

Adult female survivors of incest (n = 68) were compared to other women (n = 93) with respect to their relationships with their mothers and female friends. For the most part, incest survivors did not differ from other women in terms of their friendship networks or the quality of their closest female friendships. However, they did report lower levels of interpersonal competence. Survivors described relatively poor relationships with their mothers, who were seen by them as socially isolated and lonely. Measures of relationships with their friends were largely independent of those assessing relationships with their mothers. These results imply that incest indeed affects the relationships adult survivors share with other women, particularly their mothers, but also indicate that negative consequences are not always present. Many aspects of friendships with other women seem resilient and may serve as a positive foundation for therapeutic interventions.

Female Incest Survivors

Relationships With Mothers and Female Friends

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The real incest taboo seems to be talking about it (Armstrong, 1978). This rule of silence has been increasingly broken in recent decades as hundreds of articles on the subject have appeared in professional journals. The goal of these publications is usually to describe the characteristics of families in which incest occurs, recommend interventions for the young victims and family, and/or speculate about the motives of the perpetrator and the often-criticized mother. There is a smaller, yet substantial, base of literature addressing the long-term aftermath of familial sexual abuse for adult survivors. Research in this area has explored such consequences as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, feelings of isolation and stigma, revictimization,

Authors' Note: This article is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Michigan by Aimee K. Newman Lubell under the supervision of Christopher Peterson. The help and encouragement of committee members Margaret Buttenheim, Kathleen Faller, and Sheryl Olson are gratefully acknowledged. Howard Gottlieb, Judith Ballou, Donna Silbert, and Robert Daniels also contributed substantially to this research. Financial support was provided by the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the Horace D. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, and the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan. Address reprint requests to Aimee K. Newman Lubell, 1260 Lake Boulevard, Suite 241, Davis, CA 95616.

JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, Vol. 13 No. 2, April 1998 193-205

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substance abuse, and sexual difficulties (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). The subset of this literature that attends primarily to adult relationships is limited and usually focuses on adult heterosexual relationships.

The relationships female survivors share with other women have been studied less frequently. The purpose of this current research was to begin an exploration of these relationships. For example, what is the relationship between the incest survivor and her mother? It is reportedly poor (Herman, 1981; Rosenthal & Doherty, 1985), but does this distinguish these particular women from others (Herman & Lewis, 1986; Lerner, 1985)? If a survivor has a poor relationship with her mother, does this indicate a specific deficit of the survivor herself or, more broadly, a problem within her family system (Alexander, 1985)?

Raising questions surrounding the relationships of survivors with their mothers leads us closer to our primary interest in the kinds of interactions that incest survivors have with other women. This issue has received scant empirical attention, although some writers have commented on the apparent absence of friendships in the lives of incest survivors due to anger, mistrust, and a general devaluation of women, including themselves (Courtois, 1988; Goodwin & Talwar, 1989; Herman, 1981; Herman & Schatzow, 1984). Female survivors of incest are reported to favor men for their privileged position and to resent women for their powerlessness (Herman, 1981). Again, this may not necessarily set incest survivors apart from women in general (Schaefer, 1985). Women have long had cause to envy the power, financial advantage, respect, and opportunities typically accorded men (Brownmiller, 1975; Forster, 1985; Griffin, 1986; Hewlett, 1986). Women may internalize their devalued position, overvalue those in power, and ultimately participate in their own oppression (Lerner, 1988). Here again, a comparison between incest survivors and the general population of women would be informative.

What is the association between the quality of a woman's relationship with her mother and the quality of her peer friendships? Can women with poor connections to their mothers develop authentic, intimate relationships with other women? Is there a difference here for incest survivors, or do most women struggle to some extent with similar difficulties? Attachment theory would seem to predict that a woman's friendships are impaired to the degree that her relationship with her mother was (and is) poor. Bowlby (1979) states the following:

The key point of my thesis is that there is a strong causal relationship between an individual's experience with his [or her] parents and his [or her] later capacity to make affectional bonds . . . he [or she] tends to assimilate any new

person . . . to an existing model . . . [based on] one or other parent . . . and often to continue to do so despite repeated evidence that the model is inappropriate. (pp. 135-142)

