

MATERNAL INCEST:
THE MISSING PIECE OF THE DISCOURSE ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE
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ABSTRACT:

The issue of incest by mothers has generally been absent from the attention of both the media and mental health researchers. Since the 1970's, when the problem of child sexual abuse (CSA) began to appear on news articles, the focus has been on male perpetrators and female victims. When female sexual abuse of minors is noted, the reference is usually to female school personnel, despite statistics showing that a child is more likely to be sexually abused by his/her mother than a school teacher. The mental health field has shown a similar pattern, with the majority of studies published in the last 40 years concentrating on male perpetrators, with both research on and treatment for female child molesters lagging far behind.

I have 15 minutes to explain to you that maternal incest is a widespread problem, despite the fact that you never hear about it; no pressure! If I were to ask a group of people what they think of when I say 'child molester', most would offer words like 'paedophile' or 'predator', and a few might say 'criminal' or 'mentally ill' (Gavin 2010). However, it is doubtful anyone would mention 'incest', despite the fact that approximately 1/3 of all CSA is committed by family members (Stoltenborgh et al 2011). It is even more doubtful that anyone would mention 'women' or 'mothers'. This is due, in part, to the fact that CSA by women, and mothers in particular, has largely been absent from the discourse on sexual violence.

Is maternal incest a widespread problem? The prevalence rate for maternal incest depends on whether we look at official arrest rates, at victim reports, or at self-reports of offensive behaviors. Female perpetrators of CSA account for only 5% of all people incarcerated for sexual crimes in the US and the UK. However, they account for 25% of all perpetrators according to victim surveys (Boroughs 2004). Mothers specifically account for 44% - 81% of the perpetrators of CSA in multiple studies of victim reports (Rosencrans & Bear 1997; McCarty 1986; Saradjian 1997; Elliott, M. 2017). We can estimate how widespread maternal incest is by extrapolating to the larger population. Current research indicates that 27% of American women and 16% of American men report a history of CSA (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith 1990), or approximately 43% of American adults. If the US population is 325 million and 43% of those were sexually abused, then nearly 140 million Americans experienced CSA. If only 10% of those people were molested by their mothers, then approximately 14 million people were molested by their mothers, which is the populations of Paris, Berlin and London combined. Victim surveys indicate that the percentage molested by their mothers is probably 25% or more, approximately 35 million people. That is equal to the population of Afghanistan.

What does maternal incest involve? CSA is the sexual stimulation of a child for the benefit of the perpetrator and women engage in the same forms of sexual abuse as do males; fondling, digital penetration, oral sex, as well as penetration with objects, something men generally do not do. It is not gentler or less invasive than CSA by men, and it is more likely to be accompanied by high levels of physical abuse of the victims (Wolfers 1994). One study of women child molesters found that 23% had attempted to murder their victims via suffocation but stopped after the child lost consciousness (Saradjian 1996). As in cases of CSA by men, women's motivation to

sexually molest a child is sexual arousal, often interwoven with anger (Nathan and Ward 2002; Tardif et al 2005; Joyal & Carpentier 2016). Just as male pedophiles can connect online to men with similar deviant interests, women with sexual interests in minors can find websites such as Butterfly Kisses, which describes itself as devoted to “*children's sexuality and voluntary emotional and sexual relationships between girls and women*” (Lambert & O’Halloran 2008).

If female sexual abuse of children in general and maternal incest specifically is occurring at such a high frequency, then why is it less well-known to both professionals and to the general public? Why was the topic missing from health and criminal justice research as well as the popular press? This wasn’t always the case. Some of the earliest literature on CSA recognized the existence of maternal incest, such as Tardieu’s 1857 forensic study of physical and sexual abuse of children or Chideckel’s 1935 discussion of women who engage in sexual sadism with minors. However, by the middle of the 20th century, women were viewed as lacking both the initiative and the anatomy to cause sexual abuse, as seen in Mathis’ 1972 reference “... *that she might seduce a child into sex play is unthinkable and even if she did so, what harm could she do without a penis?*”.

For decades, both mental health researchers and psychotherapists ignored the possibility of maternal incest simply by not asking about it, despite commonly asking about CSA in general and paternal incest specifically (Holmes et al 1996, 1997). The landmark texts of the late 20th century that dealt with CSA, including Betrayal of Innocence (Forward & Buck 1979), Conspiracy of Silence (Butler 1978), Kiss Daddy Goodnight (Armstrong 1978) The Best Kept Secret (Rush 1980) all discussed male perpetrators as the norm and either ignored mothers or discussed them as mentally ill or victims themselves (Whittier 2009). The Courage to Heal, a continually bestselling book since its publication in 1988, devoted only 3 out of its 495 pages to women child molesters (Bass & Davis 1988). When health professionals did note the existence of maternal incest, the writing often showed a bias, such as Kaufman’s 1995 article which highlighted existence of co-ed CSA teams but minimized the fact that 75% of the women committed their offenses without a coercive male accomplice.

