

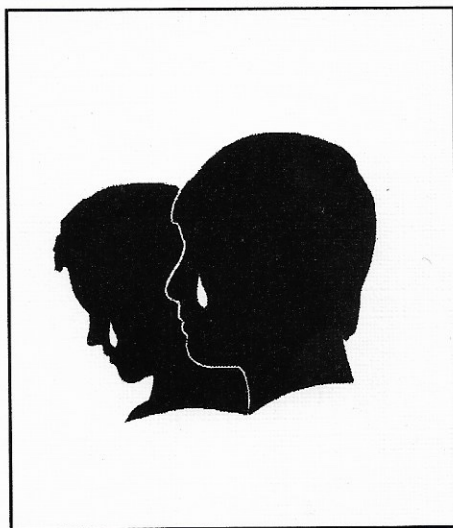
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# Daughter's Perceptions of Being Mothered by an Incest Survivor: A Phenomenological Study

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**ABSTRACT.** This article presents the results of a qualitative analysis of the experience of being the daughter of an incest survivor using a phenomenological approach to the narratives of six women. The majority of the daughters identified a number of effects of their mother's abuse that they perceived as harmful as a child and that lasted into adulthood. Most perceived their mothers as failing to grow up. The daughters responded with a lack of affection toward their mothers, complications in differentiation and integration of a negative self-view. Even in adulthood, the daughters reported a number of characteristics that are normally associated with being a victim of sexual abuse, despite the fact that only two of the six had been so abused. The mother's ultimate disclosure of her incest history helped the daughter to offset these difficulties. The clinical implications of these findings are outlined. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com) <Web-site: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

**KEYWORDS.** Second-generation effects, mothering, parenting, child abuse, adults molested as children

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## INTRODUCTION

The research and clinical literature suggest that the effects of incestuous abuse can be long lasting and pervasive (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Russell, 1986). Such effects include both interpersonal problems such as depression, shame, somatic effects and low self-esteem, and interpersonal effects such as sexualized behavior and mistrust of others. Study of the family variables associated with incest has primarily focused on the first generation in which the child is victimized (Alexander, 1985; Edwards & Alexander, 1992; Pelletier & Handy, 1986). More recent authors have underscored the impact of an abuse history on current marital relationships (Bacon & Lein, 1996; Follette & Pistorello, 1995).

According to Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), mothering has at its center the teaching of the next generation. Daughters grow up in close physical and emotional proximity to their mothers and are highly influenced by their functioning (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Kaschak, 1992; Miller, 1986). Surrey (1991) defines mothering as "attentiveness and emotional responsivity to the other as an intrinsic, ongoing aspect of one's own experience" (p. 37). Such descriptions of the intimate and responsive nature of mother-daughter relationships raise questions about how well survivors of incest can effectively provide such mothering. This has been noted in the literature by clinicians such as Cole and Woolger (1989), who found in their practice that incest survivors

often express inadequacy in coping with children's dependency demands, e.g., toddler's needs for limits, teen needs for coping with sexuality. They also manifest resentment and hostility towards their children and appear unaware that their feelings may be related to their own disappointing, harsh childhood. (p. 414)

A number of recently published studies have examined the effects of incest on the survivor's parenting ability. Cole and Woolger (1989) compared 21 mothers who had been incestuously abused as children to 19 mothers sexually abused by unrelated men. While the groups were not distinguishable on their child-rearing attitudes regarding nurturance and control of children, the incest victims scored significantly higher on the child-acceptance-autonomy scale, indicating a tendency to agree with statements that are extreme in requiring that children

become autonomous quickly. They also scored lower on child acceptance and higher on conflict over child rearing, which approached significance in comparison to non-incest survivor mothers.

In further research, Cole, Woolger, Power and Smith (1992) studied 20 mothers whose fathers were incestuous and alcoholic, 25 women whose fathers were alcoholic only and 39 mothers whose fathers presented with no known problems. The variables of interest included, among others, current parent experiences and strategies. The incest survivors were characterized by significantly less confidence and less sense of control as parents than non-risk mothers, less consistency and organization and making fewer demands on their children.

Carson, Gertz, Donaldson and Wonderlich (1990) proposed that some incest victims may not provide their children with the skills needed for entrance into adulthood. These authors suggest that gaps in knowledge with respect to socially appropriate behaviors and conflict resolution skills, and the survivors' difficulty trusting others could impact her child's independence and achievement orientation.