Thus, one possibility is that incest survivors experience poor relationships with both mothers and friends and that these are linked. Alexander (1992, 1993) presented this argument in an explicit manner, suggesting that many incest survivors demonstrate a stable and pervasive pattern of insecure attachment that interferes with the establishment of peer relationships. However, there are several reasons to be skeptical that this assertion is generally the case. Although studies of the immediate consequences of sexual abuse during childhood suggest that friendship formation can be impaired (Briere & Runtz, 1993), there is no single symptom—including social withdrawal—that characterizes the majority of sexually abused children. Indeed, perhaps one third of abused children demonstrate no symptoms at all (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). Among those who do manifest problems in the immediate wake of sexual abuse, these symptoms abate with time in the majority of cases.

Existing investigations of relationships among adult survivors of incest are often limited in their scope. Research participants are frequently in their late teens or early 20s; they are enrolled in college and presumably still a part of the family system in which the incest occurred (Fox & Gilbert, 1994). Additionally, measures of social adjustment often lump peer relationships (i.e., female friends) with heterosexual relationships (Harter, Alexander, & Neimeyer, 1988; Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, & Maddever, 1990). Survivors with problematic sexual relationships with men is not necessarily indicative of concurrent difficulty with female friendships (Fox & Gilbert, 1994). Within the minimal number of research studies that focused on either of these separate issues, there is scant evidence that friendships with women are specifically impaired (Alexander & Lupfer, 1987; Edwards & Alexander, 1992).

As an alternative to the prediction of attachment theory that incest survivors show pervasive deficits in relationships with others, the current study presented in this article suggests that many adult incest survivors may have successfully differentiated their relationships with mothers and peers and, consequently, there is no link between the two. This research explored how the relationships of incest survivors resembled and differed from those of other women, and it sought to make a major contribution to current understanding of survivors and women in general. Toward this end, the focus is on

two major relationship areas of significance for incest survivors—relationships with their mothers and their friendships with other women.

METHODOLOGY

Research Participants

Participants in this study totaled 161 women between the ages of 20 and 90 inclusive, the vast majority of whom were Michigan residents (85%), Caucasian (90%), and heterosexual (84%). The mean age of this population sample was 37 years, and mean level of education was between an associate's degree and a bachelor's degree. Approximately one third were single, one half married, and the remaining were separated or divorced; these proportions approximate those of the general adult female population in the contemporary United States (Furstenberg, 1996; Witham, 1995).

Participants included 68 self-identified incest survivors and 93 women who had never been victims of incest. Seventy-nine percent of the survivors and 54% of the comparison group had participated in psychological therapy. The two groups were otherwise well-matched with respect to age, ethnicity, education, partnered status, and sexual orientation. This was demonstrated by nonsignificant X^2 tests for categorical variables and t tests for continuous variables (see Table 1). The results were unaffected by whether the individuals within the study sample had participated in psychological therapy. Additionally, the results were unaffected when analyses were limited to only those research participants with a heterosexual orientation.

Research Procedure

The incest survivors were recruited in several ways. An ad placed in a local newsletter, written by and for women who were sexually abused as children, reaped 14 respondents. Twelve women responded to flyers distributed at a public lecture on incest at the University of Michigan. The remaining 42 survivors responded to flyers distributed to self-help groups such as Survivors of Incest Anonymous in the Ann Arbor and Detroit areas, a flyer posted at a shelter for battered women, and to flyers distributed through therapists. Seven women were contacted to participate in the comparison group and were reassigned to the incest group when they reported they were incest survivors.

Women in the comparison group were contacted through ads and flyers inviting participation in a study of female relationships among peers of the

