

The Role Relationship Between Victim and Perpetrator as a Predictor of Characteristics of Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT: It is hypothesized that the closeness of the relationship between the perpetrator of sexual abuse and the victim will determine the number of instances of sexual abuse, the duration of the sexually abusive relationship, the level of coercion necessary to gain compliance, and how long it takes the victim to tell. Differences for cases where the perpetrator is the victim's father and married to the victim's mother, the victim's stepfather or victim's mother's live-in boyfriend, and the victim's noncustodial father are explored. It is argued that in the first case type, the relationship is the closest, the second case type falls in the middle, and in the third, the relationship is the most distant. Hypotheses regarding number of instances of sexual abuse, its duration, and the delay in telling are supported by the data.

In recent years clinicians and researchers have noted that the characteristics of sexual abuse vary depending upon the role relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. The most global distinction and one made by most professionals is between sexual abuse which is intrafamilial and that which is extrafamilial (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979; Finkelhor, 1984; Russell, 1983; Russell, 1986; Groth, 1979; Faller, 1981; Faller, 1988; Mayer, 1985). For example, although some offenders abuse both within and outside the family (Sanford, 1988), there are differences between persons who sexually abuse their own children and those who seek out and sexually abuse children who are unrelated (Gebhard et al., 1965; Groth, 1979; Mayer, 1985; Kempe & Kempe, 1984). Further, the characteristics of the sexual abuse itself

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are likely to vary depending upon whether the perpetrator is within the family and has ready access to the victim or is someone outside who sees the child rarely or perhaps on only one occasion. Thus intrafamilial sexual abuse may occur frequently over a period of months or even years, while extrafamilial abuse is more likely to consist of a single or small number of incidents during a short-time period. The reaction of the child is likely to vary depending upon the relationship of the perpetrator to the child and family. For instance, a child may more readily reveal sexual abuse by someone who is outside the family system but be reticent about a family member (Faller, 1981; Faller, 1987). In addition Mrazek and Mrazek (1981) note that one of the factors that needs to be taken into account in assessing the effect of sexual abuse on the child is the degree of relatedness between the victim and the offender. The source and extent of trauma from intrafamilial sexual abuse can usually be distinguished from that caused by extrafamilial. For example, Landis (1956) in a sample of college students and Anderson, Bache, and Griffith (1981) in a sample of adolescents receiving treatment, found being sexually abused by a relative was more traumatic than being victimized by a nonrelative.

Furthermore, differences have been noted in the characteristics of various types of intrafamilial sexual abuse. Russell (1984, 1986) in a study of sexual abuse in a representative sample of 930 San Francisco area women, found that the stepfather-stepdaughter relationship to be one at grave risk for sexual abuse. Thirty-four point five percent of women who had stepfathers were sexually abused by them as opposed to 2.3% by biological fathers. Moreover sexual abuse by stepfathers was more serious than that inflicted by biological fathers: it occurred more frequently and involved more genital intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, analingus, and anal intercourse. Similarly, in a study conducted by the Tufts New England Medical Center (1984), sexual abuse by a stepfather was found to have had quite a traumatic impact upon the victim, but comparable trauma could not be documented for situations involving biological fathers. And recently MacFarlane (1986) has described the special characteristics of sexual abuse by a father who is divorced from or in the process of a divorce from the child's mother, hypothesizing that the stress of marital dissolution and changes in physical circumstances may heighten the risk for sexual abuse.

In the study to be described here, the impact of the role relationship of perpetrator to victim upon the characteristics of the sexual abuse will be explored for three types of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The hypotheses are as follows:

1. The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the greater the number of instances of sexual abuse.

Closeness will bring with it more contact with and more unsupervised access to the victim, and thereby more frequent opportunity to engage in sexually abusive behavior. Closeness suggests a more cooperative and dependent relationship, which can lead to more frequent compliance with requests or demands for sexual activities.

2. The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the longer the duration of the sexual abuse.

Intimate relationships imply longevity and therefore the possibility of ongoing sexual abuse.

3. The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator the less coercion involved in the sexual abuse.

The victim will be accustomed to touch by someone who is close and will be in the habit of obeying and trusting that person. Because of this, the perpetrator will not have to use coercive measures to involve the child in sexual encounters.