Burkett (1991) compared 20 mothers who had been sexually abused before the age of 14 by a family member at least four years older, to 20 women with no child sexual abuse history. All of the women were observed in interaction with their children and completed a semi-structured interview. In comparison with the non-abused mothers, the women with an abuse history were more self- than child-focused and relied more on their children for emotional support. Cohen (1995) compared 26 mothers who were incest survivors with a control group of 28 mothers, with no abuse history, on parenting skills. She found statistically significant differences on all seven subscales indicating that mothers with an abuse history self-reported having fewer skills.

Spieker, Bensley, McMahon, Fung, and Ossiander (1996) examined the role of a sexual abuse history in 104 adolescent mother-child dyads. After controlling for a history of physical abuse, quality of early teaching interaction, infant attachment security, IQ, race, welfare status at one year and history of foster care, the mothers who were severely and chronically sexually abused as children were significantly more likely to have CPS contact for their child.

Banyard (1997) conducted a secondary analysis of data on 430 low income, mostly African American mothers, with respect to parenting. Women with a child sexual abuse history were significantly more likely to have a negative view of their parenting, and to use physical

abuse strategies more frequently, even after controlling for the quality of the family-of-origin relationship. Finally, in a study with 206 low-income single mothers aged 19 to 49, Hall, Sachs and Rayens (1998) found that levels of sexual and physical abuse in childhood were both positively associated with mother's child abuse potential; the strongest association was with a history of sexual abuse.

While mothers who are incest survivors are, in general, concerned parents who wish to meet the needs of their own children (Cohen, 1995), the results across these primarily quantitative, controlled studies suggest that they report fewer parenting skills and perceive themselves more negatively as parents. To date, however, no one has investigated the experience of being mothered by an incest survivor, to confirm or discount the mother's perceptions, as well as providing the opportunity for such children to voice their perspectives.

Given the novelty and the potential importance of the focus on how survivors parent their own children, further study of possible second-generation effects of incest is warranted. This article presents a qualitative analysis of the narratives of six women whose mothers are incest survivors. The exploratory study explores the daughters' subjective experiences of their mothers as well as personal difficulties that they attribute to their mother having been a childhood victim of incest. There is no attempt to attribute causality, but to explore phenomenologically the perceptions of the daughters.

## METHOD

### *Procedure*

Murphy and O'Leary (1994) recently proposed the value of using qualitative methodology in understanding the contextual and subjective complexities of interpersonal violence. The current study utilized a phenomenological approach in interviews with six daughters of incest survivors. The senior author conducted all the interviews.

For purposes of the research, incest was defined as "being used sexually by another person in the family while a child or adolescent, living at home, and dependent on her parents or caretakers for her livelihood." The advertisement was carefully worded so that it encouraged participation from daughters who had positive, negative or

mixed reactions to their mothers being incest survivors. Participants were solicited in two agencies that offer treatment for survivors of sexual abuse in the hope that some members might encourage their adult daughters to participate, and by posting advertisements at the university, in churches and on one employee bulletin board. Of the six participants, one came in response to a church poster, one whose mother was receiving counseling and told her about the research, and four through hearing about the study from participants or acquaintances of the senior author.

To volunteer for the study, a woman had to be older than 20, and certain that her mother was an incest survivor. Convenience sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed and, as is common in qualitative studies, no attempt was made to control for cultural, educational or socio-economic variables. New participants were solicited until saturation was reached, that is, until no new information emerged in the data analysis.

The data were collected through an unstructured interview with each participant, lasting about two hours. Two questions were posed in the interviews: "What is it like to be the daughter of an incest survivor?" and, "How do you think your mother's incest history affected your life?" Standard qualitative interviewing techniques such as probes and reflection were used to encourage each participant to explore her ideas, views and emotions (Rogers & Bouey, 1996).

Data explication followed the whole-part-whole technique outlined in Omery (1983) and von Eckartsberg (1986). In order to maintain the focus on the phenomenon throughout the process of explication (van Manen, 1990), three questions were kept in mind: (1) How does this information contribute to understanding what it is like to be the daughter of an incest survivor?; (2) What does this have to do with the mother's incest history?; (3) What does this mean in regard to living with a survivor-mother?

