

JUDITH LEWIS HERMAN

FATHER-DAUGHTER
INCEST

with a New Afterword

FATHER- DAUGHTER INCEST

Judith Lewis Herman
With Lisa Hirschman

With a new Afterword

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
and London, England

Copyright © 1981, 2000 by the President and Fellows
of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Second printing, 2003

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Herman, Judith Lewis, 1942–

Father-daughter incest / Judith Lewis Herman with Lisa Hirschman.

p. cm.

Originally published: Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1981.

With a new afterword.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00270-9

1. Incest—United States. 2. Fathers and daughters. I. Hirschman, Lisa.
II. Title.

[DNLM: 1. Incest.]

HQ71 .H46 2000

306.877—dc21

99-059169

Preface

This book began with two women talking to each other. Lisa Hirschman and I were both starting our clinical practice. We met to give each other supervision and support. In the course of these meetings, we discovered that both of us had seen what seemed like an alarming number of women with a history of incest. We were disturbed both by our patients' complaints and by the way these complaints had been ignored by more experienced clinicians. What little literature we could find on the subject of overt incest was so contaminated by sexist bias as to be essentially useless. Since nothing satisfactory seemed to have been written about father-daughter incest, we were finally driven to write about it ourselves.

That was in 1975. If anyone had told us at the time that we were embarking upon a five-year collaboration that would ultimately result in a book, we would have been appalled. Incest is not a topic that one embraces; one backs into it, fighting every step of the way. What kept us going was the response of the women we reached through our research and our writing. Women we had never met wrote to us to encourage us and to tell their stories. They convinced us that any secret so long and so vigorously suppressed must be worth pursuing.

Since we began our collaboration, incest has been rediscovered as a major social problem. In the past two or three years, feature articles on the topic have appeared in leading publications and special documentary reports have been aired on national network television. Confessional accounts of incest have begun to appear, and more speakouts can be expected. This growing awareness is largely a result of the women's liberation movement. In the past decade, women have directed public attention to the problems of rape, wife-beating, and child abuse, all previously forbidden subjects. Incest, the most extreme form of sexual abuse,

has until recently remained within the domain of pornography and scandal, but we believe the time has finally arrived for serious discussion.

Our book is written, first, for those women, estimated by us to be in the millions, who have personally experienced incestuous abuse. Most incest victims still bear the burden of their secret alone, considering it too disgraceful to reveal to anyone. We hope that this book will find its way into their hands, and that it will help to alleviate feelings of isolation and shame. The book is also written for professionals in the areas of mental health, child protective services, law, and law enforcement, who regularly encounter cases of father-daughter incest.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One develops an analysis of the phenomenon, based upon survey data, clinical material, anthropological literature, popular literature, and pornography. For our scholarly sources we naturally relied on libraries; but for much of the popular literature we relied on the help of friends, acquaintances, and strangers who clipped newspaper or magazine articles and called our attention to publications that we would not ordinarily have seen. We are particularly indebted to Rick Snowden, who shared his collection of "kiddie porn" with us and thereby spared us the dreary task of wading through the material ourselves.

Part Two describes a clinical study of our own, based upon interviews with patients in therapy or their therapists. Forty incest victims and twenty women whose fathers had been seductive but not overtly incestuous participated in our research. Their contribution was of the most disinterested kind. Since anonymity was a condition of their participation, they can never be credited publicly for their courage and generosity. The results reported here incorporate an earlier study, first published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* in 1977, as well as much additional data. This phase of our work was supported in part by a grant from the Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, part of the National Institute of Mental Health.

Part Three reviews the social responses to discovered incest, including crisis intervention, family treatment, and prosecution. It also deals with the possibilities of healing and prevention. Our discussion is based upon interviews with professionals in the mental health system, child protective services, and law enforcement, and upon site visits to programs that have developed innovative approaches to the problem. The programs we visited are the Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program in the Juvenile Probation Department of Santa Clara County, San Jose, California; the Child Protective Services, Tacoma, Washington; Rape Relief, Tacoma,

Washington; the Sexual Assault Center at Harborview General Hospital, Seattle, Washington; the Presentence Diagnostic Program in the Adult Probation Department, Seattle, Washington; Christopher Street, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Hennepin County District Attorney's Office, Minneapolis, Minnesota; the Center for Rape Concern (now called the Joseph J. Peters Institute), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Sexual Trauma Treatment Program in the Department of Children's and Youth Services, Hartford, Connecticut.

