MAKING SENSE OF ABUSE: CASE STUDIES IN SIBLING INCEST

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ABSTRACT: This case study focused on the process of making sense of abuse in two Latino families experiencing sibling incest. Participants included five male children ranging in age from 8 to 15 that were members of two families dealing with the issue of sibling incest. The purpose of this study was to build understanding of how families experience sibling incest and its role in their families. Clinical data from therapy sessions was analyzed to reveal that families made sense of the incest in different ways including abuse as normal and abuse as a mistake. Central concepts that explained how the families responded to the sibling incest included (1) level of family cohesion, (2) role of secrecy, and (3) view of outside systems. The findings suggest that treatment needs to include an in-depth assessment regarding these issues.

KEY WORDS: abuse in Latino families; family therapy; sexual abuse; sibling incest; treatment of sibling incest.

Sibling incest occurs at a frequency that rivals and may even exceed other forms of incest (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Hardy, 2001). Its occurrence has been associated

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with many harmful effects including increased risk for future abuse, depression, and sexual problems (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998). Despite the high rate of sibling incest and its negative effects, attention to this issue by family members, professionals, and researchers is lacking (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Sheinberg & Fraenkel, 2001).

Research on sibling incest remains scarce (Ascherman & Safier, 1990; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998; Hardy, 2001). Study in this area has focused almost exclusively on adult survivors of sibling incest (Benedict & Zautra, 1993; Finkelhor, 1980; Hardy, 2001). Studies including children have dealt primarily with the perpetrating child, fewer studies have examined the relationships among siblings (Abrahams & Hoey, 1994; Gilbert, 1992; Madonna, Van Scoyk, & Jones, 1991; Smith & Israel, 1987; Worling, 1995).

The study reported here focuses on the perspectives of children involved in incestuous relationships with their siblings. All sibling incestuous behavior was defined as abuse. Case studies of siblings in two families were used in order to determine how family members made sense of the sibling incest after disclosure, and how these meanings may be significant to treatment. This relational view of children's in-the-moment experience has not been captured in the current literature, which is based primarily on adult memory of events that occurred many years prior (Finkelhor, 1980; Hardy, 2001).

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO SIBLING INCEST

We applied Sheinberg and Fraenkel's (2001) relational framework to the issue of sibling incest. Sheinberg and Fraenkel merge systems, feminist, and social constructionist schools of thought to focus on the relational trauma of incest, which they define as "disruption in the sense of trustworthiness, openness, and clarity of family relationships, and the emotional turmoil, loyalty binds, and dilemmas that result" (p. ix). Several of Sheinberg and Fraenkel's core concepts of multiple perspectives, context, and family loyalties were particularly relevant to this study of incest.

Multiple Perspectives

This assumption holds that each member of the family system, as well as those individuals involved with the family, holds a unique perspective and that each of these positions is valid; that is to say no one position is better than another or more truthful than another. It

also includes the idea of both-and thinking which involves the process of accepting seemingly contradicting feelings so that one does not have to deny certain feelings in order to have a coherent narrative about one's life. Thus understanding how siblings create meaning around the issue of incest necessarily includes a variety of perspectives including family members, treating professionals, and the larger systems involved with the family.

Context

From a systems view, sibling incest must be understood in relation to the larger familial and social context. According to Sheinberg and Fraenkel (2001), multiple levels of context affect the problem and give rise to the conditions that sustain or ameliorate it. Issues of power, boundaries, and forgiveness may be understood within a particular set of social circumstances, including gender, culture, and the on-going relationship processes within a particular context. For example, the male/female gender roles held by family members and reinforced by the larger social context may influence how members of the system respond to the issue of incest. How incest is experienced will depend on the multi-faceted context within which it occurs and may vary from one setting to another.

Family Loyalties

Loyalties exist between family members and between different generations of family members. These ties can conflict with one another, and may lead to conflict within the system. Closeness/connectedness and power/hierarchy are useful to consider when assessing the dynamics of family systems. The perceptions, beliefs, and desires about these patterns have an impact on relationships between family members. Sibling incest is experienced in context of these relational patterns and contributes to them. Thus the meaning surrounding sibling incest will not be separate from relationship processes and how patterns of family loyalty are experienced.

SIBLING INCEST IN THE LITERATURE

Siblings share a unique genetic, historical, social class, and family relationship that often outlasts many other relationships (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998). Sibling relationships influence many aspects of

development including the development of empathy (Jenkins Tucker, Updegraff, McHale, & Crouter, 1999) and identity and attachment (White, 2001). Aspects of early sibling relationships are often repeated and expanded during adulthood (Freeman, 1993). In high functioning families older siblings serve as stable and non-abusive attachment figures (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998).

Siblings engage in many behaviors geared to gain control over one another through coercion (Baskett & Johnson; 1982). The rate of sibling violence, which includes physical, sexual and verbal abuse, was found to be 800 per 1000 as compared to a parent-child abuse rate of 23 per 1000 (Hardy, 2001). Only 11 percent of the studies on child abuse in the last 30 years have focused on sibling abuse specifically, and very few of these studies have used a relational approach for assessing and treating the sibling incestuous family (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998). Research on sibling incest has focused primarily on theory, experience, recidivism, family characteristics, disclosure, and treatment.