## **RESULTS**

### ***Participants***

Six daughters of survivor-mothers participated in this study. All were Canadian-born, Caucasian, English-speaking women who ranged in age from 24 to 41 years. Five were married and one had been separated for four years. All had children. One interviewee had less

than a high school diploma, three had some training beyond high school, and two were in college at the time. Three of the survivor-mothers were abused by stepfathers, two by their fathers and one by a highly trusted uncle.

Two of the daughters were, themselves, survivors of incest, and another suspected that she might be. The other three were certain that they were not sexually abused as children. If the daughter herself had been sexually abused as a child, the issues in her life that she attributed to her mother's abuse history were treated as such, even though they could also be the after-effects of her own childhood abuse, since victimization could be associated with a survivor mother's inability to protect her child (Blume, 1990; Burkett, 1991; Cooper & Cormier, 1982; Courtois, 1988; Russell, 1986). As such, those with a personal history of sexual abuse were not disqualified from participating. Notably, four of the daughters had previously received intensive therapy while the other two were currently considering counseling.

### *Research Themes*

The essential structure that emerged from the narratives identified three major themes: (1) that daughters of survivors of incest experienced their mothers as failing to "grow up," (2) they encountered problematic dynamics in the mother-daughter interactions during childhood, and, (3) they, themselves, experienced relational difficulties as adults. Each of the interviewees linked all three dynamics to her mother's victimization through incest.

A number of the daughters' perceptions of the mothering they received were negative, however, it should be noted that it was not the intention of this research to blame the survivors for the difficult dynamics. Rather, this information is offered to raise awareness about the possibility of second-generation effects of incest and the need for support and intervention for survivors in the context of their own parenting.

### *Experience of Maternal Child-Likeness*

The daughter's perception that their mothers had never "grown up" arose from a number of comments in the interviews. Although the words varied, each participant viewed her mother as unable to handle life in a mature manner. Several of their comments illustrate this view:

She was very much a child . . . she wasn't able to grow past where she got left as a child . . . My mother never grew up.

So you look at it in terms of a 34-year-old woman marrying and having nine children and she was very much a child.

The women experienced this view of their mothers as "a child raising children" as frightening. To the daughters, no one appeared to be in control and life and relationships seemed confusing and unmanageable.

In association with perceiving their mothers as child-like, the daughters identified a number of passive patterns in the mothering they received, seeing these not as detrimental but, rather, as gaps. However, the *outcomes* of those behaviors were sometimes harmful to the daughter, including mothers who did not act in ways that might have protected their daughters from sexual abuse.

Table 1 outlines five of the problems in mothering perceived by the daughters, how the daughters experienced this inadequacy, and how they typically coped with it. Each pattern is associated with daughters' views of their mothers as failing to grow up. Often the daughter found active means to respond to what she perceived to be her mother's passive approach to life.

One daughter's comment sums up the participants' observations of their mothers during childhood: "Because of my mother's own traumatization, I think she was almost totally ineffective."

### *Mother-Daughter Interactions*

The daughters identified two sources of difficulty that affected their relationship with their mother during childhood: (1) their perception of their mother's unresolved anger about the abuse and, (2) their perception of her as emotionally needy. They saw their mother's rage and neediness as creating distance and animosity between them:

TABLE 1. Dynamics of Daughters' Perception that Mother Failed to Grow Up

Problem in Mothering	Daughter's Perception	Daughter's Method of Coping
inappropriate trusting	lack of protection	relied on self for judgment & protection
poor parenting skills	lack of guidelines & life skills	taught self
lack of healthy boundaries	insufficient structure; chaos	attempted to take charge
did not access resources	mother appeared overwhelmed & the environment seemed crazy	escaped home as quickly as possible
denial of mother's past	secrets; child felt mother not present emotionally	tried to get mother to like her



My mother didn't raise me so there's always been a bit of distance between us . . . I'm sad for me because it affected our entire relationship.

She didn't trust me at all. It was always a fight and accusations.

*Perceived Maternal Rage.* While the daughters perceived their mothers as enraged, the mothers reportedly denied being angry. The daughters described their mother's underlying rage as usually resulting in angry explosions that released tension momentarily, while protecting the source of its intensity:

She's been in denial a lot of the time about her own feelings . . . terrible, incredible rage she has had toward her mother for not protecting her and all our life that's been there so she was really distant a lot of times when we were growing up.

My mother had major rage issues, not saying what is, especially with the anger, but then it came out in other ways. She never dealt with the anger around the abuse, the violation, the shame, the rage . . .