The similarities among these centers impressed us at least as much as their differences. They were created by people who cared deeply about their work, and they could not be reproduced by legislative fiat or the infusion of federal grants. The workers recognized the extraordinary demands of becoming involved with incestuous families or with adult victims. All had evolved methods of nurturing each other and of dealing with the painful feelings continually aroused by their work. Recognizing the difficulty of the task, they were respectful even in their criticism of one another. For sharing their experiences with us, we want particularly to thank Henry Giarretto, Bob Carroll, and Dorothy Ross of the San Jose Child Sexual Abuse Treatment Program, Peter Coleman of the Tacoma Child Protective Service, Connie Murphy of Tacoma Rape Relief, Chuck Wright of the Seattle Presentence Diagnostic Unit, Deborah Anderson of the Hennepin County District Attorney's Office, Elaine Bencivengo and Maddi Jane Stern of the Philadelphia Center for Rape Concern, and Suzanne Sgroi and Norma Totah of the Hartford Sexual Trauma Treatment Program. Twice in our travels we were welcomed not only as colleagues but as sisters. For this generosity we are indebted to Barbara Myers and the staff of Christopher Street, and to Shirley Anderson, Lucy Berliner, Caren Monastersky, Doris Stevens, and the staff of the Harborview Sexual Assault Center.

Many people gave us encouragement in the early stages of this project when it was most needed. Karen Al-Aidroos, Ellen Bassuk, Phyllis Chesler, William A. Christian, Jr., Elaine Hilberman, Mary Howell, Charles Magraw, Lynn Meyer, Jean Baker Miller, Carl Oglesby, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Kathie Sarachild, and Roland Summit read our first tentative writings and gave help and criticism. Pauline Bart was an enthusiastic supporter who showed more confidence in us than we had in ourselves. Larry Constantine, David Finkelhor, Florence Rush, and Hollis Wheeler allowed us to see unpublished manuscripts and shared their data and observations with us. In later stages, parts of the manuscript were reviewed by Joyce Backman, Lucy Berliner, Leigh Bienen,

Sandra Butler, Linda Gordon, and A. Nicholas Groth. Their criticism consistently elevated our level of understanding. William Bennett and Virginia LaPlante, our editors at Harvard University Press, were everything an author could wish for. Finally, Anne Smith somehow got the manuscript into presentable form.

Lisa Hirschman participated in every stage of this project except the writing of the book. She and I collaborated fully on the clinical research, the visits to treatment programs, and the development of an outline. Originally, we had also planned to write the book together. A three-thousand mile separation, work, and child-care commitments ultimately made this impossible. Because I had the greater flexibility in my working life, the job of completing the project we had begun together fell to me. It is not a task I would ever have undertaken alone, or could have done without her partnership.

The Women's Mental Health Collective of Somerville, Massachusetts, supported me in every aspect of this work. The Collective patiently tolerated my reduced presence through the birth both of my daughter and of this book. Michele Clark, Virginia Donovan, Noel Jette, and Ronnie Littenberg, members of the Collective, discussed cases with me, helped me clarify ideas, and contributed their own insights. One member of the Collective in particular, Emily Schatzow, shared deeply in this project. She and I collaborated in the treatment of several families and in the development of therapy groups for incest victims. We also traveled together to treatment programs and worked to develop more appropriate services in our own community.

My parents, Naphtali and Helen Block Lewis, contributed in many ways, not the least by their own example of scholarship and respect for ideas. My brother, John Block Lewis, taught himself elementary statistics in order to teach me how to analyze the data. Jerry Berndt, who endured daily life with me while the book was being written, was my best friend and most reliable critic. He also postponed many of his own aspirations in order to share equally in child care. Our daughter, Emma Lewis Berndt, took me away from my writing and brought me back to it. She was a constant reminder of the incredible attractiveness and vulnerability of children.

JLH

Collaborator's Note

During the research phase of this project certain people were very helpful to me in the formulation of ideas and in turning parts of the research into written form. I especially want to thank Gene Bocknek, Leslie Goodwoman, Eileen Nickerson, and Abigail Stewart. My husband, Peter Gourevitch, helped through many stages of this project. He did more than his share of both housework and child care; without this time the research for the book could not have been done. My son Alexander provided me with moments of pleasure and amusement, reminding me of the joy of childhood as I wrote about its sad and painful side.