Methodology has typically involved surveys/questionnaires (Finkelhor, 1984; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001; Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant, & Loughlin, 1999; Rudd & Herzberger, 1999) and scales/tests (Benedict & Zautra, 1993; Firestone et al., 1999; Laviola, 1992; Worling, 1995) that limit the amount of individual experience that can be captured. Interviews were utilized in a limited number of studies (DeVoe & Coulburn Faller, 1999; Hartley, 2001; Jean-Gilles & Crittenden, 1990; Laviola, 1992; Kreklewetz & Piotrowski, 1998). Conceptual studies have also been limited (DiGiorgio-Miller, 1998; Hargett, 1998; Robinson, 2000; Trepper & Barrett, 1986).

There have been a few case studies of sibling incest (Abrahams & Hoey, 1994; Ascherman & Safier, 1990; Tsun, 1999). Tsun (1999) focused on one case in Hong Kong, and concluded that a more systemic focus was needed that included sensitivity to culture. A case study by Ascherman and Safier (1990) focused on a sibling incest case involving an older brother and younger sister. This study concluded that the occurrence of incest for the family studied involved overlapping individual and intrafamilial factors that taken together provided a context for the incest to occur. Individual factors included unmet needs for nurturance and dependency and the desire to discharge aggression. Intrafamilial factors included isolation, a patriarchal and oppressive father, poor communication, secrets, and blurred roles among family members. Highly complex family dynamics often lie behind the abuse in ways that contribute to the acts of abuse themselves or to the maintenance of the secret. According to Kahn and Lewis (1988), nurturance-oriented incest occurs between siblings who form a secret

coalition against parents that do not offer attention, nurturance, and love. Power-oriented incest is based on force and coercion. In healthy families, parental punishment tends to decrease the likelihood of negative behaviors, but in unhealthy families punishment tends to increase deviant behaviors (Baskett & Johnson, 1982).

Sibling abuse is more likely to be concealed by family members who do not want to turn in "one of their own" or who regard the behavior as normal (Titelman, 1998). This challenge is further complicated by aspects such as definitions of abuse, inaccurate and underreporting of the abuse, and the inability to control for other factors that may be occurring within the family and affecting the lives of the individual family members (Ascherman & Safier, 1990).

Sibling incest usually is not a one-time event (Wiehe, 1997). The incestuous relationship often continues for several years. The average length of abuse was found to be between 1 and 4 years with a span of less than 1–9 years (Laviola, 1992). Sibling incest frequently involves older brothers molesting younger sisters (Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998). Studies of brother on brother incest have been limited.

Latino Families

The siblings participating in the present study were recruited from a treatment program that serves a high proportion of Latino families. Therefore, a review of some of the unique characteristics of Latino families is relevant to this article. Rather than being focused on one's self, Latinos often describe a "familial self" that reflects a sense of self that is connected to "one's close relationships as part of who one is" (Falicov, 1998, p. 163). The family, both nuclear and extended, will have an impact on the course and outcome of treatment (Antshel, 2002). Social connections transcend space and time in Latino families (Miranda, Frevert, & Kern, 1998).

Sibling bonds are strong within this culture, and cousins are often regarded as siblings. These individuals often live together and serve as the primary playmates. The sibling relationships remain strong throughout the lifespan and offer continued support. The message of solidarity is often taught beginning in childhood (Falicov, 1998). In poor and working class families, it is not unusual for siblings and cousins to all sleep together in one room or one bed and for several families to share a living space. This relationship supports family solidarity while maximizing the family resources. Compliance is considered a highly desirable value in Latino children, and mothers often reward behaviors that denote respect, compliance, and responsibility. Children who exhibit

these qualities are believed to be well brought up by the larger cultural group (Arcia, Reyes-Blanes, &Vazquez-Montilla, 2000).

As with all ethnic groups, the issue of sexual abuse is embedded within the larger cultural context and connected to the values, beliefs, and family dynamics unique to the cultural group (Comas-Diaz, 1995). The cultural norm of familismo as described above is closely connected to how child abuse is responded to by the family and larger cultural group. For example, sexual abuse of males in the Latino culture is regarded as a taboo because it threatens the machismo gender role. Therefore, when a male child is sexually abused, he may be more reluctant than his Anglo counterpart to report the abuse, as it not only threatens the family stability, but also presents additional shame because the victim role is not acceptable for a male (Comas-Diaz, 1995).

Summary

Previous research provides very little in-depth information regarding how families respond to sibling incest at the time of the abuse. It is particularly important to focus on families who have recently experienced this problem, rather than looking retrospectively at the issue. Focusing on the experiences of multiple family members will expand beyond the perpetrator/victim dichotomy to include multiple positions and voices from family members. Attention to family responses following the disclosure of the abuse will contribute to increased understanding of how families deal with sibling incest and how they interact with outside systems during the treatment process. Finally, research that focuses on the less commonly studied forms of sibling incest such as same gender sibling abuse and families from a non-white ethnic group is needed.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to build understanding about how families experiencing sibling incest made sense of the abuse and its role in their families. The first goal was to understand the relationships between family members and how these relationships may or may not create a context for sibling incest. The second was to learn about the disclosure process in the families and how each member influenced how the process unfolded. Lastly, this study explored how

the unfolding of different stories reflected the meaning ascribed to the abuse.

