

Forty-eight polyincestuous families were examined to determine the characteristics of this type of sexual abuse and subcategories of polyincest. The mean number of perpetrators per family was 3.3, and the mean number of victims 2.7. Almost 40% of perpetrators were female. Five families had only male victims, 19 only female, and 24 both male and female victims. In 71% of cases, there were offenders from both within the nuclear family and the extended family. In approximately 60% of cases, there were victims or offenders from outside the family who were involved in the sexual abuse. In more than a third of cases, there appeared to be a belief system supporting incest, and in about 40%, victims seemed to find something positive in the sexual abuse. Forty-five of the cases could be classified into one of three categories, based on some perpetrator characteristics: (a) offenders: a mother and a father figure; (b) offenders: male relatives; and (c) offenders: a mother figure, a father figure, and others.

Polyincestuous Families

An Exploratory Study

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Polyincestuous families are surprisingly common. Most professionals working with sexual abuse will, at some point, encounter one. In such cases, there are usually multiple abusers and multiple victims within the family. Incest is often found both intergenerationally and laterally in the extended family. Frequently it is difficult to differentiate perpetrators from victims because persons who are abused then abuse others. Moreover, the activity may not be experienced as entirely dystonic. Some family members, or in some cases the entire family, come to perceive the sexual behavior as acceptable or expected.

Despite the fact that this is a fairly common type of incestuous family, polyincest has not been the focus of clinical writing or research. Some of the early clinical literature describes families that would be characterized as polyincestuous but does not define them as such (Browning & Boatman, 1977; Kaufman, Peck, & Tagiuri, 1954; Rosenfeld, Nadelson, Krieger, & Backman, 1979; Sherman, 1975; Summit & Kryso, 1978). Likewise, some research about female offenders describes cases of polyincest without using the term (Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989; McCarty, 1981).

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This article is a preliminary attempt to address this rather surprising deficiency in the literature. Findings from a sample of 48 polyincestuous families are presented. For a case to be included in the study, the family had to have at least two intrafamilial offenders. By examining cases that meet this minimal definition, the author has tried to determine other characteristics of polyincest and to explore clinical assumptions about such families. Although this article includes statistical findings, illustrative case examples are also provided.

THE SAMPLE

Cases included in the sample were seen by staff of the University of Michigan Interdisciplinary Project on Child Abuse and Neglect (IPCAN) between 1978 and 1990. Although the families were referred primarily for diagnosis and treatment, data were systematically collected on them for research purposes. The vast majority (34 cases, 70.8%) were referred by county-based child protection units. The remainder came from other agencies and the courts.

In all cases, at least one victim in the family was interviewed and polyincest validated.¹ Ninety victims interviewed by IPCAN were deemed to have been abused in polyincestuous families. However, when those identified but not interviewed are included, the number rises to 130. Thus 69% of the known victims in these polyincest families were interviewed. Forty-nine perpetrators (30.8%) out of 159 who were identified were interviewed by IPCAN. The 48 polyincestuous families represent 16% of cases seen by IPCAN over the past 12 years.

The mean age of interviewed victims at the time of assessment was 6.7 years ($SD = 3.4$). Twenty-eight were male (31%) and 62 were female (69%). Eighty-one (73%) were White, three were American Indian, five were Black, and one was Mexican American. The racial breakdown for perpetrators is comparable, with the exception of the abusers of the Mexican American victim, a stepfather and two stepbrothers, who were White.² Thirty (61.2%) of the offenders were male and 19 (38.8%) female.

Families were rated according to income level at the time of evaluation. None of the families was affluent. They fell into three categories: (a) on public assistance or other benefits (21 families, 43.8%); (b) employed but income just meets necessities or employment status unstable (19 families, 39.6%); and (c) adequate income (8 families, 16.7%).³

FINDINGS

Findings are presented for the sample as a whole, and then some differences based on a classification system for polyincestuous families are provided. The general findings are divided into four categories: perpetrator and victim characteristics, the involvement of extended family and unrelated persons, characteristics of the sexual abuse, and clinical assumptions about incestuous families.

