

AYSAN SEV'ER
TOPIC EDITOR: JOAN MENCHER

INCEST

Dictionaries define incest as "sexual intercourse between persons so closely related that marriage between them is forbidden by law." However, common usage of the term embodies a wider range of sexual contacts. Social interpretations also subsume sexual contact among close kin where the participants may not be "forbidden" to marry each other by law. Therefore, the common views about incest are more amorphous than both the dictionary and legal definitions.

Anthropological research shows that incest is an ancient preoccupation of humans. Artifacts across cultures burst with themes of desire to commit intercourse with forbidden members of the clan, tribe, or family (Justice, 1979). However, history also reflects a universal aspiration to harness incestuous acts, if not thought. The scope of consanguinity varies but almost all known societies have stringent taboos, prohibitions and punishment against vertical (parents and children) and horizontal (sibling) incest. Prohibitions range from folk tales and myths evoking supernatural sanctions to tribal ostracism, condemnation and even torture and death. A few societies permit and even celebrate incest. However, even in these exceptions, the tolerance is restricted to deities (ancient Greek myths) or the reigning royalty (ancient Egypt). Incest among commoners is never accepted or tolerated (Murdock, 1949; Parsons, 1954).

Despite taboos, incest has occurred throughout human history, though the true incidence of this highly secretive act remains unknown. Even the admonition by the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism), has not eradicated incestuous behaviour. The occurrence may be quite frequent, affecting one in ten families (Finkelhor, 1979). Recent estimates are that one in three girls and one in six boys experience sexual molestation (Guidry, 1995), most by close family members.

Numerous theories address why societies curb incestuous behaviour. Some emphasize the role of inbreeding which increases the propensity for birth defects. However, this cannot account for incest taboos among primitive peoples who lack even a rudimentary understanding of genetics (Leavitt, 1992). Other theories emphasize the crucial role of kinship. Historically, the survival of the kin transcends all other roles and relations including those among family members. Societies regulate links that fuel carnal passions and jealousy among people whose survival depends on cooperation. Procreating children with ambiguous roles is fiercely discouraged. For example, the offspring of a father-daughter will be a child/grand-child for the father, and a child/sibling for the daughter. Complicated roles of the actual wife, siblings, grand-parents will create disorder.

Perhaps, the most imaginative theory about incest is the Oedipal complex (and the pale Electra version) purported by Sigmund Freud (1938) who saw "man" as raw, animalistic and basically immoral in nature. Starting from infancy, the transformation of this entity into a moral being required solutions to a series of dilemmas. One dilemma of utmost significance is the sexual desire of the pubescent son toward his mother. His desire is counterbalanced with fears of punishment (castration) from his formidable father. Generally, this dilemma is resolved by the son's identification with the father. Through identification, fear is reduced, while the son indirectly possesses the object of his desire through symbolically becoming the father. Giving up on

incestuous pursuits also frees his energies to pursue an adult love object. Freud (1951) argues that human culture began with the establishment of the incest taboo, without which, the fusion among parents/children would stifle growth and accomplishment.

Feminists see incest as a social ill arising from power discrepancies. Incest is men's abuse of power since most victims are female children. Instead of a sexual transgression, the subjugation, control and domination aspects are underscored. It is suggested that although mother initiated incest is a rarity, it has preoccupied the minds of eminent men like Freud. The irony of the "Oedipal complex" is that older brothers and father/step-fathers are the most recurrent predators (Browne and Finkelhor, 1989). Unlike Freud, feminists unconditionally place the burden on the perpetrator rather than on the acts or thoughts of innocent children or youth.

Incest is detrimental for victims. Usually, the process starts as accidental touching and fondling under the auspices of "love." It progresses to premeditated acts of coercion (Finkelhor, 1979). The sexual acts can hurt, deform and even kill victims who very young. They can lead to sexually transmitted diseases, or unwanted births or unsafe abortions when victims are adolescent girls. Moreover, the grave effects of incest include psychological trauma. When there are vast age, size and power differences, victims are terrorized for continuing access and cooperation. Shattered trust, role confusion, fear, disgust, shame and guilt re-victimize the survivors even long after their physical wounds have healed. Research indicates high incidence of substance abuse, compulsive behaviours, poor interpersonal relationships, sexual promiscuity, and even suicides among victims. Effects of incest span over generations (Russell, 1986; WAC, 1993).

As the traditional approaches suggest, societies have an obligation to curb incest. However, the reasons for doing so must transcend arguments of "survival" and embrace the "rights" of women and children to safe environments. The patriarchal structures that nourish men's domination must be dismantled. Myths that shift the burden away from male perpetrators must also be deconstructed. More than everything else, the victims deserve to be told that it was not their fault.

References and further reading

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