TABLE 1: Results

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Survivors</i>	<i>Comparison Group</i>	<i>Inferential Statistic</i>
Demographics			
<i>n</i>	68	93	
Age (years)	36	38	$t = 0.87$
Ethnicity (White)	91%	89%	$\chi^2 = 0.03$
Education (years)	14	16	$t = 1.35$
Marital/partnered status			
Single ^a	38	33	$\chi^2 = 0.92$
Married ^a	44	53	
Divorced/separated ^a	18	14	
Heterosexual orientation ^a	78	88	$\chi^2 = 3.01$
Ever in therapy ^a	79	54	$\chi^2 = 11.44^*$
Measures pertaining to friends			
Friendship network	-.03	.03	$t = 0.63$
Duration of friendship (years)	9.09	16.16	$t = 3.33^*$
Time with friend ^b	-.02	.01	$t = 0.21$
Ideal time with friend ^b	.05	-.06	$t = 0.82$
Relationship-quality: Friend	155.30	157.46	$t = 0.88$
NRI: Friend (composite)	45.98	47.71	$t = 1.27$
ICQ (composite)	126.78	143.19	$t = 4.51^*$
Measures pertaining to mothers			
Mothers' friendship network	1.85	2.17	$t = 3.29^{**}$
Time with mother ^b	-.21	.16	$t = 2.69^*$
Ideal time with mother ^b	-.34	.27	$t = 3.97^{**}$
Relationship-quality: Mother	96.39	135.61	$t = 8.85^{**}$
NRI: Mother (composite)	29.81	42.46	$t = 8.39^{**}$

a. Survivors and comparison group figures are percentages.

b. Hours per typical week plus days of typical year (normalized).

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

same sex and with their mothers. Ads were placed in the University of Michigan staff newspaper and in a local food co-op newsletter. Flyers were posted in popular restaurants in Ann Arbor and Royal Oak. Questionnaires were also distributed one-on-one in University of Michigan offices, bookstores catering to women, and local women's organizations such as the Ann Arbor Women's City Club.

Individuals expressing interest in participating were given information either in person or by phone regarding the requirements of the study. Only three individuals subsequently declined participation. Each woman was given a questionnaire to complete and a stamped envelope in which to return the survey to the researchers. Of the 180 questionnaires distributed, 161 were returned—a response rate of 89%.

Questionnaire

The same questionnaire was administered to all women in the study; women who were not incest survivors were instructed to exclude those sections specifically pertaining to incest. The questionnaire consisted of a number of sections (Newman & Peterson, 1996) and those relevant to the present study are described in the order in which they appeared in the survey instrument.

Basic information. This section requested information related to the respondent's age, income, education, occupation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and marital/partnered status.

Interpersonal competence. Buhrmester and Furman's (1988) Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ) was administered. Questions in this section inquire about reactions to people in general as well as to one's closest female friend. The questionnaire yields scores for five different aspects of social comfort and skill—beginning relationships, expressing displeasure with others, providing personal information, giving support and advice, and resolving interpersonal difficulties. The reliabilities of these subscales in the present sample, estimated by Cronbach's (1951) alpha, ranged from .85 to .92. Because the subscales were substantially intercorrelated, a composite score was formed and used in subsequent analyses.

Friendship network. This section of the questionnaire was based on the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989a, 1989b) and asked respondents to indicate such things as the number of female friends in their lives; the number of close female friends; frequency of contact by letter, phone, or in person; and activities shared with friends. The purpose of this measure was to get a relatively objective assessment of closeness to friends in terms of the time spent with them and activities shared. A composite score was formed by normalizing and combining responses to 10 questions; the associated alpha coefficient was .69.

Close friend. This section contained questions similar to some of those included in the friendship network section just described. Respondents indicated how long they had been in a relationship with their closest female friend, how much time they spent together, and how much time they would ideally like to spend together.

Relationship with friend. Respondents completed five subscales of the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI) (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985) to assess certain qualities of their female friend relationships such as companionship, conflict, satisfaction, intimacy, and reliable alliance. As mentioned earlier, because these subscales were substantially intercorrelated, only the total scale score was used in subsequent analyses; its reliability in the present sample was .86.

Respondents also completed a 30-item measure, known as Relationship-Quality: Friend, which measured the quality of their relationship with their closest female friend. The measure was specifically designed for the current research. Respondents used a 6-point scale to indicate their agreement with factors pertaining to intimacy, trust, admiration, respect, emotional support, and empathy. The reliability of this scale with the population sample in the current study was .91.

Mother. Most of the items in this section paralleled those asked in earlier sections just described, except that these inquiries pertained to the respondent's mother. In other words, there were questions about the amount of time a respondent spent with her mother and how much contact she would ideally desire. The same five subscales of NRI were administered, but from the perspective of the mother-daughter relationship. Once again, satisfactory reliabilities were indicated and only the total scale score was used in subsequent analyses ($\alpha = .87$). Respondents also completed a scale related to their mothers, known as Relationship-Quality: Mother, that paralleled the measure of the qualities of their relationship with their closest friend. This scale resulted in a reliability of .96. Respondents also answered five items on 6-point scales asking about their perceptions surrounding their mother's network of friends ($\alpha = .84$).