Perpetrators and Victims

The sex and number of abusers and victims were examined by family. There were no cases involving only female perpetrators. However, in 15 cases (31.3%), all the perpetrators identified were male, and in 33 cases (68.8%) both male and female offenders were found.

The mean number of identified perpetrators per case was 3.3; the median, 3. Twenty cases (41.7%) had only 2 offenders, 13 cases (27.1%) had 3, 6 (12.5%) had 4, 5 (10.4%) had 5, 3 (6.3%) had 6, and 1 case had 13 abusers.

This last family, the R family, involved three siblings: Lisa, age 13, Brother, 8, and Sylvia, 6. They described being sexually abused by both their mother and father when their parents were together. After the marriage ended, the R children said they continued to be sexually abused by their father when they visited him. Two of Mr. R's brothers and a 14-year-old cousin also had sex with the R children on visits. In addition, their mother sequentially had two live-in partners who joined her in sexually abusing them. There were also sex parties at their mother's house, which included drinking and drug use. The children named and described six other adults who came to these parties and had sex with the R children. Some of these adults brought their own children, who were also victimized. In addition, the R children were encouraged to have sex with each other. They stated there were additional adults at the parties, but they could not describe or name them.

Five families (10.4%) had only male victims, 19 (39.6%) only female victims, and 24 (50%) both male and female victims. The mean number of victims per family was 2.7, and the median was 2. Nine families (18.8%) had only 1 identified victim, 19 (39.6%) had 2, 9 (18.8%) had 3, and 9 (18.8%) had 4 victims. Finally, 1 family had 5, and 1 had 15 victims.

This case with 15 victims was the P family, who lived in a rural area. There were two generations of perpetrators and two of victims. Grandpa P, the family patriarch, had a farm, and four of his children had houses on or near his property. He and at least two of his sons sexually abused his grandchild-

dren. He had also sexually abused at least one of his daughters. One of his sons victimized not only his own children and those of his sister and brother, but also four unrelated children. Grandma P ran a baby-sitting service for her own grandchildren and other children in their community. Therefore, there was a constant supply of victims. Grandma P would typically be at the store when the sexual abuse took place. She would leave the children in her husband's care. The sons did some of their abusing when the victims were supposed to be in the care of Grandma P.

Participation by Extended Family and Other Persons

The cases were examined to determine the extent to which the sexual abuse was limited to the nuclear family versus abuse found in both the nuclear and extended family. In addition, the involvement of unrelated perpetrators and victims was studied.

For 13 families (27%), sexual abuse appeared to be restricted to the nuclear family. In 18 cases (37.5%), there were reports of sexual abuse in the nuclear family and both intergenerationally and laterally (involving aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and/or nephews) in the extended family. Further, in addition to nuclear family involvement, 9 families (18.8%) had only intergenerational abuse and 8 (16.7%) only lateral involvement.

Sometimes persons outside the family, both victims and offenders, are incorporated into the polyincest. No evidence was found of extrafamilial participants in 19 (39.6%) of the families. In 12 families (25%), both extrafamilial offenders and victims were identified. In 6 cases (12.5%), there were extrafamilial offenders but no victims, and in 11 cases (22.9%), victims but no offenders.

The following case example illustrates the involvement of extended family and one extrafamilial victim. Two of the victims, Kim, 3, and Laura, 6, had been removed from their mother's care and placed with the Gs, their maternal grandparents, because of the mother's mental illness. After two years with the Gs, they were placed in foster care because of the Gs' neglect. In foster care, they engaged in extensive sexual play with one another. Kim soon described sexual activities involving their grandparents and their uncle, the Gs' youngest son, and both herself and Laura. Initially Laura denied these allegations but appeared very frightened. Eventually, both girls identified themselves as victims, as well as their 9-year-old aunt and a neighbor girl, age 7. The girls' mother was made aware of the sexual abuse. She told of her mother engaging her in mutual masturbation as a child and of being raped by an older brother when she was an adolescent.