When an explosion occurred, the daughter most often interpreted it to have been simply in response to a current situation. She not only felt responsible for causing the outburst, but often experienced her mother blaming her as well:

I remember trying to keep the kids [siblings] out of Mom's way because her stress levels kept going higher and higher . . . We thought if we'd be really good it would be OK. So we'd be really good for a while but the [physical] abuse would get really bad anyway.

With repetition of this pattern, each of the daughters incorporated the message that she was bad into her self-concept:

I can't remember not feeling hurt by her, like emotionally hurt, from the time I was very small . . . I thought she didn't care about me.

She always tried to make me feel like I was out of control and that I was a bad kid.

Another facet of the maternal anger involved the daughter's view that she did not have permission to express her own feelings and perceptions:

Any kind of feelings that I would have were totally negated. If I felt sad, it was 'What the hell is the matter with you?'

Her response was to try to make me feel like I was wrong and make me feel like I should stop talking and make me feel like I shouldn't be asking the questions and make me feel like I was *wrong*.

Table 2 summarizes the daughter's perceptions of the dynamics involved in her mother's anger and the lack of support for her own feelings. Each daughter experienced these patterns as damaging to her self-concept.

As a result of this dynamic, the daughter often felt angry toward her mother. As one respondent stated, "I didn't respect her because she didn't respect me and I didn't owe her trust because she didn't trust me and I was furious with her." The daughters described their anger as blossoming during adolescence and continuing into adulthood.

*Perceived Maternal Neediness.* Each of the daughters connected her mother's perceived neediness to her own difficulty establishing a definite sense of self while maintaining a healthy connection with her mother. Across interviews, the women described this neediness in ways that suggested the mother projected her own anxiety onto her daughter:

She used to call me 'Blackface.' I can remember sitting on a stool, I was a teenager, and my neediness just all over me in my face and she would say, 'Get your black face out of here.' She couldn't handle it. She just couldn't handle my pain so obviously out there, reminding her of her own.

TABLE 2. Dynamics of Perceived Unresolved Maternal Anger

Mother's Pattern	Daughter's Perception	Daughter's Response
repression of maternal rage	daughter senses anger & is confused	suspects she is somehow to blame
volatility: verbal and/or physical	projection of maternal anger onto daughter	negative view is integrated into daughter's self-concept
negation of daughter's perceptions & feelings	daughter not seen or known as an individual	learns to doubt self

Such projection seemingly complicated the differentiation process by training a daughter to focus on her mother's feelings and needs rather than her own: "I have a hard time separating myself, cause we get enmeshed. I don't like it. I feel like telling her to just f--off once."

At some point each of the daughters responded with disaffection toward her mother, either through discontent or rebellion:

I remember my mother keeping me very close to her. Sometimes I feel like I didn't have a past. I was 'old' when I was very young and I had a lot of awareness . . . I know there is a point in my life that I was stunted emotionally.

I was so angry at my mother that I dated guys she hated. I don't know if I did it consciously but I remember feeling sort of satisfaction at her responses, in my stomach here.

Table 3 describes the daughters' difficulty differentiating from their mothers, and additional relational patterns that they attributed to their mother's neediness.

The daughters identified often feeling lost in reaction to their mother's perceived emotional neediness. As children, they felt as if they existed only as a channel for their mother to manage her emotional fragility. "I experienced her woundedness as a kid. I was a mirror of her own pain. I just felt the heaviness of Mom's pain."

### *Relational Difficulties in Adulthood*

*Estrangement from Self.* The interviewees spoke of feeling cut off from themselves as adults. For many, this manifested itself in negative

TABLE 3. Dynamics of Perceived Maternal Emotional Neediness

Mother's Pattern	Daughter's Experience	Daughter's Response
projection:	differentiation problems; focus remains on mother	disaffection toward mother
overprotection		
pull into being adult	(enmeshment)	(discontent)
parentification		
rejection/conflict	(disengagement)	(rebellion)
emotional coldness/distance	own emotional needs not met	ignore own needs
punish out of maternal anxiety	environment feels out of control	sees self as powerless

feelings about their bodies. Placed on a continuum from ignoring body sensations to creating body sensations, the daughters described: ignoring heat, cold, hunger, tiredness and pain; holding distorted views of one's physical self; perceiving their body as an "enemy," "sex object" or as the bearer of pain and abuse; feelings of shame about their body's appearance, responses and functions; destructive behaviors such as heavy smoking, eating disorders, and slashing and carving. By and large, the daughters did not experience their bodies as useful or loveable, or worthy of value or care.