Most research on female child molesters generally and mothers specifically frequently minimized the harm done. Shengold, for example, claimed that maternal incest somehow ‘saves’ the male victims from homosexuality (1989). Other research neutralized the women child molesters’ agency, such as only using data from psychiatric populations, which is the group of child molesters least likely to escape notice and likely not representative of child sex abusers (Hislop 2001). Fazel et al titled their national case-control study on female sexual offenders Sexual Offending in Women and Psychiatric Disorder, giving the impression that sexual offending by women is strongly related to mental illness, yet only 7% of the women in their study had a psychotic disorder (2010). As recently as 2015, Lamy published a case study of maternal incest by a woman with a cognitive disability. Given that most women who commit sexual abuse are not mentally ill, and that there are millions mothers committing incest, choosing to emphasize the case of a woman with limited culpability is problematic.

When maternal abuse was not blamed on a coercive male or on mental illness, then it was blamed on loneliness, on past victimization, on drugs and alcohol, on anything other than the mother’s sexual or power needs (Finch 1973; Courtois 1996; Goldberg & Pollack 2013). Until

very recently, articles on maternal incest lacked any mention of sexuality. This appears to be related to a social view that mothers are asexual, as our culture remains uncomfortable with the idea of women having a proactive sexual drive (Turton 2010). There has been an assumption that a mother's primary focus is on nurturing, which ignored the possibility that mothers have other needs. Some authors go as far as discussing maternal sexual abuse without using the term 'mother', substituting the genderless term 'parent' to describe a sample of women (Lambert & Hammond 2009). The construction of mothers as asexual and nurturing has made it difficult to view them as engaging in acts that denote the abuse of power. To commit incest is to dehumanize one's offspring for one's own needs, and this is antithetical to our understanding of motherhood (Fitzroy 2005). It isn't only maternal incest that is viewed through a gendered lens that renders violent women harmless. Women who commit other types of serious crimes, such as domestic violence and murder, often their actions neutralized, by referencing any past victimization or by descriptions that indicate they were somehow lacking agency (Allen 1987). But it is women's sexual behavior which is most likely to be reframed as unimportant and unintentional. Sexual deviancy cannot exist within mothers, so the narrative is transformed and sanitized, situating mothers comfortably within safe domestic bubble. Denov notes that, just as Victorian society couldn't assimilate Freud's theories of paternal incest into their views of fatherhood, the bedrock upon which their civilization was built; modern society can't fit maternal incest into our views of mothers because we have constructed mothers as the sanctuary from sexuality and danger (2003). We struggle to see sexual violence as part of a woman's gender performance, because it doesn't fit out stereotypes (Hird 2002).

If the professional discourse has ignored and minimized the topic maternal incest until recently, the media discourse has severely distorted the topic and continues to do so. Western media accounts of CSA by women have described the women as fragile or mentally ill and described their actions as a 'mistake' rather than a crime. The media have used terms such as 'lovers', 'relationship' and 'tryst', and 'sex romp' when discussing the molestation of minors by women, which imply the possibility of consent by the victim as well as lack of harm. The media has reserved blameworthy terms such as 'paedophile', 'predator' and 'pervert' for men accused of the same behaviors, because our culture locates deviant sexuality within masculinity (Landor 2012; Frei 2008; Hayes & Baker 2014). The language used by the media is relevant, as it impacts the public's view of CSA by women as harmless or as criminal (Plumm, Nelson, and Terrance 2010). Media in both the US and the UK are more likely to report on women who commit sexual abuse against post-pubescent male victims, which is easy to sensationalize and reinforces heterosexual gender role stereotypes. The most common media account of CSA by women involves teachers, despite the fact that teachers make up only 7% of all known CSA by women (Hepner-Williamson 2012).

In sum, the data is clear that maternal incest is a widespread problem but, due to the challenge it presents to traditional scripts of female behavior, it has been unacknowledged and misinterpreted in Western social discourse. Health professionals' framing of maternal incest, in which her gender is more relevant than her actions, maintains an essentialist perspective of women by transforming perpetrators into victims. The mass media's focus on teacher/student offenses reinforces heteronormative ideas about gender while ignoring power issues and simultaneously rendering maternal incest invisible. The treatment of this issue can be understood as stemming from a desire to maintain a patriarchal view of women as having a special and asexual

relationship with children. However, after two days of discussion on gender and sexual violence, it is clear that we need to start challenging assumptions about gender and violence and acknowledging the wide variations in human behavior within and between all genders. Rather than equating violence with one gender, we must acknowledge that violence is about power and analyse all the contexts which empower anyone to act violently (Hird 2002).

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