

THE ATTITUDES OF INCEST OFFENDERS

Sexual Entitlement and Acceptance of Sex With Children

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The attitudes of child molesters often are considered to contribute to their offenses, and the accurate identification of these cognitive distortions can be important to assessment and treatment. Through the administration of a newly created questionnaire, the attitudes of 50 male incest offenders were compared with those of 25 male batterers and 25 men not seeking treatment. Compared to the other groups, the incest offenders showed deviant attitudes in three domains: (a) endorsing attitudes supportive of male sexual privilege (sexual entitlement), (b) perceiving children to be sexually attractive and sexually motivated, and (c) minimizing the harm caused by sexual abuse of children. Implications of the findings for theories of father-daughter incest are discussed.

Intrafamilial sexual abuse is widely regarded as a serious social problem affecting a substantial portion of both males and females (Bagley, 1991). The negative effects of such abuse are often serious and persisting, particularly when the offender is a father or father

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figure of the victim (Bagley, 1991; Hanson, 1990; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). Given the magnitude of the problem, it is important that the factors contributing to sexual abuse by parental figures be well understood.

Following Finkelhor (1984), incestuous abuse can be considered as the product of a variety of factors. These factors can include, for example, sexual preferences for children, opportunities to offend, emotional immaturity, a belief in male sexual entitlement, and an inability to recognize the negative impact of such abuse (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Solicitor General Canada, 1990). These and other factors are believed to combine in different ways in specific cases of incestuous abuse.

One potential scenario involves a man who is blocked from legal sexual outlets, who then, in frustration, turns to children as an alternative. The blocks to nonabusive sexual expression could include problems such as difficulties relating to adult women, marital problems, and restrictive attitudes concerning all forms of sexuality. This sexual frustration model portrays incest offenders as typically immature, underassertive men who choose inappropriate victims to fulfill their normal sexual needs, similar to Groth's (1978) "regressed" offender.

A second type of incest offender, Groth's (1978) "fixated" offender, is one who is primarily motivated by his sexual interest in children. Although phallometric studies generally find that, among child molesters, incest offenders have the least pedophilic interest, there remains a substantial minority of incest offenders who have strong sexual arousal to children in general (Barbaree & Marshall, 1989; Lang & Frenzel, 1989). Even among nonpedophilic incest offenders, some capacity to perceive children as sexual is necessary for them to commit their offense. Although little is known about why men may perceive children as sexually attractive, one possible basis of sexual interest in children may be a misinterpretation of children's natural

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warmth and friendliness as sexual courtship behavior. An extension of this hypothesis is that incest offenders may have a general problem distinguishing affection from sexuality among adults as well as among children.

Another view of incest offenders focuses on the abuse of power inherent in the act (Herman & Hirschman, 1980). From this perspective, incestuous abuse is based less on confused sexual impulses (normal or otherwise), but more on the selfish use of children for personal gratification. In this sexual entitlement model, the offender sexually abuses children because he believes that satisfying his own impulses is more important than the negative consequences for the child victim. An underpinning of this type of abuse could be the general belief that a man's sexual impulses must be acted on. It may not matter to the offender whether other sexual options are available; if he feels aroused by a particular person (including his own child), then he could feel justified in acting on that feeling. This type of incest offender would not typically be underassertive and blocked; instead, he would more likely be undercontrolled, sharing many features with general criminal populations (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Each of the above models presumes that incest offenders have specific types of beliefs, attitudes, or cognitive distortions that predispose them to sexual offending. In the first model, for example, the offender would perceive himself to be sexually frustrated and could hold negative attitudes toward extramarital affairs. In the second, the offender would perceive children as sexual, perceive little harm in sex with children, and perhaps have general difficulties distinguishing sex from affection or simple friendliness. Incest offenders in the third model would believe that they have strong sexual needs that must be satisfied, and may believe that men, in general, are entitled to act out their sexual impulses.

It is not difficult to identify specific cases that fit each of the above patterns (e.g., Abel, Becker, & Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Snowden, 1984). There has been, however, surprisingly little research on incest offenders' attitudes that has used systematic assessment and appropriate comparison groups. The dearth of such research can be attributed partly to a lack of standardized measures designed for assessing their attitudes. Measures designed for other contexts (e.g., sex-role re-

search) have been used with groups of child molesters, including incest offenders, but the results of such studies often have been inconclusive (see Hanson, Cox, & Woszczyna, 1991).