LH

Author's Note, 2000: In Memory of Lisa Hirschman

Lisa died last year at the age of fifty-two, torn away much too soon from a family and a community that treasured her. Her absence is felt all the more keenly because in life she had such extraordinary presence. When we worked together, I was struck by her capacity to pay close attention to others and to stay engaged no matter how emotionally demanding the situation. She listened, she understood, and she resonated to the truth of each encounter fearlessly, with laughter, tears, or righteous anger. She brought this observant quality into every aspect of her life: marriage, parenthood, and the quiet work of the psychologist. Lisa kept her work close to the experience of life lived daily. I think this is what enabled her, twenty years ago, to notice what others did not. More recently, in a paper entitled "Restoring Complexity to the Subjective Worlds of Profound Abuse Survivors,"* she described her work with incest survivors as "detailing." I give this paper now to my students, who are learning the craft of psychotherapy, and sometimes, as they share with me the moments of insight and liberation that are the reward of this patient discipline, I am reminded of Lisa, the master crafts-woman, and the many privileged moments that we shared in our collaboration.

* In *Conversations in Self Psychology: Progress in Self Psychology*, vol. 13, ed. Arnold Goldberg (Hillsdale, N.J.: The Analytic Press, 1997), pp. 307–323.

Father-Daughter Incest

Contents

Preface	vii
Author's Note, 2000: In Memory of Lisa Hirschman	xiii
Introduction: Cinderella or Saint Dymphna	1
One The Incest Secret	
1 A Common Occurrence	7
2 The Question of Harm	22
3 The Question of Blame	36
4 The Rule of the Father	50
Two Daughters' Lives	
5 Incestuous Fathers and Their Families	67
6 The Daughter's Inheritance	96
7 Seductive Fathers and Their Families	109
Three Breaking Secrecy	
8 The Crisis of Disclosure	129
9 Restoring Families	144
10 Criminal Justice	162
11 Remedies for Victims	177
12 Preventing Sexual Abuse	202

Afterword, 2000: Understanding Incest	
Twenty Years Later	219
Appendix: The Incest Statutes, by Leigh Bienen	253
Notes	293
Index	309

Introduction

Cinderella or Saint Dympna

*Deep water has no ford.
The broad field has no end.
Small stones have no number.
A pretty girl has no kinsmen.*
—Slovenian folk song

Every little girl knows the story of Cinderella, who was persecuted by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters, and who was rescued at last by her prince. The fairy tale most commonly repeated in Western culture warns girls to expect nothing but abuse from women, and teaches them to look to men for salvation. But the currently popular Cinderella story is only one variant of an old tale which has been preserved in folklore for many centuries. In other versions, the tale is about the sorrows of a girl who has lost her mother, and her persecution by an incestuous father.

Many variations of the story begin with a description of the good and beautiful mother who dies while her daughter is still young. The tales recount the daughter's grief, her longing for her absent mother, and her devotion to her mother's memory. In one version, the little girl plants a twig on her mother's grave and waters it each day with her tears. The twig grows into a sheltering tree, which later, in times of adversity, becomes her refuge and the source of her gifts.¹

The Cinderella story warns little girls that it is dangerous to be left alone with a widowed father, for a widowed father must remarry, and the daughter's fate depends upon his choice of a wife. In some variants of the tale, the daughter suffers because the father replaces her mother with a cruel stepmother. In others, the daughter suffers because the father wishes to marry her himself.

Thus in the tale of Many-Furs, a widowed king sends his messengers to search the kingdom for a woman who exactly resembles his lost wife. No one meets the test but his beautiful daughter. The king then resolves to marry her. To discourage him, the daughter asks for gifts of ever finer dresses. Each time, the father meets her request. Finally, when she can put him off no longer, the daughter flees, disguised in a coat made of many furs. In a foreign land she works as a scullery maid while awaiting rescue by her prince. Like Cinderella, she is discovered when she attends a dance, wearing one of the fine dresses given to her by her father.²

This same folk tale has been preserved in Christian martyrology as the legend of Saint Dymphna. The secular tale ends happily, with the daughter's successful escape and marriage; the Christian tale ends tragically, with her murder. According to popular belief, Dymphna was the daughter of an Irish heathen king and a Christian princess, who died while Dymphna was still a child. After her death, the bereaved king was inconsolable, until he noticed Dymphna's extraordinary resemblance to her mother. He thereupon resolved to marry her. Unable to dissuade him, Dymphna, like Many-Furs, fled across the ocean in disguise. She was accompanied by her priest and confessor, Gereberus. The two settled in a forest at Gheel, near Antwerp, and for a short time lived a simple and peaceful life. But the king, infuriated by his daughter's escape, pursued her relentlessly until he found her. When she once again refused to submit to him, he ordered his men to kill her and her companion. The king's men struck off Gereberus' head without hesitation, but no one dared to touch Dymphna. Thereupon the king drew his own sword and beheaded his daughter, leaving her body for the animals to devour. She was said to be fifteen years old.³