Incest. This section requested information surrounding incest, which was described for the research participants as

Childhood experiences . . . of sexual contact *with a relative*. This includes open mouth kissing; intentional touching of buttocks, thigh, or leg in a sexual or seductive manner; breast contact, clothed or unclothed; body contact such as a hug that seems sexual; manual genital contact, clothed or unclothed; oral-genital contact; attempted or completed intercourse. For the purpose of this study, there must have been physical sexual contact by a relative. Relatives include immediate as well as distant family, such as a distant cousin. Family may be biological, by marriage (e.g., brother-in-law), foster, adoptive, or step.

Mother's boyfriend who lived with the family as a step-father is considered family for this study. A close friend of the family is not.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they had personally experienced incest; this response was used to classify them into either the survivor or comparison group. If incest had occurred, further information as to their age when it began was requested, the age and identity of the abuser(s), the use of force during abuse, and the duration of abuse. Each respondent indicated whether she had disclosed the incest to her mother, when, and her mother's response (positive or negative). Respondents also indicated whether they held their mother responsible for the incest, either as children or currently.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Incest

The most commonly reported perpetrator of incest was the natural father who sexually abused 47% of the incest survivors in this study sample. Brothers abused 31% of the survivors, 18% were abused by their mothers, and stepfathers abused 9% of survivors. Included in the preceding figures were the 9% of survivors who were victimized by both parents. Uncles, cousins, grandparents, and other relatives were also reported as abusers.

On average, incest began when the abused was 5 years of age and lasted for 8 years. Penetration of some part of the body, other than mouth-to-mouth kissing, occurred in 72% of cases. Physical force was used with 47% of the survivors during sexual abuse, and another 43% reported being threatened. Thirty-three percent of those abused as children disclosed the activity to their mothers, and as adults, 50% discussed the abuse with their mothers. Few of the survivors held their mothers responsible for the incest, either as children or as adults. If their mother was not the perpetrator, 6% blamed her for the incest as children and 3% blamed her as adults. If their mother was the perpetrator, 4% blamed her as children and 22% blamed her as adults.

Friends

There were few differences between the two groups of women in measure results pertaining to female friendship (see *t* tests reported in Table 1). Indeed, none of the individual items distinguished the groups except for the length of friendships with closest friends where survivors reported, on average, a

friendship 9 years in length and comparison respondents reported a close friendship averaging a duration of 16 years. There were differences with respect to interpersonal competence, which not only asked questions related to closest female friends, but also overall capacities for friendship. Survivors of incest scored lower on the composite ICQ measure.

Mothers

The *t* tests in Table 1 indicate that survivors and comparison respondents differed in terms of the measures pertaining to their relationships with their mothers. Survivors saw the friendship networks of their mothers as depleted in comparison to how the other respondents viewed these networks of their own mothers. Survivors spent less time with their mothers, and they wished to spend even less time than they actually did. Mother scores on the NRI were lower for survivors of incest, as were Relationship-Quality: Mother scores. There were few correlations between the measures pertaining to relationships with mothers and those pertaining to relationships with friends.

Disclosure

No relationship was found between disclosure per se and measures of friendship or interpersonal competence. A positive response by the mother to disclosure during childhood correlated with interpersonal competence ($r = .24, p < .05$); no correlation was evident between a positive response to disclosure and the Relationship-Quality: Friend measure or the Relationship-Quality: Mother measure. Holding the mother responsible for incest was not correlated with any of the measures.