The Multiphasic Sex Inventory (MSI; Nichols & Molinder, 1984) has several attitude scales designed for sexual offenders (e.g., Sexual Obsessions, Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity, Justifications), but these scales rarely have been used in research on incest offenders (for an exception, see Simkins, Ward, Bowman, & Rinck, 1989). There are several problems with using the MSI scales in research. First, the scales presume that the test taker has committed a sexual offense and, consequently, the items are inappropriate for nonoffending comparison groups (e.g., "My sexual offense occurred because of stresses in my life"). Second, both the Justifications scale and the Cognitive Distortions and Immaturity scale are rather heterogeneous, containing many different types of rationalizations and cognitive distortions. Consequently, even if incest offenders scored more deviantly than comparison groups on these MSI scales, the specific types of deviant attitudes commonly found among incest offenders would remain unclear.

There have been several attempts to develop questionnaire measures of attitudes supportive of sex with children (Abel et al., 1989; Cortoni, Gordon, Malcom, & Ellerby, 1991; Hodgkinson, 1990). These scales are similar to each other and mostly contain items relating to the perception of children as sexual and the lack of harm caused by adult/child sexual contact (the second of the models described above). The scale of this type that has received the most attention is the Cognitions scale of Abel and Becker (Abel et al., 1989). The items involve agreement ratings for statements such as, "If a child has sex with an adult, the child will look back at the experience as an adult and see it as a positive experience." The scale is essentially unidimensional, although it can be divided into several subscales.

Gore (1988) found that child molesters scored more deviantly on the Abel and Becker Cognition scale than did control subjects, but there were only minor differences between child molesters and a nonpedophilic sexual offender comparison group. Stermac and Segal (1989), however, did find that the child molesters in their study scored more deviantly than did the rapists or the community controls.

Although the initial results with the Abel and Becker Cognition scale are promising, even the authors have stated that it could be improved (Abel et al., 1989). In particular, they have suggested that it could be shortened, made less transparent, and include items worded in the reverse direction to reduce endorsement biases.

The present study was aimed at extending previous research on incest offender attitudes by using some new scales to assess a wider range of attitudes than were considered in previous studies. As stated above, there is reason to believe that incestuous abuse can be related to several different types of cognitive distortions or attitudinal problems. Because there were no existing scales for many of the proposed cognitive distortions, a number of new scales were created for this study: (a) the Sexual Frustration scale, which contained 6 items related to the experience of not having sufficient sexual outlets; (b) the Affairs scale, containing 3 items concerning the immorality of extramarital affairs (a possible rationalization for keeping sex within the family); (c) the Sexy Children scale, containing 12 items concerning the perception of children as sexually attractive and sexually motivated; (d) the Sexual Harm scale, containing 10 items concerning the amount of harm caused by adult/child sexual contact; (e) the Sexual Entitlement scale, containing 9 items concerning male sexual entitlement and the necessity of fulfilling sexual urges; and (f) the Sex/Affection Confusion scale, an 8-item scale dealing with the perception that all positive relationships are sexual.

The items for the above scales were developed from interviews with child molesters (mainly incest offenders) and through repeated administration of various versions of the scales to child molesters and community comparison groups. The Sexy Children and Sexual Harm scales resemble some of the other attitudinal scales developed for child molesters and share some items (Abel et al., 1989; Cortoni et al., 1991; Hodgkinson, 1990).

In summary, the present study attempted to identify specific attitudes of incest offenders that may be related to their offenses. The study involved administering a number of specially designed attitudinal questionnaires to a group of incest offenders and to two comparison groups without identified problems with sexual offending. One of the comparison groups was composed of men referred for treatment

for assaulting their partners. These domestically assaultive men make a particularly good comparison group because they control for serious criminal offending within the family, identification by legal and social welfare agencies, and interest in pursuing treatment.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

The incest offenders in the present study were 50 adult males referred for treatment through a child welfare agency. None of them had received treatment for their current offense, and many were still awaiting court dispositions. Subjects in the two comparison groups came from two sources. Appeals to programs providing treatment to abusive men yielded 25 volunteers; these comprised the first comparison group. The second comparison group consisted of 25 men who were not in any form of treatment and who volunteered after reading announcements posted in various social service and community agencies. Descriptive information concerning these groups can be found in Table 1. Overall, the nontreatment group was more educated, had a higher income, and was more likely to be employed than the incest or domestic violence groups. The male batterers did not differ from the incest group on any of the demographic information except level of education. More of the male batterers had attended community college or university than had the incest offenders, $F(1, 72) = 4.96, p < .05$. There were no group differences on age or marital status.

Of the incest offenders, 58% had selected more than one victim. Most of the offenders had selected exclusively female victims (80%), but some had offended against only boys (12%) or against both sexes (8%). Although 18% admitted to only one isolated incident, 56% indicated that the abuse had continued for several months or more. Most of the self-reported abuse involved exposing oneself (60%) or touching of the victims' genitalia (78%) or breasts (60%). A substantial minority (28%), however, admitted to sexual intercourse with the victim. Nine men (18%) had previous counseling for a variety of problems.