Beginning in the thirteenth century, a popular cult grew up around the bones of Saint Dymphna. Many miraculous cures of insanity and demonic possession were attributed to her intercession, and she came to be regarded as the patroness of the mentally ill. By the end of the thirteenth century, a hospital for the insane had been founded in her name at Gheel. This institution still exists and is even now widely regarded as one of the best of its kind. A notable feature of the sanatorium is the boarding of patients in the homes of townspeople, where they assist with household duties and share in family life. This humane policy has only been recently rediscovered in the American mental health system.

Like many martyrs, Dymphna was canonized first by the people, and only belatedly and grudgingly by the church hierarchy. The biographies of the saints, in which her story is recorded, all register their protest at

the contamination of hagiography by folklore. Dympna's story is not "authenticated." No written record documents her life. Perhaps she never existed at all. No matter. Dympna was sanctified by the people because she represents the real experience of numberless women. Like so many female martyrs, she resisted rape, forced marriage, or incest, even at the cost of her life. Women who have endured centuries of sexual victimization honor Dympna for her heroism and recognize her authenticity, whether or not it is documented to the satisfaction of the authorities.

It is appropriate that the patron saint of the mentally afflicted should be an incest victim. No one could understand better than she what it means to undergo emotional torment. No one knows better what it means to be an orphan, to be driven too soon from one's home, to live as an outsider, to feel like an exile in normal society. To those who feel themselves burdened with unspeakable secrets, and who have despaired of human understanding, Saint Dympna represents the folk wisdom that it has all happened many times before. This book is dedicated to all the heroines who cannot be honored in their own names, the modern-day Cinderellas and Saint Dymptnas, who have been victims of incest.

It is not possible to write dispassionately about incest. The subject is entirely enmeshed not only in myth and folklore, but also in ideology. We have found that a frankly feminist perspective offers the best explanation of the existing data. Without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and fathers) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters, and daughters) are female. Without a feminist analysis, one is at a loss to explain why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women's liberation movement, or why the recent apologists for incest have been popular men's magazines and the closely allied, all-male Institute for Sex Research.

An understanding of incest also rests on certain basic assumptions about the power of parents and the needs of children. It is regarded as axiomatic that parents have more power than children. This is an inescapable biological fact; young children are completely dependent on their parents or other caring adults for survival. It is further assumed that children need the unconditional protection and nurturance of their parents for healthy development; they cannot provide care in return. Parents may find many rewards in the raising of children, but they cannot expect their own needs for food, clothing, shelter, or sex to be fulfilled by

their children. When a parent compels a child to work to support the family, that is the exploitation of child labor. When a parent compels a child to fulfill his sexual needs, that is incest.

For this reason, incest must be considered a crime, one for which the adult is fully responsible. The terms "offender" and "victim" describe the situation accurately, even though many people find this language objectionable. Use of these terms is not meant to reduce complex human beings to simple categories. A man who sexually abuses his daughter is more than just an offender; a woman who has had a sexual relationship with her father does not derive her complete identity from her status as a victim. But these terms should be used in relation to the incest offense in order to make it clear where the responsibility lies.

Father-daughter incest is not only the type of incest most frequently reported but also represents a paradigm of female sexual victimization. The relationship between father and daughter, adult male and female child, is one of the most unequal relationships imaginable. It is no accident that incest occurs most often precisely in the relationship where the female is most powerless. The actual sexual encounter may be brutal or tender, painful or pleasurable; but it is always, inevitably, destructive to the child. The father, in effect, forces the daughter to pay with her body for affection and care which should be freely given. In so doing, he destroys the protective bond between parent and child and initiates his daughter into prostitution. This is the reality of incest from the point of view of the victim. Measures can and must be taken to change that reality.

Outside the scope of this discussion are those rare cases of sexual relations between consenting adults. These instances are frequently cited by pornographers and others who would liberate us all from the incest taboo. The vast majority of incest begins years before the earliest conceivable age of consent. For the same reason, the discussion does not dwell on those spontaneous instances of exploratory sex play between siblings close in age. The horror of incest is not in the sexual act, but in the exploitation of children and the corruption of parental love.

One THE INCEST SECRET