

June 1991

The Psychoanalysis of Incest

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Recommended Citation

Mirowski, M.D., Doris (1991) "The Psychoanalysis of Incest," *Jefferson Journal of Psychiatry*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/jeffjpsychiatry/vol9/iss2/15>

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Book Reviews

The Psychoanalysis of Incest

THE TRAUMA OF TRANSGRESSION. PSYCHOTHERAPY OF INCEST VICTIMS

Selma Kramer, M.D. and Salman Akhtar, M.D., editors

Jason Aronson Inc. 1991

1991, \$27.50, 186 Pages.

Doris Mirowski, M.D.

In incest lies “the deliberate attempt to eradicate or compromise the separate identity of another person . . . Torture and deprivation under conditions of complete dependency have elicited a terrible and terrifying combination of helplessness and rage—unbearable feelings that must be suppressed for the victim to survive.” The result is the sacrifice of the individual with “their souls in bondage to someone else.” It is this that Leonard Shengold, M.D. calls “soul murder,” and the impact is tremendous.

The Trauma of Transgression, Psychotherapy of Incest Victims investigates this impact. Edited by Selma Kramer, M.D. and Salman Akhtar, M.D., this book was originally a set of papers presented by seven psychoanalysts at the 21st Annual Margaret S. Mahler Symposium on Child Development in Philadelphia in May, 1990. Mahler’s concepts of symbiosis and separation-individuation as factors in an individual’s response to incest recur throughout the book.

A snug-fitting series of chapters, the book is a building of ideas through explanation, investigation of cases and discussion of preceding chapters, rather than a random compilation of papers. Most chapters are clear. At 180 pages, the book is comfortably readable. The pattern of a chapter of theoretical and technical approach followed by critical discussion allows for a spanning of analytic concepts. From a resident’s perspective such structure permits easy elucidation and completeness of ideas. There is also the promise of the book’s value growing with the resident.

In the first chapter, Steele makes the frightening topic of the origin of incest approachable with his smooth writing style. He points out that the forbiddance against incest is more against its active recognition than its occurrence. Clearly outlined in the “The Psychopathology of Incest Participants” are contributing reasons for our meager recognition of incest: participants consciously avoiding or unconsciously repressing revelation of experiences; their basic mistrust interfering with their potential to seek or participate in analytic therapy; and the therapist’s

doubt of stories of incest, either attributing them to the oedipal period or because of countertransference embarrassment.

Steele also addresses the symbiotic element in father-daughter incest and the lack of separation-individuation in mother-son incest. In the former, a spouse-rejected father detects similar feelings of deprivation in his daughter, and the primitive need for company becomes sexualized. In the latter, there is a "sexualization of the symbiotic phase and blockage of the separation-individuation" by the mother.

Interference in normal development and the problem of relatedness between the child and both parents in incest is discussed by Fischer, as is psychoanalysis' prejudice against the mother. She questions our need to concentrate on the pathogenic mother, regardless of her perpetration or passive complicity.

Fischer also focuses on the rapprochement subphase as the most fragile stage, emphasizing that the greatest trauma is committed at this time. A child at this stage has not yet been supplied the means to resolve the ambivalence of rapprochement and to internalize a positive nurturing parental image. To survive being used, being sexually overstimulated and helpless while dependent, the rage must be denied. The rapprochement crisis remains unresolved, for the parent is not emotionally available. This makes the risk of blaming the parent too great, for the victim cannot afford to lose his only image of security and comfort, the needed good object. It is here, Fischer feels, in "the inability to resolve ambivalence with the resultant need to maintain the image of the split-off good parent," that lies the amnesia, the secretiveness and other presentations. The clarity and intensity with which she writes make her chapter especially valuable in understanding the rapprochement subphase and the means used to survive the experience of incest.

The trauma of these individuals must be taken into account when considering analytic-type therapy. Margolis addresses this along with the frequently co-existing physical or emotional abuse, the role of guilt in these patients, the dangers in treating them, and countertransference reactions.

Severe trauma makes analysis an unattractive treatment choice, although it is possible in some patients. Countertransference can affect its detection, which is an important reason to understand our personal attitudes towards incest. As Margolis says, "when the subject . . . is avoided in our clinical world, we repeat for the patient the collusion of the non-incestuous parent who does not want to acknowledge the spouse's incestuous activity."

He also brings up the possibility of ego-strengthening effects of incest. He believes that the abusive environment encourages self-reliance, dependability, ambition, idealism and a sense of responsibility. Such traits are frequently found in the victim, who often outperforms his nonincestuous sibling, according to Margolis. Kramer later questions the belief that anyone benefits from such trauma.

In Akhtar's chapter, "The Etiology and Treatment of Incest-Related Psychopathology" there is detailed discussion of Margolis' preceding section, and an outline of helpful guideposts in the treatment of these patients. Several variables in

the developmental stage, such as being preverbal or verbal, preoedipal or oedipal and having the capacity for orgasm during incestual intercourse, contribute to the impact of incest and affect treatment. This systematic breakdown again makes the topic approachable.

Perhaps the chapter most difficult to grasp is Apprey's "Psychical Transgression by a Child of Incest." Through a detailed case presentation he outlines the tendency for mystification of traumatic experiences as a means of recreating it. (This chapter was quite frustrating for me, leaving me wishing that I had *Apprey's Psychiatric Dictionary!*) Via a system of "mutual implications," he attempts to decipher the victim's means for confounding his recall and retelling. He unfortunately is quite abstract, giving no specific examples of "multiple ambivalent, ambivalent, conflicting, and Janusian strategies." This should give a taste of the esoteric flavor of this chapter.

It is curious that in the incest case he describes, he does not address the fact that it was not committed by a blood relative. Although the case involved inappropriate adult-child sex through two generations, I felt lost by this lack of discussion and relative generality, however interesting the case and analysis. He concludes with the point that the patient, a product of incest, was a secondary victim who was psychically transgressed.

Etezady gives a very clear and concise review of object relations, separation-individuation, rapprochement, the dynamics of the families and the impact; it is easily read and understood and helpful for the resident. In "Victims of Incest" he presents engrossing excerpts of his analysis of a woman, which I found exhilarating in his perception. His countertransferential barriers, related to the patient's sadomasochistic fantasies, are also clearly discussed.

The book concludes with Kramer's lucid review of significant issues addressed by each contributor. I finished it with a much improved understanding of these families, the subtle preceding settings of incest, the perpetrators, the victims and their confusion, and important aspects of treating of these people. The book is highly recommended.

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