4. The closer the relationship between victim and perpetrator, the longer it will take the victim to report the sexual abuse.

The child is more likely to love someone close and not want to get him in trouble. Also the victim may be more fearful of someone who is close (because of his potential to inflict harm), and therefore delay telling about sexual abuse. In addition, a perpetrator in an intimate relationship will have more opportunity and power to persuade or coerce the child not to tell about the abuse.

The role relationships for which these hypotheses will be tested are all ones where the perpetrator is a paternal caretaker: 1. biological fathers in intact families;² 2. stepfathers and mothers' living-together-partners (LTP);³ and 3. noncustodial fathers who are separated or divorced from the victim's mother.⁴

All of these relationships are fairly proximate ones when contrasted with extrafamilial sexually abusive relationships. It will nevertheless be argued that the biological father relationship is the closest, followed by the stepfather-LTP, and the noncustodial father relationship is the least close.

The level of intimacy between the victim and perpetrator can be understood in terms of the nature of the relationship between them

and the mother and perpetrator, which, in turn, affects the child's relationship with both the offender and the mother. Legal and blood ties also influence the closeness of a relationship, although they are likely to be more salient for the adults involved and more meaningful to older children.

The biological father relationship in an intact family is most likely for the child the closest of those being considered. The mother in this type of family is more often closer to and more financially and emotionally dependent upon the perpetrator than in the other two relationships. This man is the only father the child has known and the only spouse the mother has had. Furthermore, this relationship has endured all of the child's life⁹ and is likely to be characterized by extended and unsupervised contact between them. Finally, there are both legal and blood ties in the bio-father-child relationship.

In contrast, the stepfather-LTP relationship in general will be less close for the child because she has another father and the stepfather relationship has existed for only part of her life. A stepfather or boyfriend is less likely than a bio-father to be given supervisory responsibility over the child. The mother might be less dependent and close to a stepfather or live-in boyfriend because of her previous marriage. Having had the experience of another relationship, which she may have ended, she can therefore see alternatives to staying with a man who displeases her. In addition she likely has lived for a time as a single parent. This man has no blood ties to the victim, and, although he may have a legal relationship to the mother, he usually has no legal or support responsibility for the child.

Finally it can be argued that the noncustodial parent relationship is the least close for the victim because she does not live with this father and usually only sees him for visitation a few hours a week or every other weekend. Although this is usually unsupervised access for him, it is quite limited. In addition, while the victim may or may not have another father figure in her life, she has a mother who not only is her primary caretaker but may make her dislike of the father clear. Further, the child is probably more likely than those in the other two groups to have witnessed altercations between her parents. Moreover, the mother may seek information from the child regarding care and the general circumstances of visitation with the father. The victim of the noncustodial abuser has little concern that her mother will be angry at or rejecting of her if she reveals the father's improprieties. Mothers in this group are rarely close to their ex-spouses. While some depend upon them for child support, it would be unlikely

for such mothers to look to these men as sources of emotional support. Although the blood relationship persists between the victim and the father and he continues to have some legally imposed financial obligations, the impact of these factors is attenuated by the divorce and by the difficulty of enforcing his legal obligations.

Method

Data for this study were gathered between the years 1978 and 1986 from cases seen by the University of Michigan Interdisciplinary Project on Child Abuse and Neglect (IPCAN). Seventy-four percent of the cases were referred by county-based child protection units, and the remainder came from the courts (10.6%), law enforcement agencies (6.4%), and other mental health facilities (9%) in Michigan.⁶ The geographical distribution of the cases is consistent with the distribution of the state child protective services caseload. The largest proportion are from the more populous southeastern part of the state. Although the primary reason for referral was diagnosis, case management recommendations, and/or treatment of sexual abuse, data were systematically gathered for research purposes.

The 171 cases reported on in this article are a subset of a larger data set of 383 substantiated cases of sexual abuse.⁷ These 171 cases include 59 where the perpetrator is biological father to the victim and husband to the victim's mother; 62 where the perpetrator is a stepfather or mother's live-in boyfriend; and 50 where the perpetrator is a noncustodial father because the parents are separated or divorced.⁸

Data were gathered in the course of clinical interviews taking two to 15 hours (mean = 5.7 hours).⁹ A research protocol was completed by the assessor using information collected in clinical assessments. In half of the cases, the victim, the perpetrator, and the mother were all evaluated by IPCAN staff. In 33% of cases the victim and her mother were seen, and in 17% of the cases only the victim was seen by IPCAN. In cases where we did not assess all relevant family members, those persons were interviewed by another mental health agency, the child protection service, or the police. In all cases, we had access to the other agency records.

