



Mothers whose children were sexually victimized by three types of father figures are compared on factors related to the concept of maternal collusion. Categories of mothers are those whose children were abused by bio-fathers married to the mothers, by stepfathers and mothers' live-in partners, and by noncustodial fathers where there is a separation or divorce. Variables related to collusion that were explored are maternal protectiveness when made aware of the sexual abuse, mothers' relationship with the victim, and maternal dependency. Mothers who were separated or divorced from the offender were rated the most positively on all three variables. Mothers in the other two groups were rated about equally, but findings do not support a conclusion that they are collusive in the sexual abuse of their children.

The Myth of the "Collusive Mother"

*Variability in the Functioning
of Mothers of Victims of
Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse*

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Much has been written about the role of mothers in the incestuous abuse of their children. Many clinicians have designated the "collusive mother" the cornerstone of the pathological family system in which incest occurs (e.g., Brandt & Tisza, 1977; Justice & Justice, 1979; Matchotka, Pittman, & Flomenhaft, 1967; Sarles, 1975; Walters, 1975; Weiner, 1964). Nevertheless, some authors have raised questions about the appropriateness of blaming mothers for the sexual abuse of their daughters (Herman, 1981; Rush, 1980; Ward, 1985). Conte (1982), in discussing the family dynamics theory of sexual abuse, including the central role of the mother, points out its sexist bias and notes the multiple contexts in which sexual abuse occurs, questioning the ability of a single theory to explain all of them. He also correctly cautions professionals about the lack of empirical findings to support this conceptual framework.

Empirical exploration of the concept of maternal collusion presents some problems. First, any study would have to be retrospective. That is to say, it

would take place after professionals became aware of sexual abuse and would examine maternal statements and behaviors in the past that facilitated the incest or its continuance. Second, motivations underlying statements and behaviors would have to be imputed. For example, researchers would need to assert the mother engaged in certain acts because she consciously or unconsciously wanted the sexual abuse to occur or persist.

Because of the obstacles to developing a methodology for investigating maternal collusion, three related variables were explored: maternal protectiveness when made aware of the sexual abuse, mother's relationship with the victim, and maternal dependency, particularly upon the perpetrator.¹ These factors were examined in situations of intrafamilial sexual abuse for mothers who have varying role relationships with the offender.

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). Cases were referred by county-based child protection units (74%), the courts (6.4%), law enforcement agencies (10.6%), and mental health facilities (9%) in Michigan. Although the primary reason for referral was diagnosis and/or treatment of sexual abuse, data were gathered systematically for research purposes.

The 171 cases² reported here are a subset of a larger sample of 375 cases and consist of all cases in which the offender was the victim's biological father and married to the victim's mother (59 cases),³ a stepfather or mother's live-in boyfriend (62 cases),⁴ and a noncustodial father because the parents are separated or divorced (50 cases).^{5,6}

Data were gathered in the course of clinical assessments taking 2 to 15 hours; mean assessment length = 4.7 hours.⁷ In half of the cases, the victim, the mother, and the perpetrator were all evaluated by IPCAN staff. In 33% the mother and victim were seen, and in 17% of the cases only the victim was seen by IPCAN. In cases where IPCAN did not see the entire family, those members not assessed were seen by another mental health agency, the child protection agency, or the police. In almost all cases, the other agency's records were available.⁸ A research protocol was completed by the assessor using information collected in the clinical interviews, supplemented by data from other agencies.⁹

The coding systems for the variables (1) protectiveness of the mother's response to knowledge of the sexual abuse, (2) mother's relationship with the victim, and (3) mother's dependency upon the perpetrator were developed after examination of the clinical material from the first 50 cases, and behavioral indicators were designated for the coding categories. Four- or

five-category Likert scales were created for each variable. They will be described.