Characteristics of the Sexual Abuse

Two characteristics of the sexual abuse are reported. The first is whether the sexual activities took place in dyads, in groups of three or more, or both. The second is the extent to which sexual exploitation (pornography or prostitution) was present in these families.

In 17 cases (35.4%), only dyadic sex was reported; in 19 cases (39.6%), the sexual activity involved three or more people; and in 12 cases (25%), both were described.

A case involving group sex is the T case. Cindy U, 5, would be sexually abused when she visited her mother, Mrs. T. Her mother had abandoned her to her father when they divorced. Mrs. T, Cindy's stepfather Mr. T, and Mrs. T's two brothers, ages 18 and 15, would all sexually abuse Cindy in the bedroom she occupied when she visited. This included Mr. and Mrs. T. licking her vagina and the males putting their penises in her mouth and vagina and ejaculating. On at least one occasion, there was another woman and her daughter there. Mr. U, Cindy's father, alleged that Mrs. T's father and two of her other brothers sexually abused her, but Mrs. T denied this. However, Mrs. T's father had been charged with indecent exposure, and one of her older brothers produced pornography.

In some cases in the sample, sexual exploitation was reported. In 2 families, using children in pornography was alleged; in 8, child prostitution was reported; and in 6, both pornography and prostitution were alleged. In 32 families (66.7%), there was no evidence of sexual exploitation.

The description provided by two sisters, Marsha, 5, and Charlene, 4, suggests both types of exploitation took place. Marsha was sexually abused by her stepfather as her mother watched and did not intervene. Later her mother left him because he beat her (the mother). She then took up with another man diagnosed as chronic schizophrenic. Marsha and Charlene entered foster care when their mother went into the hospital to have a third child. While in placement, they told of their mother, her boyfriend, and another man repeatedly sexually abusing them. These three perpetrators also allowed "greasy men" to undress them and fondle them. Their mother's friend took pictures of them naked and of the activities with the "greasy men" and gave the pictures to the men. Marsha and Charlene said their mom got money from the men.

Clinical Assumptions About Polyincest

An attempt was made to investigate the clinical assumptions about polyincestuous families: that incest is a way of life with them, that sexual behavior

between adults and children is perceived as normal, and that the behavior is syntonic. Unfortunately, examining this issue proved to be quite difficult because most of the involved adults were not very forthcoming. However, several factors that might indirectly address these assumptions were explored: (a) whether there was a belief system supporting the sexual abuse, (b) whether victims were also offenders, (c) how professionals learned about the sexual abuse, and (d) whether victims appeared to experience discomfort with the sexual abuse.

Data related to belief systems were gathered from the offenders, from nonoffending family members, and from case records. In 18 cases (37.5%), some family members, usually offenders, appeared to hold beliefs that justified their sexually abusive behavior. In 5 cases, offenders espoused a pedophile philosophy, that is, they regarded sex between adults and children as good for children and natural. In another 5 cases, there appeared to be intergenerational transmission of incest as an acceptable life-style. In 4 cases, incest was supported by religious beliefs, 2 involving satanism. Two families were involved in motorcycle clubs, whose philosophy supported incest and other sexual deviance, and in another 2 cases, 1 offender seemed to have delusions supporting incest and was able to convince others of the efficacy of these practices.

The second indicator of possible acceptance of incest as a life-style was the presence of victims who were also victimizing. In 23 families (47.9%), there was at least 1 victim who also committed offenses against other children.

The third indicator was how the sexual abuse came to be known to professionals, the assumption being that if the victim or the offender experiences discomfort with sexual abuse, she or he may seek help from outside the family. Notable is the finding that in more than half of the cases (27, 56.3%), the polyincest was discovered only after the children had been placed outside the home for other reasons, usually for neglect. In foster care, their sexualized behavior (17 cases) or statements about sexual activity (10 cases) led to the discovery of polyincest. In 1 case, the children were placed because their father was accused of sexually abusing them, and the mother's activities were revealed in foster care. In 10 cases (20.8%), another relative, often a divorced parent, was the first person to raise concerns about sexual abuse. Finally, in 5 cases the child disclosed polyincest while still in the family, and in 5, information came from other sources, in 3 of these from an offender.