TABLE 1: Descriptive Characteristics of the Three Groups

	Group		
	<i>Incest Offenders^a</i>	<i>Male Batterers^b</i>	<i>Community Comparison Ss^b</i>
Age			
Less than 35 years	40.0	36.0	40.0
35 to 45 years	28.0	36.0	36.0
45 years and over	32.0	28.0	24.0
Education			
Elementary school	10.2	16.0	4.0
High school	55.1	24.0	16.0
Community college	24.5	36.0	20.0
University	10.2	24.0	60.0
Marital status			
Married	51.0	36.0	64.0
Single	10.2	16.0	12.0
Separated/divorced	34.7	36.0	12.0
Common law	4.1	12.0	12.0
Employment			
Currently employed	65.3	84.0	96.0
Income			
Under \$25,000	36.0	32.0	4.0
\$25,000 to \$35,000	30.0	28.0	52.0
\$35,000 to \$45,000	24.0	28.0	8.0
Over \$45,000	10.0	12.0	36.0

NOTE: Numbers are percentages.

a. $n = 50$.

b. $n = 25$.

MEASURES

Hanson Sex Attitudes Questionnaire. This questionnaire was developed for the current study. It contains the following scales: Frustration, Affairs, Sexual Entitlement, Sex/Affection Confusion, Sexy Children, and Sexual Harm. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement to a series of items using a 5-point scale from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (5). Items from each scale were intermixed to create a 47-item scale. The complete scales can be found in the appendix.

Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). This 33-item scale assesses the tendency to perceive and present oneself in an unrealistically positive manner. A summary of

reliability and validity information can be found in Crowne and Marlowe (1964).

Background Questionnaire. This brief questionnaire, designed for the present study, obtained information concerning the subjects' demographic characteristics. For the incest offenders, there were additional questions concerning their offense history.

PROCEDURE

After signing informed consent forms indicating that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential, the participants were given a package containing the Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire, the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, and the Background Questionnaire.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 2, the attitude scales were internally consistent (coefficient alphas greater than .80), with the exception of the Sex/Affection Confusion scale (.62) and the Affairs scale (.67), which were only marginally internally consistent. The latter two scales could not be divided or reduced to produce scales with higher internal consistencies. Most of the attitude scales showed substantial positive correlations with each other (.40 to .70 range). The Affairs scale, however, correlated negatively with the other scales, which was contrary to expectation. The Frustration scale showed the weakest correlations with the other attitude measures and was also the scale that correlated most strongly with social desirability (-.46). The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale also was significantly correlated with the Sex/Affection Confusion and Sexual Harm scales, but the correlations were small, resulting in less than 5% of shared variance. The other attitude scales did not correlate significantly with social desirability.

There was an overall difference between the three groups on the six attitude scales, as indicated by a multivariate analysis of covariance $F(2, 95) = 3.53, p < .05$. Group differences on each scale were examined using analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) controlling for social desirability, except for the Frustration and Sexual Entitlement

TABLE 2: Intercorrelation Matrix for the Hanson Sex Attitude Scales and Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sex/Affection							
Confusion	(.62)						
2. Frustration	.38**	(.81)					
3. Affairs	-.27*	.03	(.67)				
4. Sexual							
Entitlement	.68**	.40**	-.23*	(.81)			
5. Sexy Kids	.57**	.09	-.46**	.66**	(.92)		
6. Sexual Harm	.58**	.16	-.45**	.66**	.85**	(.92)	
7. Marlowe-Crowne	.24*	-.46**	.18	-.19	-.12	-.21*	(.76)

NOTE: Reliabilities are presented in parentheses in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

scales, in which one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used because the assumption of homogeneity of group regression coefficients was not met. For these two scales, however, the ANOVAs and ANCOVAs produced equivalent results.

As shown in Table 3, the overall group difference was attributable to the incest group scoring higher on the Sexual Entitlement, Sexy Children, and Sexual Harm scales. Despite the demographic differences between the comparison groups, the responses of the male batterers and the community comparison subjects were virtually identical on all of the measures. Post hoc t tests found no significant differences between the two comparison groups (using a Bonferroni alpha adjustment based on two comparisons for each scale; Hays, 1981). Post hoc t tests did indicate, however, that the incest group did differ significantly from the combined comparison group ($n = 50$) on the three scales noted above.

On the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, the means for the incest offenders, male batterers, and community comparison subjects were 15.7, 14.2, and 14.5, respectively. The difference among the three groups was not significant.