The *mother's protectiveness* is a five-category variable: 1 = very unprotective; 2 = somewhat unprotective; 3 = first supported victim, then perpetrator; 4 = somewhat protective; and 5 = very protective. Very unprotective mothers might continue to allow the perpetrator unsupervised access to the victim, declare the victim to be a liar, tell the victim she had to endure the sexual abuse, put pressure on her to change her story, or strongly aver against her child and the child's version of events. Somewhat unprotective mothers might respond by telling the victim not to tell anyone else about the abuse and by leaving the victim with the offender from time to time. Mothers whose responses were judged to fall into category three were those who initially seemed to believe the victim but, upon hearing a different account of the situation from the perpetrator, chose to believe him, or mothers who behaved appropriately initially and cooperated with authorities but later proved uncooperative and in some cases pressured the victim to withdraw her allegation. A somewhat protective response was characterized as demanding the perpetrator to seek treatment and not leaving the children alone with him. A very protective mother might take her children and leave the home upon discovery of the sexual abuse, call the child protection agency, call the police, or require the perpetrator leave the home. Such a mother would not waiver in her resolve to protect her children.

The *mother's affective relationship* to the victim is a four-category variable: 1 = very cold, 2 = fairly cold, 3 = somewhat warm, and 4 = very warm. Behavioral information used to code this variable included the number of positive versus negative statements the mother made about the victim, any declaration of love or caring for the victim versus statements about not loving or never feeling close to the victim, an assessment of the extent to which the mother might blame the victim for the sexual abuse, the victim's assessment of her relationship with the mother, and observations of the mother-child interaction.

The *mother's dependency* upon the perpetrator (who is her husband, her boyfriend, or her ex-husband) is also a four-category variable: 1 = very dependent, 2 = somewhat dependent, 3 = somewhat independent, and 4 = very independent. Indicators of the mother's degree of independence or dependence include her financial resources, for example, whether she has income from employment, public assistance, or another source, or, alternatively, is dependent upon the perpetrator for support. In addition, sources of emotional support other than the offender are assessed. Finally her ability to contradict the perpetrator, to engage in actions he disapproves of or forbids, and to seek the children's interest when it is not consistent with his are indicators of her level of independence.

While case record data that preceded the clinical contact with the family

were taken into account, statements and behavior during interviews were the primary sources of data for coding these variables. Therefore, the findings reflect maternal characteristics at the time of assessment.

Analyses of variance were employed to examine differences on the variables among groups of mothers in the three types of role relationships with the perpetrators.

RESULTS

Findings regarding differences in maternal protectiveness as indicated by behavior up to the time of the clinical assessment appear in Table 1. There are statistically significant differences among the three groups of mothers. Those women who had severed the marital relationship with the perpetrator were much more protective in their responses than the other two groups, and mothers in the bio-father group were the least protective. In addition, there was more variability among mothers in the first two groups than in the third, as evidenced by larger standard deviations.

The results of the analysis of variance for mothers' relationships with the victim at the time of assessment appear in Table 2. These data indicate that there are statistically significant differences in mothers' affective relationships with their victim-children that seem to depend upon the mother's relationship with the perpetrator. Mothers who are no longer married to or living with the perpetrator have warmer relationships with their victimized children than those who live with the perpetrator (be he a stepfather or live-in partner) and those who are married to the perpetrator who is also the biological father.

Finally, Table 3 reflects the assessment of maternal dependency at the time of assessment. With the variable of maternal dependency there are marked and statistically significant differences among case types. Not surprisingly, the mothers who are no longer with the perpetrators are much less dependent upon them, while the mothers in situations where the perpetrator is a partner but not a biological father of the victim are slightly less dependent than those for whom the perpetrator is the biological father.

DISCUSSION

First, it should be noted that attempts to test empirically the concept of maternal collusion in sexual abuse raised concerns about the subjectivity of the concept and the ability of observers to designate behavioral criteria that might indicate collusiveness. Therefore, related variables for which behavioral indicators could be more easily specified were employed.

TABLE 1
Maternal Protectiveness for Three Case Types

| <i>Case Type</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Stand. Dev.</i> |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Bio-father | 56 | 2.3 | 1.5 |
| Stepfather-LTP | 59 | 2.5 | 1.4 |
| Noncustodial | 48 | 4.8 | .5 |

NOTE: F-statistic = 58.1; $p < .0000$.