The fourth factor, whether the victim experienced discomfort related to the sexual abuse, was assessed from the child's presentation during clinical interviews. Forty-eight children (53.3%) evidenced obvious discomfort with the sexual activity; the emotional reaction of 5 children could not be deter-

mined; and 37 children (41.1%) appeared to have some positive reaction to the sexual abuse.

The following case example illustrates some of these clinical characteristics. Ms. L brought her 3-year-old daughter, Hannah, to be evaluated because she thought she was masturbating excessively. During the assessment, Hannah demonstrated how her maternal grandparents taught her to "ride" (rub her vagina) on chair arms and described mutual fondling while she and her grandparents were nude, as well as oral sex and apparent interfemoral intercourse. From Hannah's description, it appeared that she enjoyed the sexual activity, and she begged to ride on all the chair arms in the evaluator's office and to be allowed to remove her panties to do this. Her only discomfort seemed to be related to her mother's disapproval of her masturbation. When Ms. L was asked about any sexual abuse involving her parents as a child, initially all she could recall was being required to put hemorrhoid medicine on her mother, which consisted of rubbing medicine back and forth for a long time in her mother's vaginal and anal area. She had significant memory gaps about her childhood and had experienced a very stormy adolescence involving drinking, running away, and a pregnancy at 16 (with Hannah). In treatment, she recalled that her parents had involved her and her older brother in sexual activity with them, and they had assisted her brother in forced intercourse with her when she was about 6. Her father, silently supported by her mother, would talk about the importance of learning about sex from older persons in the family. He explained to her that sex between parents and children was the ultimate expression of parental love. Ms. L recalled that he belonged to a club and received pictures in the mail of adults and children having sex.

Subcategories of Polyincestuous Families

The data reported here suggest that there is a fair amount of variability among polyincestuous families. The findings and their interrelationships were considered in trying to develop a useful way of categorizing the cases. Most of the cases fit into a classification system based on perpetrator characteristics. There are three types of cases: (a) those where the only identified offenders are a mother figure and a father figure; (b) those where males, at least two of whom were relatives, sexually abused the children; and (c) those in which a mother figure, a father figure, and others sexually abused the children.⁴

Thirteen cases (27.1%) involved only one mother and one father figure as perpetrators. In only 6 of these were the offenders biological mothers with

fathers. Five were mothers and stepfathers; 4 were mother or father and a paramour; and 1 was a situation of grandparents sexually abusing their granddaughter.⁵

The H case is illustrative of this first casetype. Mr. H was a cross-dresser as well as a child sexual abuser. He had been married twice previously and had victimized children and engaged in cross-dressing in those marriages. Both of these wives tolerated the cross-dressing but divorced him when they discovered the sexual abuse. In his third marriage, he sexually abused his wife's two children, George, 10, and Sandra, 8, and possibly his 5-year-old son by her. He also continued to cross-dress. Mrs. H sexually abused her son and instructed him in sexual involvement with his stepfather. That is, she fellated her son and taught him how to fellate his stepfather by having him practice on a banana.

Fifteen cases (31.3%) were ones where only male perpetrators were involved. The most common pattern was a father and brother sexually abusing the children, 7 cases. Grandfathers were perpetrators in 5 cases, usually with fathers, but in 1 case with an uncle, and in another with a stepfather and a neighbor. In one instance, the offenders were a father, an uncle, and a grandfather; in another, the mother's boyfriend and a brother; and in yet another, the father, a cousin, and the father's best friend.