None of the six participants experienced their mothers as validating their own sense of self. Rather, they felt that their mothers "squashed" their inner voices by negating their perceptions and minimizing feelings. As one respondent noted, "A daughter's natural, trusting instincts toward herself are destroyed." Estranged from two very personal sources of information and wisdom, the physical and the intuitive, the daughters often made decisions based solely on information from external sources.

*Relationships with Men.* Several of the daughters identified sex as a means of attempting to meet their emotional needs. One respondent attributed this view to maternal modeling. The others, feeling the rejection of their mothers very keenly, especially during adolescence, sought sexual partners to gain a sense of acceptance and love. One daughter noted that she was confused about how to handle sexual advances from men, believing that she had a right to refuse these advances, but not knowing how to do so in a direct and clear way.

The daughters also linked the choice of their first male partner as in reaction to their mothers. Four women claimed that they chose their initial partners to get away from their mothers. Several reported deliberately dating men that their mothers actively disliked, acknowledging that they did not know whether they liked these men, but continuing to date them out of spite.

As well, four of the daughters attributed their current marital roles to maternal role-modeling and childhood experiences. The women seemed to be unconsciously repeating what they saw in their mothers, or automatically reacting against what they grew up with. The specific areas mentioned in this regard included sexuality and setting and maintaining healthy boundaries within the marriage.

*The Daughter as Parent.* Each of the women reported having wanted children and feeling confident in their ability to parent well.

Most felt angry about how they had been raised and wanted children in order to demonstrate how to parent properly. Unfortunately, the optimistic belief that they could control the effects of their pasts on their own parenting eventually broke down for each of the women.

I think it's impacting how I parent . . . I overcompensate or try to have the perfect family situation and thinking that none of that could touch it. But it has.

After having children, each daughter discovered at some point that, although she knew how *not* to parent, she was "without a blueprint" about how *to* parent in a healthy way, and "Had to make it up as I went along." Furthermore, each of the daughters struggled in the very area of mothering in which she was most directly affected by her childhood experiences with her mother. For example, one daughter who reported that her childhood was marked by conflict with her mother now notes that she is inflexible in her own parenting, which pulls her into power struggles with her children.

### *Intergenerational Effects of Incest*

Could the daughter of an incest survivor display symptoms indicating a sexual abuse history without having been abused herself? Can the distortions in affective capacities, self-concept and world view that result from childhood sexual trauma be passed on to the second generation through modeling?

In considering whether the effects on the daughter would fit with those indicating a history of incest, Finkelhor and Browne's (1985) conceptualization of the traumatic impact of childhood sexual abuse provided a useful framework. This model proposes that four traumagenic dynamics are at the core of the psychological injury that many incest victims experience: traumatic sexualization, stigmatization, betrayal and powerlessness. Traumatic sexualization is the shaping of sexual feelings and sexual attitudes in a way that is developmentally precocious and interpersonally dysfunctional. Stigmatization is the negative connotations about the abuse experience that become integrated into the victim's self-concept. Betrayal refers to the discovery that someone in a position of trust caused her harm. Powerlessness is the process by which the victim's will, desires and sense of efficacy are constantly undermined.

The information provided in Table 4 groups the long-term effects that the six daughters identified in their narratives under each of the

TABLE 4. Long-Term Effects of Being Mothered by an Incest Survivor

Evidenced by Mothers Only	Evidenced by Both Mothers and Daughters	Evidenced by Daughters Only
<u>Traumatic Sexualization</u> inappropriate sexualization of own children	negative attitude toward own body/sexuality difficulty integrating sex & intimacy confusion about expressions of sexuality	sexually acting out sexualized relationships with men flashbacks* wearing clothing that hides body*
<u>Stigmatization</u>	shame low self-esteem deficient in self-care isolation	feel defective, crazy, inadequate feelings of being different self-injury* feeling stigmatized*
<u>Betrayal</u> emotionally dead or constricted difficulty being emotionally intimate fear of sons	distrust hypervigilance impaired judgement about trust-worthiness of others fail to recognize when own child in danger of abuse overfunctioning; people-pleaser overprotective of own children boundary issues lack parenting skills	rebellion generalize fear to all men (men = danger)
<u>Powerlessness</u> constant anger generalize dislike of all women (female = victim)	lack of assertiveness external locus of control eating disorders alienation from body sensations choose abusive partners need to control/dominate others difficulty recognizing & expressing anger instinctively know & do what others want	substance abuse impaired functioning in occupation perfectionist muscular tension* respiratory distress*

\*These effects were reported only by daughter(s) who were sexually abused during childhood

traumagenic dynamics. Effects that were reported solely by daughters who were sexually abused during childhood are marked with an asterisk.