Information coded for this study includes: 1.the approximate number of times the child was sexually abused; 2.the length of time between onset of sexual abuse and clinical assessment; 3.the level of coercion involved in the sexual abuse; and 4.the length of time between the last incident of sexual abuse and its report.

In some cases the number of incidents of sexual abuse was easily specified because they were few in number. In others, however, the sexual abuse had been going on over several years. Then the approximate number of occurrences was computed by asking the victim, for example, whether it happened about once a week, once a month, or less than once a month, and using this information to estimate the number of abusive encounters.

Because systematic information was not collected directly on the duration

of the sexual abuse, the difference between the victim's age at onset of sexual abuse and age at assessment was used to calculate the approximate duration of the sexual abuse. In virtually all cases the clinical evaluation was part of a series of interventions that led to the cessation of the sexual abuse. However, in a small number of cases the victims were adults coming for treatment, whose sexual abuse had ended earlier. These cases were eliminated when this variable was formed.

The age of victim at onset (used to calculate duration) was based upon information from the victim, the mother, the perpetrator, and other agency records. However, it was most commonly determined by asking the victim about recollections of the first time sexual abuse took place and calculating age based upon this information.

The level of coercion involved in the sexual abuse was derived from the victim's description of the abuse, information from the mother and sometimes the abuser, and the medical exam.

The length of time between the last incident of abuse and the report was based upon the victim's or another dependable person's statement regarding the last time the sexual abuse occurred. Sexual abuse was considered to have been reported when the child told someone who might take some action. Usually this was the mother, but sometimes it was another relative, a friend, or a professional.

Because of our inability to obtain sufficient information to code these variables for some cases, there are missing data. The major types of statistical analysis employed in this study are the Chi square and analysis of variance.

Results

The findings for the four variables under consideration, number of instances of sexual abuse, duration of the abuse, amount of coercion involved, and length of time between the last incident and report, will be contrasted for the three different role relationships that perpetrators have with victims, biological father, stepfather-LTP, and noncustodial father.

Number of Times Victimized

Means for the approximate number of instances of sexual abuse were computed and compared for the three groups, and distributions were calculated for children victimized one through five, six through ten, and more than ten times. The findings appear in Tables 1 and 2 below. Statistically significant differences are found in the number of times different types of offenders sexually abused their victims. Non-custodial fathers sexually did so on average the least number of times, biological fathers in intact families the most, and stepfathers

TABLE 1
**Mean Number of Instances of Sexual Abuse for
 Three Role Relationships**

	<i>Bio-father</i>	<i>Stepfather LTP</i>	<i>Noncustodial Father</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of Cases	54	58	48	160
Mean Instances	34.4	26.4	19.1	26.9
Standard Deviation	32.9	31.1	19.5	29.3
<i>F</i> statistic = 3.63 <i>p</i> = .03				

and live-in partners fell in between. In all three of the role relationships, father figures were most likely to sexually abuse more than 10 times, but the proportion of such cases is highest for bio-father cases, followed by stepfather-LTPs, and then by noncustodial fathers. Bio-fathers were also the least likely to sexually abuse five or fewer times, although stepfather-LTP cases most often fell into this category, not noncustodial fathers.

TABLE 2
**Distribution of Instances of Sexual Abuse for
 Three Role Relationships**

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Bio-father</i>		<i>Stepfather LTP</i>		<i>Non- custodial father</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
1-5 Times	8	14.8	21	36.2	10	20.8	39	24.4
6-10 Times	13	24.1	10	17.2	17	35.4	40	25.0
>10 Times	33	61.1	27	46.6	21	43.8	81	50.6
Chi square = 10.91 <i>p</i> = .03 <i>df</i> = 4								

Duration of the Sexual Abuse

Mean differences between the age at onset and the age at assessment were computed in years and contrasted for the three role relationships. The findings appear in Table 3. The differences in the number of years from onset of sexual abuse to the time of evaluation for the three groups are statistically significant. The duration of the sexual abuse of children victimized by noncustodial fathers is the shortest, a little less than two years, followed by that of victims of stepfathers and mother's boyfriends, almost two and a half years. The longest duration is found in situations where the child is sexually abused by her biological father in an intact family, more than three and a half years.