The M case is one that involved only male offenders. Mr. M and his brother sexually abused his son, Tim. This abuse began when the Ms were still married. Mr. M would anally penetrate Tim and make Tim fellate him. After Mr. and Mrs. M separated, Mr. M sexually abused Tim on visits. On several occasions, he allowed his brother to join him. Tim would have to fellate each man sequentially. They would ejaculate in his mouth, telling him that semen was man's milk, and that it was full of vitamins. They also anally penetrated him and fondled his penis. Tim said one time after anal intercourse, his father washed his anus with a toothbrush, and this hurt. Mr. M's father was also a sexual abuser. He had six daughters and sexually abused at least three of them (they testified in his criminal trial). However, Mr. M denied that his father ever did anything sexual to him.

In 17 cases (35.4%), the abusers were a father and mother figure and others. Because the combinations were so varied, these situations were categorized according to whether the additional offenders were related, unrelated, or both.⁶ In 8 cases, the other abusers were related; in 3, they were unrelated; and in 6 they were both related and unrelated.

The F case is one with parents who were sexual abusers and both related and unrelated offenders. The two victims, Marcia, 5, and Diane, 6, were removed from their parents' care because the father was physically abusive.

In foster care they began to talk about their Uncle R. He would be left to baby-sit for them and would take them into the bathroom, sequentially, and "make love" to them. This consisted of fellatio, intercourse, and cunnilingus. Diane said the intercourse hurt. On one occasion, when Uncle R was baby-sitting, M, a next door neighbor, came over. He was allowed to sexually abuse the girls as well. The girls also described being baby-sat by their Aunt J and Uncle C. On those occasions, they spent the night at their aunt and uncle's. They would be made to watch pornographic movies with them and then to watch their aunt and uncle repeat the acts in the movies. With greater difficulty and over time, they revealed sexual activities with their parents. This included mutual masturbation with their mother and their father engaging in intercourse with all three females, Marcia, Diane, and Mrs. F. These activities occurred in a group context.

The reader will not be surprised by the fact that these three casetypes varied along some of the dimensions reported for the sample as a whole. Obviously they differed regarding the sex of offenders (the first and third casetypes having offenders of both sexes and the second only having male offenders), and the number of perpetrators, with the third casetype having the most (Casetype 1 = 2, Casetype 2 = 2.7, Casetype 3 = 4.8; $F = 13.3, p = .0000$). Moreover, in Casetypes 2 and 3, the extended family was more likely to be involved, both laterally (chi-square = 19.9, $p = .0000$) and inter-generationally (chi-square = 18.9, $p = .0000$). In addition, Casetype 3 was more likely to have extrafamilial offenders (chi-square = 6.8, $p = .03$).

There were also differences among casetypes regarding the characteristics of the sexual abuse. There were differences in dyadic and group sexual activities. Sex in cases involving only male offenders was more likely to be dyadic, whereas sex in cases involving mother and father figures and others was more likely to be group or both group and dyadic (chi-square = 13, $p = .01$). In addition, whereas in only a fifth or less of families fitting Casetypes 1 and 2 was there any evidence of sexual exploitation, more than half of cases fitting Type 3 had indications of such activity (chi-square = 6.1, $p = .05$).

There were no significant differences among the three casetypes on the variables assumed to be related to family members' perceptions of and comfort with incest.

DISCUSSION

Before a discussion of the findings, it is important to appreciate the limitations of this study. It has at least two kinds of limitations, those related to potential bias and those caused by limits to the information obtained. It

should be pointed out that the cases came from a single agency and one that tends to receive referrals on the most difficult sexual abuse cases. There is no reason to assume that the high proportion of polyincest found in referrals to this agency is characteristic of the level among sexual abuse cases in general.

Second, the author was unable to consistently pursue all possible incest in identified families, so that every potential perpetrator and victim was evaluated. Moreover, polyincest families are perhaps more secretive than incest families in general, making it more difficult to obtain information from them. It is the author's belief that the information available about this sample of cases is in many instances the "tip of the iceberg." The full extent of the sexual abuse and of the dynamics leading to it may never be known in a substantial number of the cases.

Although the findings must be interpreted cautiously, they add to our understanding of polyincest and have implications for practice and research.