The participants reported exhibiting many behaviors and characteristics common to incest survivors to the extent that the symptoms of each imply a history of sexual abuse. The research results suggest, however, that such symptoms could also be associated with being parented by a mother-survivor.

Since this is an exploratory study with a small sample size, the after-effects cannot be attributed specifically to being mothered by a survivor. In addition to the mother-daughter relationship, other factors

such as family dynamics, female socialization and intergenerational patterns are all very complex and influential pieces of the overall picture. Nevertheless, the results suggest viewing such symptoms with caution before concluding that they are the result of childhood sexual abuse.

### *Reconnecting with Mothers as Adults*

Five of the daughters identified three distinct experiences as adults as changing their relationships with their mothers, themselves, and others. These change-points were the mother's disclosure of her incest history, the birth of the daughter's first child and the daughter's pursuit of healing. The one daughter that was the exception to this process reported no ameliorating effects as an adult. Even as a child, she had known intuitively about her mother's incest history, confirmed by a maternal aunt but never admitted to her by her mother.

In contrast, each of the remaining five daughters were told by their mothers about her incest history. Three of the mothers had received counseling and, reportedly as a result of this, initiated the disclosure of their incest to their daughters. These mothers each described the nature of the abuse in some detail, who perpetrated and when the abuse occurred. The daughters of these three mothers perceive them as continuing to be willing to talk about the abuse. In contrast, the two mothers who had not received counseling disclosed to their daughters in sketchy and indirect ways. Their daughters described them as reluctant to broach the topic further. Irrespective of the manner of the disclosure, all five daughters reported that their mother's disclosure had depersonalized a number of the negative dynamics in their relationships from childhood, increased their acceptance of their mothers and facilitated an understanding of the daughter's own past.

Each daughter had felt deeply rejected by her mother as a child; her mother's anger had seemed directed at her personally. Once the daughter knew of her mother's incest history, she perceived her mother's anger differently, realizing that while she was the target, she was not the legitimate source. She could now see the incest as the problem, not herself. This understanding changed her perception of both her childhood and adult patterns. As one daughter stated, "So much in my past began to make sense once I knew my mother's history."

Hearing directly from her mother about her incest history resulted

in a profound shift in the daughter's perception of her. As one respondent noted, "[The disclosure] changed my perspective on a number of different things with my mother . . . She did the best she could." Another daughter commented, "When I understood where she was coming from during my childhood, then I was able to love her . . . to forgive her and understand her." Other comments included, "It gave us room to love each other," "We can talk about anything now," and, "The anger has been diffused a lot." While not all of the relationships improved so profoundly, in several, a small shift nonetheless created a sense of good will that had not been present previously.

Some described the impact of the disclosure as affecting other relationships beyond the mother-daughter. One respondent commented:

A big secret cracked open. It changed my life . . . I've lost that tightness inside, that feeling of needing to do something to get her to notice me. I like myself better now because my mom likes me. I can do what I want with my life now, and I know she's going to love me . . . I'm more relaxed with my kids. I find I'm accepting them more.

Several of the daughters cited the birth of her first child as a change-point in relation to their mother. Once she had a baby herself, she could see her mother from a new perspective. For some daughters, it was her mother's interest in the baby and her requests to be allowed into the child's life as a grandmother that led to a change in the daughter's perception of her.

A final element that had a significant impact on five of the daughters was seeking personal healing. Four of the daughters had received counseling at some point and one had considered seeking professional help. The only participant who was currently being counseled was the daughter whose mother had not disclosed. Each of the daughters also utilized books and friends in their self-work. Those who sought deeper understanding of herself and her mother each reported greater satisfaction with their current relationship, whether they perceived their mother as changing or not. For most of the respondents, the combination of their mother's disclosure, the daughter becoming a mother herself and her own pursuit of healing created a powerful catalyst for personal change, change in the mother-daughter relationship, as well as change in other key relationships in the daughter's life.



