

EXAMINING THE MYTHS: A FEMINIST VIEW OF INCEST by Julie Brickman

1. There is a strong bias against incest in our society

False. As things stand now, despite the fact that everybody claims, it continues to flourish. The bias is against uncovering it, talking about it, exposing its existence, then looking at how some of our most cherished institutions and values support it.

2. Incest is another word for rape, by a relative.

True. When we talk about incest we are talking first and foremost about force and coercion, forced and coercive sexual acts, or rape. We are talking about daddy or uncle forcing a six month old or six year old or 16 year old daughter or niece to gratify him sexually. Yet so deeply buried is this secret we don't even have words to describe it.

The word incest, in the dictionary, is not defined as forcible sexual intercourse, only as sexual intercourse between two people so closely related as to be forbidden a sexual relationship by law. That is Why I prefer to place it back in the context of rape. Rape implies force.

Furthermore, we have no adequate words for the people who commit incest. We continue to call them fathers, which seems to me to fail to distinguish them from a whole other group of people who do not rape their daughters. Or we call them offenders, which again fails to distinguish them from any number of other people such as peepers and flashers.

would suggest we begin to use words that describe what we are talking about. Words like daughter- raper or niece-molester. It will help us keep our goals straight if we think of this guy in front of us as a daughter raper rather than a daddy.

- 3 Incest is a disturbance in the functioning of a family unit.

False No doubt by the time of intervention, the family unit will be disturbed. Perhaps it always was. This is NOT, however, the cause of the incest. Instead, it is likely to be the consequence of incest.

Again, clarity is very important. It's important to keep in mind who did what to whom. Dad molested daughter. What happened after that? Everything in the family got twisted around.

Looking at it this way, and bypassing all those tempting textbook theories about the role of moms and daughters, keeps the source of the disturbance very clear. The source is the man who raped his daughter, or molested his stepchild.

The fact that mother is out every night making campaign speeches or is having an affair with George next door or appears to be dirty and unkept is all very interesting, but about as relevant to the occurrence of incest as the fact that the teapot has a handle missing.

4. If father and mother had a normal sex life, father wouldn't commit incest.

False. Difficult as this may be to accept, father and mother's sex life is also completely irrelevant to the occurrence of incest.

There are lots of fathers who are not satisfied with their marital sex lives. Some of them get divorced, some seek counselling, some find mistresses, some masturbate. They do not necessarily rape and molest their daughters. As a matter of fact, many daughter-molesters have perfectly "normal" sexual

relationships with their wives.

Let me emphasize the implications of this. Just ASKING the question: "How is your sex life?" opens the door to scapegoating marital sex lives and mothers for the occurrence of incest. It offers fathers an out they are only too glad to take.

5. Mothers often unconsciously encourage incest in order to evade some of their responsibilities as wives.

False. There are lots of mothers who would like to evade the more dreary tasks that are considered part of their responsibilities, who prefer not to vacuum or do dishes or take care of the children. And there are lots of wives who do not consider it their duty to be available sexually to their husband any time he might wish.

But they do not do this thinking their husbands will use their daughters in their place. They don't want consciously or unconsciously - to dump on their daughters. It would not even occur to them that their husband might consider it his right to turn to his daughter to fill his needs.

My experience is that most mothers are completely stunned when they find out.

They had no idea, and this is a crisis time for them. Their whole world is shaken to the core and they, too, need individual help and support, need to be put in touch with other mothers in the same boat.

It is in this area that we have to shake off learning which teaches us that the role of the mother is to serve everyone's psychological needs in the family, and that the role of the father is to provide economic security. If we do not shake these beliefs, we will tend to see mothers as at least partly responsible for incest, and will scrutinize their ability to fulfill their role until we find some flaw or failure.

And believe me, daughter-molesters will go along with this. They are often men to make impossible demands on their wives anyway, who see burnt toast as a personal affront.

6 Incest victims are fully aware of what is happening to them at the time.

False. Incest victims know something awful and (literally) unbelievable is happening to them and that it is happening with someone they loved and trusted (not always, some dads are violent and overbearing).

