

Reflection

Afterword, 2000: Understanding Incest Twenty Years Later

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This book, like so many feminist writings, began with two women talking. Our simple acts of speaking and listening joined us to a world-wide liberation movement. In the “free space” we created in our intimate dialogues with our patients and with each other, we joined with numerous other women who were uncovering the secret crimes at the heart of patriarchal order.¹ When Lisa Hirschman and I began our study in the mid-1970s, incest was publicly invisible, yet the private confidences of numerous victims led us and a number of other feminist writers to suspect that sexual exploitation of women and children was endemic in our society.² Against the evidence of our patients’ personal testimony, we encountered a suffocating array of denials, rationalizations, and excuses that passed for authoritative wisdom in literature, social science, medicine, and law. At the time it was generally held that sexual offenses were rare in reality but rampant in the overactive imaginations of women and children. The opposite turned out to be true.

In the past two decades, the original premises of our incest study have been amply confirmed. It is now widely understood that father-daughter incest is not an aberration but rather a common and predictable abuse of patriarchal power. It is also a means of perpetuating the power of fathers, one of the many private crimes (rape, sexual trafficking, domestic battery) by which male dominance and female subordination are enforced.³ Perhaps those who grasp the importance of incest most fully are practical businessmen who profit from the sale of women’s bodies. A pimp explains to a naive student what he looks for in a prostitute:

Beauty, yes. Sexual expertise, somewhat. That can be taught easier than you think. What is important above all is obedience. And how do you get obedience? You get obedience if you get women who have had sex with their fathers, their uncles, their brothers—you know, someone they love and fear to lose so that they do not dare to defy.⁴

While conceding that incest is much more common than previously thought, some commentators have attempted to understand the problem apart from the context of male dominance. They point out, quite rightly, that not all perpetrators are men (only some 90 percent of them),⁵ and not all victims are girls (boys are also sexually abused in significant numbers, mostly by older boys and men).⁶ Nevertheless, a feminist analysis remains the only one capable of explaining how such widespread abuses visited mainly by one sex upon the other could be so long denied or condoned. Only a feminist analysis explains why incest perpetrators look like the ordinary men they are—indeed, why so many are men of power and respect. Only a feminist analysis explains why women have always been the most committed advocates for abused children and adult survivors. And only a feminist analysis

explains why such bitter conflict arises any time a serious effort is made to hold incest perpetrators accountable for their crimes . . .

NOTES

1. Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation* (Washington, N.J.: Times Change Press, 1970).

2. Other feminist thinkers who investigated this issue at the same time were Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980); Louise Armstrong, *Kiss Daddy Goodnight: A Speak-Out on Incest* (New York: Hawthorne, 1978); Sandra Butler, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest* (San Francisco: Glide, 1978); and Jean Goodwin, *Sexual Abuse, Incest Victims and Their Families* (Boston: John Wright, 1982).

3. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975); Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

4. Richard Kluff, "On the Apparent Invisibility of Incest," in Richard Kluff, ed., *Incest-Related Syndromes of Adult Psychopathology* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1990), p. 25.

5. Diana Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

6. D. Finkelhor, G. Hotaling, I. A. Lewis, and C. Smith, "Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors," *Child Abuse and Neglect* (1990), 14:19–28.