Several exploratory analyses were conducted examining the relationship among offense history, demographic information, and attitudes. The attitude measures in this study were not significantly related to the seriousness or extent of sexual offending behavior, nor were they correlated with income, education, age, or marital status. The

TABLE 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Analyses of Covariance/Variance for Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire

Scale	Group			<i>F</i> ^a
	<i>Incest Offenders</i>	<i>Male Batterers</i>	<i>Community Comparison Ss</i>	
Sex/Affection				
Confusion	2.2 (.73)	2.1 (.41)	2.0 (.68)	1.38
Frustration	2.9 (1.2)	3.0 (.90)	2.8 (.96)	.42
Affairs	3.6 (1.0)	3.4 (1.3)	3.6 (1.0)	.18
Sexual				
Entitlement	2.3 (.98)	1.8 (.51)	1.8 (.62)	3.92*
Sexy Children	1.9 (.92)	1.5 (.42)	1.4 (.78)	5.47**
Sexual Harm	1.6 (.89)	1.2 (.30)	1.3 (.83)	3.84*

NOTE: Standard deviations are in parentheses. The reported means are unadjusted. They differed from the adjusted means by less than .04 units.

a. Analysis of covariance controlling for Marlowe-Crowne social desirability, except for the Frustration and Sexual Entitlement scales, where one-way analyses of variance were carried out because the assumption of homogeneity of group regression coefficients was not met.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

number of significant results in the remaining exploratory analyses were no more than would be expected by chance.

DISCUSSION

The incest offenders in the present study reported more deviant attitudes than did the comparison groups of men who had no identified problems with sexual abuse. The incest offenders were the most likely to perceive children as sexually attractive and as sexually motivated, they minimized the harm caused by the sexual abuse of children, and they often endorsed attitudes supportive of male sexual entitlement. Contrary to expectation, there was no difference between the incest offenders and the other groups on the measures of attitudes toward affairs, sexual frustration, and confusion between sex and affection. Also, there were no differences between the male batterers and the nontreatment males, which suggests that the deviant attitudes reported by the incest offenders cannot easily be attributed to general family problems or to involvement with the legal or social service systems.

Although previous studies have identified deviant attitudes in general groups of child molesters (Abel et al., 1989; Stermac & Segal, 1989), little research has focused specifically on incest offenders, as was done in the present study. The incest offenders in this study appeared to share the sexualized view of children that have been identified previously in samples of child molesters using other questionnaires (Abel et al., 1989; Cortoni et al., 1991; Stermac & Segal, 1989).

The present study also extends previous research by identifying a specific type of cognitive distortion—sexual entitlement—that has not been documented empirically in other studies. This finding supports a view of incest offenders as narcissistic, uninhibited men who believe that their own sexual impulses must be fulfilled. Such an egocentric belief system could prevent them from developing appropriate self-control when they are sexually aroused and provided with opportunities to offend. Instead, they would be likely to actively seek opportunities to sexually abuse, particularly if they perceived (or could convince themselves) that children are interested in, and not harmed by, sex with adults.

Although male sexual entitlement is conceptually related to narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders, it is also a belief that has some support in traditional cultural values (Herman & Hirschman, 1980). Feminist theory (e.g., Herman, 1990) has long emphasized that sex-role expectations contribute to sexual abuse. However, the attempts to document differences between sexual offenders and other groups on sex-role attitude measures have been largely unsuccessful (Hanson et al., 1991). Feminist theorists could argue, nevertheless, that sexist attitudes contribute to abuse at a cultural, not individual level; another possibility is to assume that the existing sex-role measures (e.g., Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) are too broad to capture the attitudes most closely associated with sexual abuse. The extensive social psychological research on the relationship between attitudes and behavior has typically found that specific attitudes are better predictors of behavior than are general attitudes (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Although attitudes concerning women's employment or manners may play a distal role in sexual abuse, the sexist attitudes directly related to sexuality should be those most likely to be associated with sexual abusive behavior. Consequently, the incest offender's

endorsement of the items on the Sexual Entitlement scale could be interpreted as supporting a link between sexual abuse and individual differences in sexually specific sexist attitudes (e.g., "Women should oblige men's sexual needs").