But once it starts to happen, they expend most of their psychological energy trying to distance themselves, either by somehow teaching themselves to disappear from their bodies so as to anesthetize those parts, or by a psychological dissociation of selves, that bad self who is punished by a monster every night vs. the good girl who is always kind to everyone.

Having no categories to understand what is happening, they develop their own explanations, ones that fit the nature of their experience, which is that someone they love and trust is hurting and betraying them.

And the only explanation that fits is that they are horrible, worthless pieces of scum, unfit, unlovable filth. Why else, so the psyche insists, would anyone do this to them? They are sure that if somehow they were different human beings or had behaved differently, this would not have happened to them they could have controlled it.

Soon after the incest has started, this belief will be quite firmly in place and very difficult to shake. The only weapon we have against it is our own deep belief in their innocence, admittedly often difficult to maintain in the face of self-mutilation, prostitution, drug abuse, and all the ways they have of demonstrating their own worthlessness. In fact, while most incest victims have a deep need for warm human contact and love, they also have a need to keep the people they value at a distance, for if they let us

come close they are afraid we will see their slimy, semen-filled, ripped and shredded insides, their true awfulness and be repelled.

So, incest victims are not fully aware of what is happening. With lots of encouragement and support, they can tell us what happened, although they will resist that, sometimes because they can't remember, sometimes because they think you won't believe it if they tell all the gory details. In fact, they will often reverse their story at the first sign of opposition or disbelief.

What they cannot ever tell us is why it happened. The job of those who work with victims is to slowly, patiently teach them to connect their own misery to the fact that someone they loved and trusted used them, dumped all over them, inflicted pain on them.

One of the most frustrating facts of working with victims, especially long term victims, is their very insistence on seeing themselves as responsible, their complete lack of anger and outrage at what happened (in contrast to our sense of discomfort and outrage when we hear what has been going on).

They don't know. They don't know they had a right to anything different, and they won't be able to learn this until they are safe, and have been shown there can be affection without abuse.

7. All men who commit incest display some form of psycho-pathology (craziness)....

False. These men don't have a problem, they ARE a problem. Whenever they get anywhere close to experiencing insecurity, pain, anxiety, lovelessness, they inflict this pain on other vulnerable people, usually small children, rather than feel it themselves.

That is, to me, one of the worst things that happens; these men force others to feel their pain and conflicts for them. That is what victimization is all about, the ability to get other people to carry your burdens for you so you don't have to.

So we see victims who are broken with shame and self-loathing and fathers who seem perfectly fine and conflict-free. Perhaps a bit authoritarian, or a bit disogynist, maybe even a tad of a wimp or an isolate, but a reasonable family man, not at all crazy by any of our standards.

The point, for those who do treatment, and indeed for everyone concerned about this issue, is that we have to reverse all those assumptions we were taught about how everyone is a victim. Here we have an entirely different kettle of fish. We have a man who has to learn to experience his own pain rather than inflict it on others. Then and only then can we help him deal with his pain and conflicts and allow him to consider reentry into the family.

8 Incest can best be understood as a sexual disturbance.

False. I think by now it is clear that incest is primarily a disturbance in power, in the right to control or have authority over oneself or someone else. This victim has too little. The molester has too much.

If we persist in treating offenders as if their disturbance is sexual, and fail to look at their need for power and control in other areas of their lives, we will fail every time.

The issue is power; the arena in which it is fought is sexual. Because the arena is sexual, and because of our own basic belief in the importance of healthy sexuality, we tend to get sidetracked where with regard to both victims and offenders.

9. Some incest victims are so beautiful and seductive that it is only natural for any man, even father, to be overwhelmingly attracted to them.

False. This reflects our society's tendency to sexualize young children, especially young girls (e.g. Lolita, Tatum O'Neal). Young children are simply NOT sexy or seductive unless adults have taught them to be that way.