## DISCUSSION

The interviews with six adult daughters of incest survivors documented a number of difficulties in their perceptions of the mothering they received as children and problems in the mother-daughter relationship. These difficulties were, in most instances, not ameliorated until the daughters were adults, were mothers themselves, and their own mothers had disclosed their incest history. The primarily negative nature of the comments, despite questions designed to elicit positives about the mother-daughter relationship, was unanticipated and may reflect a bias such that only daughters with negative experiences were willing to participate in the research. Nevertheless, the informants in the current study perceived difficulties similar to those reported by the mothers themselves in previous quantitative research (Banyard, 1997; Carson et al., 1990; Cohen, 1995; Cole et al., 1992; Hall et al., 1998; Spieker et al., 1996).

The results of this qualitative study must be regarded as exploratory given the small sample size and the fact that participants included both daughters who had their own sexual abuse history and those who did not. Nevertheless, the in-depth nature of the qualitative research process and the agreement across daughters on the major themes, suggests that further research about daughter's perceptions about growing up with mothers with an incest history is warranted. Quantitative research with a large sample of daughters who have a mother with an incest history, could utilize any of a number of standardized measures that ask retrospective questions about parenting received as a child. Further qualitative interviews could compare a greater number of daughters who themselves were sexually abused to daughters who had no such history to identify possible dual effects of one's own history in addition to one's mother's.

Although the results of the study are not generalizable, counselors with clients who are either daughters whose mothers have an incest history or the mothers themselves, may, at the very least, introduce questions to explore possible mother-daughter relationship problems. This will especially be important if a daughter reports a history of maternal incest, describes a number of difficulties typical of sexual abuse survivors, yet has not been sexually abused herself.

In such situations, the counselor might explore the client's childhood and her perceptions of her relationship with her mother. If the latter was characterized by problems similar to those described by the

daughters in the current study, the clinician may fill the role of surrogate parent or teach the client to re-parent herself. Counselors can also facilitate a deeper understanding of, and empathy toward the mother. Most of the study respondents spoke of the positive effect of their mother's eventual disclosure of her incest history. On hearing this, they were able to depersonalize their perceptions of their mothers' rejection and anger, and accept their mother's choices, forgive them, and move more freely in their own lives. Finally, exploring the client's belief system may be helpful, particularly in the areas of sexuality, male-female relationships, and personal power. Study respondents noted that examining what they had been taught about these areas was very useful in facilitating positive changes.

When a mother reports an incest history, the clinician should first address the survivor-mother's trauma issues. While this may remain a central focus for some time, the counselor can explore whether the mother has concerns about the relationship with her children. The results of the current research suggest that the daughters perceived their mothers' displaced and projected anger as one of the most damaging dynamics in their relationship. The survivor's anger about the incest, anger at the abuser and anger about her own mother's failure to protect her could all be explored. The survivor's awareness and admission of the sources of her anger could diminish the likelihood of projecting that anger into the relationship with her daughter. Disclosing the incest at a time that is appropriate to the daughter's age also appears to help prevent the daughter's misinterpretation of her survivor-mother's anger. The mother-survivor may also benefit from help with parenting skills and education around a child's developmental needs. Counselors may inquire about the survivor's relationship with each child, being alert to the possibility of rejection or projection.

Finally, a number of participants identified their father or father-figure as either a mitigating influence or a complicating factor in their childhood. Exploring this could include an assessment of the relationship between the parenting couple, and the partner's relationship with the children.

### *CONCLUSION*

This qualitative study introduces a topic that has not yet been extensively explored, and its findings are preliminary. However, the results

suggest that interpersonal effects of incest may have an impact on the next generation of daughters. One possible sequelae of incest is its effect on the survivor mothering adequately. The paucity of research into this area is regrettable since most professionals accept that incest affects a significant portion of the female population. Given that in North American society women still shoulder almost exclusive responsibility for raising children, the importance of systematic inquiry into the effects of incest on the survivor's parenting seems apparent.

The daughters' narratives and the fundamental structure and relational patterns that emerged from the data attest to the power of intergenerational dynamics and personal experiences that remain outside conscious awareness. Through the appropriate and sensitive exposure of those secrets, counselors can facilitate communication and understanding between generations. In doing so, we will be agents of change not only in individual lives, but in the ongoing life of the family as well.

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