The present results did not support theories that portray incest offenders as inhibited men who turn to their children out of sexual frustration. The incest offenders did not report themselves to be any more sexually frustrated than did the comparison groups. The absence of significant group differences needs to be considered cautiously because the Frustration scale is new, unvalidated, and highly correlated with social desirability. On the other hand, the Frustration scale was internally consistent, and statistically controlling for social desirability did not change the results with this measure. Negative attitudes toward affairs also did not characterize the incest group. The trend was, in fact, in the opposite direction: Men who had negative attitudes toward affairs were less likely to sexualize children or minimize the harm caused by sexual abuse. Although incest offenders may have moralistic attitudes toward sex, sexual abuse also could follow from insufficient sexual restrictions. Interviews with some of the incest offenders in this study suggested that they frequently viewed their sexually abusive behavior as a type of affair, particularly when the victim was a stepdaughter rather than a biological daughter.

The Sex/Affection Confusion scale used in the present study failed to distinguish between the incest offenders and the comparison groups. The weak internal consistency of this scale limits any strong interpretation of the results. The construct assessed by the scale, however, may be too global. Rather than having a general problem distinguishing affection from sexuality, incest offenders may have a more specific problem that leads them to interpret the normal affection of children as sexual. Such a misperception would lead to a general view of children as sexual, as reflected in the elevated scores of the incest offenders on the Sexy Children scale. The factors that lead to incest offenders perceiving children as sexual is an important area for further research, especially because the sexualization of children is an important part of the offense pattern for many incest offenders (Williams & Finkelhor, 1992).

Although the results of the present study are promising, there are several limitations that need to be considered. As in any study that

draws from existing groups of incest offenders (in this case, those seeking treatment), the extent to which the results can be generalized to other groups of incest offenders remains unknown. The representativeness of the comparison groups also remains unknown. In particular, no questions were asked that could have identified the extent to which the "nonincestuous" groups had been engaged in sexually abusive behavior. Because the questionnaires were given under instructions of anonymity, it is unclear whether similar results would be found in applied assessment settings when the respondents could face serious legal or social consequences if they received a "negative" assessment. Overall, however, the results are encouraging and suggest future directions for the assessment and treatment of incest offenders.

APPENDIX

Hanson Sex Attitude Questionnaire

Sexual Entitlement

1. A person should have sex whenever it is needed.
2. Women should oblige men's sexual needs.
3. Everyone is entitled to sex.
- *4. Sex must be enjoyed by both parties.
5. Men need sex more than women do.
6. I have a higher sex drive than most people.
7. I am often bothered by thoughts of having sex.
- *8. I have no trouble going without sex if my partner is not interested.
9. A man who is denied sex suffers more than a woman who has sex when she does not want it.

Sexy Children

1. Some children are mature enough to enjoy sex with adults.
2. An 8-year-old child can enjoy a good sex joke.
3. Some children like to sexually tease me.
4. Some children are so willing to have sex that it is difficult to stay away from them.
5. Young boys want sex as much as adult men do.
6. Young girls want sex as much as adult women do.
7. Children are often able to understand an adult's needs better than other adults can.
8. The innocent look of young girls makes them attractive.
9. The lack of hair makes children's bodies attractive.

10. Children don't tell others about sexual activity because they do not want it to stop.
11. A child who does not resist sexual touching really feels OK about being touched.
12. If a child does not say "no," it means the child wants sex.

Frustration

1. I am often sexually frustrated.
- *2. I have sex about as often as I want to.
3. Quite often I would like to have sex but I cannot.
4. I am often sexually aroused when there is no one to have sex with.
5. I don't have sex as often as I would like to.

Affairs

- *1. Sexual faithfulness is not essential for a happy marriage.
- *2. It is OK for a man to have a few affairs in any relationship.
- *3. A man can have sex outside marriage and still love his wife.

Sex/Affection Confusion

1. Sex is a necessary part of intimacy.
- *2. My closest relationships are not sexual.
3. It is impossible to really love someone until you have had sex with them.
- *4. Sexual attraction is not an important part of affection.
5. If someone likes me it is OK to have sex with them.
6. Being a good sexual lover is a way of showing someone that you care.
7. All kissing is a type of sex.
8. Sex makes all relationships stronger.

Sexual Harm

1. Sometimes it is possible for an adult to teach children about sex by having sex with them.
2. An acceptable way to answer children's questions about sex is to show them.
3. Having sex with a lonely child can make the child feel loved and cared for.
4. Sometimes having sex with a child can be a way of showing love for the child.
5. Caressing a child's body or genitals usually is not a sexual act.
- *6. Fondling a child without penetration can still cause harm.
7. As long as the child does not protest, it is OK to touch his or her genitals.
8. Sometime in the future our society will realize that sex between a child and an adult is all right.
- *9. Children who have sex with adults will have sexual problems when they grow up.
10. Children can easily forgive parents if they have sex with them.

*indicates that the item is reverse scored. The items are randomized when administered and are presented here as discrete scales for display purposes only.

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