Level of Coercion Involved in the Sexual Abuse

Degree of coercion is an eight category variable developed after examining the first 50 cases. Its levels are as follows: 1 = forced, physical injury resulted, 2 = forced, no injury, 3 = threatened with force, 4 = other threats, 5 = bribes, inducements, 6 = seduction, 7 = mutual collaboration, and 8 = victim initiated.¹⁰ The differences in level of coercion among the three groups were not statistically significant (bio-father mean = 3.3; stepfather-LTP = 3.3; and noncustodial father mean = 2.9; $F = 1.39$; $p = .25$).

Length of Time Between Last Sexual Abuse and Report

For the length of time between the last incident and the report of sexual abuse, the mean number of days for the three role relationships

TABLE 3

Mean Duration of Sexual Abuse for Three Role Relationships

	<i>Bio-father</i>	<i>Stepfather LTP</i>	<i>Noncustodial Father</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of cases	56	59	48	163
Mean years	3.6	2.4	1.9	2.7
Standard deviation	4.0	2.2	2.0	2.9
$F = 4.9$ $p = .009$				

and distributions for cases falling into the following time groupings were calculated and compared: 1–7, 8–30, 31–90, 91–180, 181–365, 366–730, and more than 730 days. The results appear in Tables 4 and 5. As seen in Table 4, although the mean length of time between the last incident of sexual abuse and the report indicates that the longest delay occurs in bio-father cases, followed by stepfather and then noncustodial father cases, the differences only approach statistical significance because of the large variance. However, as indicated in Table 5, when distributions for the three casetypes are compared, the differences are statistically significant and generally indicate that reports of victims with less intimate relationships with their abusers occur sooner.

Discussion

The results described generally indicate that the characteristics of sexual abuse vary depending upon the role relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, even when all the perpetrators are paternal caretakers. Three of the four hypotheses are supported by the data, and the findings are consistent with the assertion that relationships between bio-fathers and victims in intact families are the closest, followed by those between stepfather-LTPs and victims, and finally by those between noncustodial fathers and victims.

Thus the close relationship that seems to be present between the bio-father and his victim results in sexual abuse which occurs the

TABLE 4

Mean Number of Days Between Last Sexual Abuse
and Report for Three Role Relationships

	<i>Bio-father</i>	<i>Stepfather LTP</i>	<i>Non-custodial Father</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of cases	46	49	40	135
Mean days	176.5	96.0	56.8	111.8
Standard deviation	294.7	241.5	164.8	245.7
<i>F</i> statistic = 2.77 <i>p</i> = .06				

TABLE 5

**Distribution for Number of Days Between Last Sexual Abuse
and Report for Three Role Relationships**

	<i>Bio-father</i>		<i>Stepfather LTP</i>		<i>Non- custodial father</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
1-7 days	9	19.6	18	36.7	18	32.5	40	29.6
8-30 days	15	32.6	18	36.7	19	47.5	52	38.5
31-90 days	7	15.2	8	16.3	5	12.5	20	14.8
91-180 days	6	13.0	1	2.0	1	2.5	8	5.9
181-365 days	1	2.2	0	0.0	1	2.5	2	1.5
366-730 days	4	8.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	3.0
>730 days	4	8.7	4	8.2	1	2.5	9	6.7

Chi square = 20.4 *p* = .05

greatest number of times and endures the longest. In addition, although there is a lot of variability, the victim of the bio-father delays the longest before telling. Similarly the less intimate relationship that appears to exist between stepfather-LTPs and their victims leads to fewer incidents of sexual abuse and to victimization of shorter duration, and the child tells somewhat more readily. The finding that bio-fathers sexually abused their children a greater number of times than stepfathers is the converse of Russell's; she found stepfathers engaged in more sexual victimization (1984; 1986). And finally the least intimate of these relationships, that between the noncustodial father and his victim, is characterized by the fewest incidents of sexual abuse, victimization of the shortest duration, and the shortest delay between the last incident of sexual abuse and report.

