied to puberty, when the abusing father demands sexual intercourse from his daughter. The present study also parallels Russell's study [1983] in that she determined that the largest percentage of biological fathers were contained in the category of least serious sexual abuse.

Although the present study was limited, its replication of previous research lends confidence to its findings. One would hope that professionals will use this information in their assessments of emotionally disturbed children and adults or in the evaluation of cases of family dysfunction. With the realization that incest is underreported, social workers and other professionals could evaluate their clients in regard to the factors affecting self-disclosure and nondisclosure, and incorporate questions regarding the possibility of incest into their assessment process. They may be surprised to find that incest underlies many dysfunctional families and adults.

The finding that self-disclosure of abuse appears to increase as the victim's age increases, and when the duration of abuse is 24 or more months, underscores how long a time victims can be abused before they tell, and perhaps can only disclose when they attain an age when they have more awareness and knowledge about sexual activity. The horror of this is that the victim who is involved in a lengthy incestuous relationship may develop serious psychological problems as a result of the abuse. Groth [1978] believes that the trauma of sexual victimization increases with the closeness of the relationship between abuser and victim and with the duration of the experience. Finkelhor [1979] states that abuse by close family members is more traumatic than abuse by strangers because the abuser violates the child's trust and breaks a serious taboo, creating guilt in the victim and complicating the family dynamics.

In addition, the low number of nondisclosed reports indicates that other professionals such as physicians, educators, mental health workers, day care providers, law enforcement officials, and social workers, continue to need education about the indicators of child sexual abuse. Many abusers threaten their victims against revealing the family secret, so the perceptive professional who notices and reports child sexual abuse because of certain indicators or symptoms in the child may be the key to these children receiving the help that they need. Further research on disclosure of incest might involve comparing those counties that had some prevention or education programs with those counties that had none, to determine if the age of self-disclosure is affected.
Virginia CPS agencies have placed much emphasis on alerting the public to child abuse and informing them about their responsibility to report abuse. A steady increase of reports from year to year indicates that this approach is effective. Bruises, burns, and broken bones, however, are more easily identified as child abuse than incest. Russell [1986] calls incest "the secret trauma." Professionals with knowledge of the factors that affect a victim's nondisclosure or self-disclosure of abuse will develop appropriate sensitivity to an individual and consider the possibility that she may be an incest victim. With the realization that others can conceive of their situation, incest victims may more readily share their secrets with others and may allow themselves to be rescued from the trauma of one of life's best-kept secrets.

References


(Address requests for a reprint to Lynda T. Farrell, P.O. Box 37, Hampden-Sydney, VA 23943.)
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