TABLE 2
Mother-Victim Affective Relationship for Three Case Types

| <i>Case Type</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Stand. Dev.</i> |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Bio-father | 58 | 2.7 | .86 |
| Stepfather-LTP | 62 | 2.8 | .92 |
| Noncustodial | 49 | 3.2 | .66 |

NOTE: F-statistic = 6.08, $p < .003$.

TABLE 3
Maternal Dependency for Three Case Types

| <i>Case Type</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Stand. Dev.</i> |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Bio-father | 66 | 1.7 | .84 |
| Stepfather-LTP | 62 | 1.9 | .79 |
| Noncustodial | 48 | 3.1 | .71 |

NOTE: F-statistic = 46.2; $p < .0000$.

Second, the mothers' ratings on the three variables explored—protectiveness, relationship with the victim, and dependency—vary according to their role relationships with the offender. Mothers whose children were victimized by bio-fathers were rated the most "collusive" on the three factors assumed to reflect collusiveness, followed closely by mothers whose children were abused by stepfathers or live-in partners. In contrast, women in situations where the offender was a noncustodial father on average were very protective, had warm relationships with the victims, and were somewhat independent of the perpetrator. Nevertheless, it would be hard to designate the mothers in the first two groups "collusive" based upon the data, for they certainly do not on average fall at the substantially negative ends of the scales.

Third, it may be that women whose children are abused by their ex-husbands react more protectively because they are less dependent upon their former spouses than are mothers who live with the offenders, and because they have better relationships with the victims.¹⁰

Finally, there is an intriguing question that cannot be resolved from the data. That is whether mothers whose children suffered sexual abuse at the hands of noncustodial fathers were always superior in their capacities to protect, nurture, and function independently, and, therefore, got out of marriages with men who were potentially sexually abusive, or whether these capabilities developed after their marriages were dissolved.

NOTES

1. Lack of protection is assumed to result from the mother's desire for the behavior to continue. Similarly, lack of empathy and love for the child might result in the mother not caring whether the child is being sexually abused. Finally, the fact that the mother is dependent upon someone who wishes to be sexual with a child could lead the mother to facilitate passively or actively this abuse.

2. For the purposes of this study, a case consists of a mother-victim-perpetrator triad. Therefore, if there is more than one victim in a family, each victim is treated as part of a separate case, and is linked to data on the mother and the perpetrator.

3. For all mothers in the biological father group, this was their only marriage and the children were from this relationship, although some were conceived or born before the marriage.

4. Mothers whose children were victimized by stepfathers and mother's live-in partner were combined for this analysis. Not only did matrices and chi-squares on the three variables to be considered yield very similar distributions for the two groups, but clinical data indicated the patterns of sexual abuse were very similar for the two groups. Most of the stepfathers began their relationships with the mothers as live-in boyfriends. The number of stepfathers in this group is 40 and the number of boyfriends is 22.

5. In none of the cases where the perpetrator was a noncustodial father was sexual abuse the cause of the marital dissolution, and mothers were not aware of this being a problem during the marriage. In a few cases, sexual abuse preceding the marital breakup was documented, but in most it seemed to have evolved after marital separation. However, in the latter cases there were usually signs during the marriage that such a problem could develop, for example, the father getting an erection while bathing with the child or while the child was sitting on his lap, the father teaching the child to tongue kiss, or the father engaging in an unusual amount of caressing and touching of the child.

6. These three groups were chosen for analysis because each had a large enough number of cases to yield meaningful analysis.

7. For an extensive discussion of the diagnostic procedures employed to determine that in these cases sexual abuse had taken place, see Faller (1988).

8. Because the information in the records of other agencies was sometimes incomplete or judged unreliable, there are some missing data.

9. The author was responsible for 90% of the assessments. While there might be concern about coding bias, the three types of intrafamilial sexual abuse included in this analysis were not defined until most of the cases had been coded, and no hypotheses about differential functioning of mothers were generated. Moreover, as noted in the text, codes were anchored to behavioral indicators.

10. All three variables were highly correlated.

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