Several factors have been noted to be associated with the closeness of the perpetrator-victim relationship: its length or the proportion of the child's life it has existed; the amount of unsupervised access the perpetrator has to the victim; the child's feelings toward the offender, which can include love, fear, and dependency; and the victim's awareness of the mother's feelings toward this paternal caretaker. All of

these factors can be seen as affecting each of the three variables under consideration—frequency, duration, and length of time to report. The two structural factors, length of relationship and access, might be more important in determining the number of abusive incidents and duration of the sexual abuse. Arguably the child's feelings impact more significantly upon the willingness to tell than they do on frequency and duration. These feelings are more important than other factors related to closeness in the child's decision to tell. The victim's feelings toward the offender will be largely determined by how he acts. Despite the fact that all of the men were sexually abusive, their treatment of victims could vary widely and was not dependent upon whether they were fathers, stepfathers, or noncustodial fathers. For example, many noncustodial fathers were very affectionate and tried to make visitation a "fun time," while bio-fathers in intact families might be tyrannical and abusive. The diversity in the victim's feelings toward the perpetrator may help to explain the large variance in the length of time it took victims to report sexual abuse, which results in mean differences which only approach statistical significance.

The findings related to the variable, coercion, were not in the predicted direction, even though the level employed by noncustodial fathers is higher than that of the other two groups. However, what is more disconcerting about these data is how coercive all of the paternal caretakers were, regardless of their relationships with the victims. Clinical assumptions about intrafamilial sexual abuse, are that it is not characterized by the use of force. One would expect the means for all groups to be toward the less coercive end of the continuum. They are not. They indicate that paternal caretakers' methods of gaining their victims' cooperation were characterized by threats and force. These findings are in contrast with those of Russell (1986), who found that in general incidents of intrafamilial sexual abuse were not characterized by coercion.¹¹

Conclusion

The research reported in this study suggests that differences in characteristics of sexual abuse can be found even in role relationships which have much in common, three situations where the perpetrator is a paternal caretaker. Specifically in this sample there are consistent and predicted differences in the number of incidents of sexual

abuse, its duration, and the length of time it took victims to report sexual abuse. The results of this study must be understood as preliminary because the sample is limited to identified cases served by one agency. Nevertheless, additional research along these lines might enhance professional understanding of the importance of role relationships as predictors of the characteristics of sexual abuse.

Reference Notes

1. The term, intrafamilial sexual abuse, is used to refer to sexual abuse by someone within the victim's household and sexual abuse by a family member. Thus sexual abuse by a live-in boyfriend of the mother would be regarded as intrafamilial even though the perpetrator has no blood or legally sanctioned relationship to the child.
2. For all mothers in the biological father group, this was their only marriage thus far, and the children were from this relationship. However, some of them were conceived or born before the marriage.
3. Children who were victimized by stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends were combined for the purpose of this study. T tests and/or chi squares were undertaken for these two subgroups on the variables under consideration. No significant differences were found. Moreover, from a clinical standpoint, the patterns and dynamics of sexual abuse in the two subgroups were comparable. Most of the stepfathers began their relationships with the mothers as live-in boyfriends, and in many cases the sexual abuse preceded stepparent status. The number of stepfathers in this group is 40 and the number of boyfriends 22.
4. In none of the cases was sexual abuse by the noncustodial father the cause of the marital dissolution, and no mothers were aware of this being a problem while in the marriage.
5. The pronouns, she and her, will be used to refer to victims because approximately four-fifths of them were female.
6. Because referral sources for the sample tend to serve intrafamilial sexual abuse cases, the sample is skewed toward sexual abuse cases where the perpetrator is a parent or a parent has been neglectful and allowed sexual abuse to take place.
7. For an extensive discussion of the clinical procedures employed to assure these were valid cases of sexual abuse, see Faller, K.C. 1988. *Child Sexual Abuse: Diagnosis, Case Management, and Treatment*.
8. The smaller number of cases involving noncustodial parents is in part due to the difficulty in substantiating these cases.
9. The author was responsible for 90% of these assessments.
10. In no case did the victim initiate the sexual interaction.
11. Russell's definition of coercion is somewhat different from ours. For example, the use of or threat of weapons is specified, and physical injury is not included.

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