DISCUSSION

This study explored several aspects of the ways in which the relationships of adult incest survivors resemble and differ from those of other women. The major findings are the following:

1. There were no differences between the survivor group and the comparison group on measures of the extent of their friendship networks. This is at odds with speculation that incest survivors have few, if any, friends, but consistent with previous studies specifically investigating female friends of adult survivors.
2. The finding just described remained when relationships with closest female friends were examined. A composite measure of companionship, conflict resolution, satisfaction, intimacy, and trust revealed comparable behavior and

- feelings in these areas for both survivors and comparison study participants. Again, these findings are at odds with the supposition that survivors of incest are isolated from other women.
3. There were several exceptions to the thrust of these findings concerning friends. The closest friendships reported by survivors had lasted an average of 7 years less than those of comparison participants. Furthermore, survivors reported lower levels of interpersonal competence.
 4. Survivors of incest viewed the quality of their relationships with their mothers as relatively poor. Survivors reported less satisfaction, less compatibility, less intimacy, more conflict, and less assurance in the continuity of these relationships. They spent less time with their mothers and desired even less contact than they had. These feelings existed regardless of whether the mother was an incest perpetrator or whether she was held responsible for the incest.
 5. From the view of their daughters, mothers of incest survivors were more isolated and lonely than those of the other research participants. Perhaps some of the mothers were victims of sexual abuse in their families of origin and/or experienced violence in their current family environments. Perhaps they distanced themselves from others because they were reluctant to discuss their own experiences of incest or domestic violence. This finding contributes to understanding why mothers and daughters in families where incest occurred experienced poor interpersonal relationships—the family system itself was, and is, problematic.
 6. The relationships of incest survivors with their female friends were mostly independent of their relationships with their mothers. This finding disagrees with speculation based on attachment theory that presents incest survivors, because of their early-established poor relationships with their mothers, as incapable of forming adult friendships with other women. As Cole and Putnam (1992) observed, “Adulthood does afford the opportunity to leave the home and to form new relationships. Physical distance can promote psychological distance and pave the path for the ability to reason about the childhood sexual experience” (p. 179).

The present study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The most obvious shortcoming was the way in which participants were recruited. Participants self-selected themselves into the study, thus their representativeness is unknown. Additionally, both survivor and comparison groups were better educated than the average American woman and were overwhelmingly White and middle class. Professional women were overrepresented. The proportion of lesbians was higher than typical estimates for the general population, although as previously noted, the results were not affected when analyses were limited solely to heterosexuals (Ritchie, 1996).

Previous researchers have identified subgroups of incest survivors defined by the severity of the abuse and overall family style (Alexander & Schaeffer, 1994). These subgroups presumably indicate differential long-term effects of incest. With respect to friendship measures in the present sample of incest

survivors, we found no evidence for such subgroups. Either female friendship was not affected by these factors, or we did not include their full range. In any event, further research with more diverse samples of survivors is indicated. Despite the possible nonrepresentative status of our study population sample, the present results are noteworthy for demonstrating that childhood incest need not have an across-the-board effect on adult relationships with other women.

Abuse survivors were compared to other women on a number of measures, raising the possibility that our results capitalized on chance; however, this still seems unlikely. Composite measures were used whenever possible, and patterns of results were consistent. Indeed, almost all comparisons achieved significance at the .001 level or fell short of a .05 criterion (see Table 1).

All women were studied at a single juncture in life and their retrospective reports were taken at face value. A preferable approach would be to study survivors and their relationships over time, supplementing self-reports with measures completed by friends and relatives. Differences between the population groups in this study, with respect to depression or self-esteem, might have confounded comparisons, but any reporting biases thereby introduced would have had effects on all of the measures, which was not the case. As noted earlier, participation in psychological therapy did not affect the results.

Even with consideration of these shortcomings, the current research makes a valuable contribution by being among the first studies to investigate how adult survivors of incest relate to other women—both their mothers and their friends. Survivors differed systematically from other women, often in ways contrary to clinical theory and lore. Incest takes a toll on its survivors, even into adulthood, but negative consequences are not ubiquitous. Many aspects of friendships with other women prove resilient.

The satisfactory relationships, which adult survivors of incest can and do achieve with their friends, provide a positive foundation on which to base therapeutic interventions (Alexander & Anderson, 1994). Indeed, group therapy might be a particularly valuable medium of treatment (Alexander, Neimeyer, & Follette, 1991). Therapists should expect survivors to have strained relationships with their mothers. While those abused by incest may be encouraged to express their feelings openly in therapy, they should not be misguided into believing that they should do so freely in all relationships because this can take a natural toll on friendships. Perhaps guidance surrounding the identification of appropriate feelings and their expression would be most useful (Newman & Peterson, 1996). Given that the mothers of incest survivors seemed socially isolated, perhaps they would benefit from the same form of therapy.

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