Furthermore, it is NOT NATURAL to see young girls as sexual objects, although most men have been socialized to sexualize their relationships with women and girls.

On top of this, men are NOT overwhelmed by testosterone (the male sex hormone) so that they suddenly cannot control themselves and simply have to rape the next woman in sight, be she six or 36. In fact, this runaway hormone theory presents a rather ridiculous image.

Certainly men have strong sexual urges (as do women), but they are perfectly capable of controlling them. The beauty or "seductiveness" of a young girl, then, is not relevant to a decision taken by father or uncle or stepfather to rape or molest her.

10. Many little children have sexual fantasies about their opposite-sexed parent.

False. This theory, the sexualization of young children as if they were adults, is one of the biggest disservices Freud and his followers bequeathed us.

Many of Freud's patients reported father-daughter incest to him, fact which he wrote about in his letters to Fleiss, a fellow physician and close friend, letters be subsequently ordered destroyed (he did destroy his own end of the correspondence).

At first he believed these accounts, but eventually, due to his own problems, he came to view them as fantasies. From this he developed his theory of childhood sexuality, of kids as sexual beings.

Remnants of this theory abound to this day. So when victims of incest finally get up the nerve (or remember) to tell about what happened to them, they are often told this is a fantasy on their part, that all little kids really wish their fathers would rape them.

In fact, the reverse is true. Adults sexually desire children, sexualize them, seduce them, rape them. If a child reports a sexual fantasy about an adult, we can be sure that the adult is sexualizing the relationship to some extent.

11. As with any child, what is best for incest victims is to grow up in an intact family

False. What is best for the incest victim is to grow up in a safe, loving, protected environment, one which allows her the space to develop freely.

This may or may not be her family of origin. It may be some part of her original family, e.g. kids and mother (often the preferred choice), or it may be with relatives, friends, in an incest survivors home or by herself, whatever comes closest to fulfilling her needs.

An incest victim does not only need the incest to stop to be able to breathe freely again. She needs the FEAR of incest to stop.

12. Incest victims are deeply scarred especially in terms of their sexuality.

False. Incest victims may or may not be deeply scarred. It depends on how long and how badly they were used, and on how they are treated once it begins to surface.

The scarring that is present must be examined in terms of basic human rights and dignity, not in terms of sexuality. Though it may show up in the sexual arena - the area in which they were most obviously used - it is their worth and dignity that is most scarred.

It is most important not to believe that incest victims are damaged goods (no matter how they see themselves). We must avoid thinking of them as "nothing but's", but see the whole person, encourage strengths and creativities and conversations about everyday living. They really can reclaim their lives, it IS possible.

13. It is impossible to understand or identify with incest because it is so far out of the bounds of our everyday experience.

False. Although this is where we usually start. We begin by thinking, my god, how could this happen, how could it occur so frequently. Eventually, we come to see that incest is simply an exaggeration of the relationships condoned by our social structure.

Marriage, as we know it, is modeled on father-daughter relationships, although not, of course, between relatives. What we have is a union between an older, richer man who goes out into the world and provides, and a younger woman who stays at home, serves his needs, is poorer, depends on him.

14. In the long run, what incest victims need most is a good sexual relationship with an understanding man.

As might be clear from the previous answer, this is false. Incest victims need help in two areas: nurturance and affection, support, hugs, love. Usually they need this from a female, and whenever possible, a strengthening of the bond between mother and daughter. They do NOT need affection that is tied in any way to a sexual relationship.

They also need to learn that they have rights, that people no matter who they are, do not have the right to intrude on them sexually, physically or psychologically. They do not know this. And until they do, they will have no way to get angry, to begin to connect their feelings of worthlessness and misery to someone else's taking advantage of them.

cannot emphasize this too much. It is NOT their sexuality that is in need of definition, but their basic human rights. They need to learn they can have some control over their own lives, that their world actually makes a difference, has an impact, will be taken seriously by someone else and acted on. They need some say, some power over their lives. This is what they have deprived of.

Source: <http://www.paedosexualitaet.de/incest/feminist.html>

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