Perhaps too often, practitioners who are evaluating and/or treating incest assume that there is only one offender to be discovered, treated, or otherwise dealt with. Although this study should not be taken to indicate that polyincest is rampant, it nevertheless suggests that more than one perpetrator should be considered. Because clinicians have a hypothesis that incest is learned behavior, often they do take into account the possibility of intergenerational transmission. They are less likely, however, to consider risk from uncles, aunts, and cousins in families where parental incest has been diagnosed. This study suggests that lateral extended family involvement may be almost as common as intergenerational involvement.

Clinicians should also be alert to the possibility of females being involved along with men in incest. In fact, there is research that suggests that when women do offend, they are likely to do so in polyincest situations (Faller, 1987; McCarty, 1986). Practitioners typically explore the role that mothers in incest cases may have played in unconsciously facilitating the victimization of their children, especially if the mothers themselves have been sexually abused. Another possibility that needs to be considered is that the women may be offenders.

The findings regarding the incorporation of persons outside the family in the sexual abuse have practice and research implications. They are further evidence that the long-accepted dichotomy between intrafamilial sexual abuse on one hand and extrafamilial on the other is a false one (Becker, 1988).

A characteristic of polyincest not found in clinical descriptions is sexual exploitation of the children. The presence of reports of sexual exploitation in a third of cases suggests that it is something clinicians need to assess in polyincest.

It is difficult to interpret the findings regarding clinical assumptions that members of polyincest families perceive the sexual activity as normal. It is probably important to differentiate adult perceptions from those of children. In close to half of the cases, a belief system supporting sex between adults and children was found, and no doubt this is an underestimate. These beliefs, however, were usually espoused by adults. Children may perceive sexual abuse as expected behavior but in many cases will not like it. The fact that they do not disclose polyincest may reflect ignorance about other life-styles and an inability to see adults as sources of help, rather than their comfort with the sexual activity. Moreover, although the finding that a high proportion of victims also commit sex offenses may indicate that the behavior is ego-syntonic, it may also represent the child trying to deal with the sexual trauma by identifying with the aggressor.

Caution is necessary in interpreting the finding that during clinical interviews a substantial minority of victims appeared to perceive the sexual activity at least somewhat positively. These data are likely less reliable than the other data presented in this article because they are based on clinical judgment in an artificial context, the clinical interview. In any case, it is important to appreciate what might lead children to find positive aspects to sexual abuse. Most of the victims were neglected as well as sexually abused. Thus sexual contact might be one of the few opportunities for receiving nurturance and attention.

In addition, the children were quite young, with their mean age being about 6½. This young age means that children are less likely to know the sex is unacceptable and decreases the probability of other appropriate experiences with adults. Only one older child, a 15-year-old girl, appeared to be gratified by the sexual contacts. She characterized them as "affairs." She was, however, emotionally disturbed, and her more intact, 14-year-old sister had a marked negative reaction to the sexual abuse.

Finally, although the data suggest that there is variability among polyincestuous families that can be categorized, the classification system offered here must be seen as preliminary. Not all cases could be subsumed within the categories. In addition, there may be other, more enlightening ways of classifying cases. Moreover, as already noted, sample bias may have affected the cases available to be studied. One rather obvious gap is the absence of families with only female perpetrators.

In conclusion, although the findings represent a preliminary effort to understand polyincest, they require replication, and polyincest needs further exploration. Particularly enlightening would be an intensive investigation of

a small number of families. This would allow the pursuit of all named offenders and victims and a more in-depth exploration of questions of motivation for the sexual activity and degree of syntonomy.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the process employed to validate cases, see Faller (1988).
2. This racial breakdown is fairly close to that of the geographical area from which the cases came, which has an 11% minority population.
3. The demographic data in this section are based on the victims and offenders actually interviewed.
4. Three cases did not fit into this classification system: one where a father and a grandmother sexually abused two daughters, a second where a mother and three of her brothers sexually abused her two children, and a third in which a mother and a series of her boyfriends sexually abused her two children.
5. The total is 16 because, in three cases, the male perpetrator was a father to some victims and a stepfather to others.
6. Stepparents and paramours were considered to be related.

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