METHODS

This research, which took place over a period of 24 months, used a case study approach to understand how two Latino families made sense of sibling incest. A qualitative case study methodology (Meyer, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984) was used, drawing upon data collected by a social service agency specializing in the treatment of such cases. This methodology allowed for a deep understanding of each case and the treatment population from which they were drawn. Data included transcribed therapy sessions, conversations with the therapist, and other data generated by the therapy process such as reports, assessments, and/or client artwork.

Case studies rest on the assumption that information gathered from the experience of a small number of cases can provide information about a larger population (Yin, 1984). Case studies allow a close reading and a contextual advantage, and seek to capture the experience of people in their natural, everyday setting in order to understand larger social complexes (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). The case study approach allows the researcher to tailor the design and data collection to the particular research problem and provides a deeper, more fully nuanced view than would be possible in other methodologies (Meyer, 2001). According to Stake (1995), the first obligation is to understand one case, and to maximize what we can learn from it.

Definition of Sibling Incest for this Study

For the purposes of this study, sibling incest was defined as sexual behavior between siblings that results in feelings of anger, sadness, or fear in the child who did not initiate the behavior. Additional components included the use of coercion, force, pressure, threats, or secrecy in order to initiate or maintain the sexual behavior. Siblings may or may not be blood related, and the definition of sibling included children who had been living together in the same family and had assumed the role of siblings to one another for a period of two or more years.

Case Selection

Two cases of sibling incest were chosen to participate in this research project. Siblings from each of the families agreed to have their therapy sessions audio-taped and to allow these sessions to be used in this research study. Two cases were included in order to allow for comparison and contrast between and within the families. The first two families that met the eligibility criteria for participation were chosen to participate. The names and other identifying information have been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the two participating families.

Eligibility criteria for inclusion of cases in the study included the presence of sibling incest, participation in therapeutic treatment, consent by participant, guardian, and therapist, and age of child participants to be between 5 and 17 years of age. The use of data from already occurring therapy sessions allowed this research to be as unobtrusive into the children's lives as possible. Data generated for this study came from the questions asked by the therapist as part of the normal therapeutic process. This process also made possible the translation of rich, detailed clinical information into systematic research. A total of 33 therapy sessions for the first case and 37 sessions for the second case were transcribed. All sessions were conducted in English.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was simultaneous with the on-going therapy. To minimize intrusiveness, all questions were asked by the treating therapist and were generated by the therapeutic process. Data analysis took place through a feedback loop that employed the assistance of the therapist in verifying the findings with the participant as well as adding to the emerging themes in order to uncover a more detailed picture of the processes that existed within each of the families.

Grounded theory coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to assist in analysis of each case. Open, line by line coding allowed initial themes and categories to evolve from the data itself. The second step, axial coding, involved identifying central concepts or themes related to the overarching research questions. Multiple themes and concepts were grouped around a larger theme when possible. Theoretical saturation was sought in order to exhaust each emerging category. Categories were considered saturated when (a) no new or relevant data seemed to emerge regarding a category, (b) the category

was well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories were well established and validated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The analysis for each family was first done separately. Subsequent analysis revealed a unifying theme for the two cases (i.e., making sense of the abuse). Though each family made sense of the abuse in its own way, both families' stories included messages about how secrecy was used, the level of cohesion, and the view of outside systems.

After major categories were identified, they were used to build understanding (i.e., grounded theory, about sibling incest). The emerging theory needed to be congruent across sources in order to be considered valid (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). This meant that the theory about the meaning of sibling incest needed to reflect the positions of all participants in both families, although each family had its own unique characteristics.

FINDINGS: MAKING SENSE OF SIBLING INCEST

The two cases made sense of the incest differently. In this section we first present the two different constructions: abuse as normal and abuse as a mistake. We then show how three organizing constructs, (a) level of cohesion, (b) role of secrecy, and (c) view of outside systems contributed to the linkages between the abuse, its meaning, and how family members responded to it and to the possibility of change. For both families, the sibling incest was a very painful experience. These processes are depicted in Figure 1.

Abuse as Normal

The first case, the Hernandez family, viewed abuse as normal. Although the family consisted of Ms. Hernandez and her seven children, only three children participated in this study. Antonio, age 15 was the alleged perpetrator of the abuse, and Beto, age 12, and Cesar, age 10 were victims. A total of 3 months of individual therapy sessions was used. In this case (a) family relationships were perceived as distant, (b) secrecy was used to maintain abuse and/or promote personal gain, and (c) outside systems were viewed as intrusive. They described distant relationships that created the space and opportunity for violence, aggression, and fear to emerge.

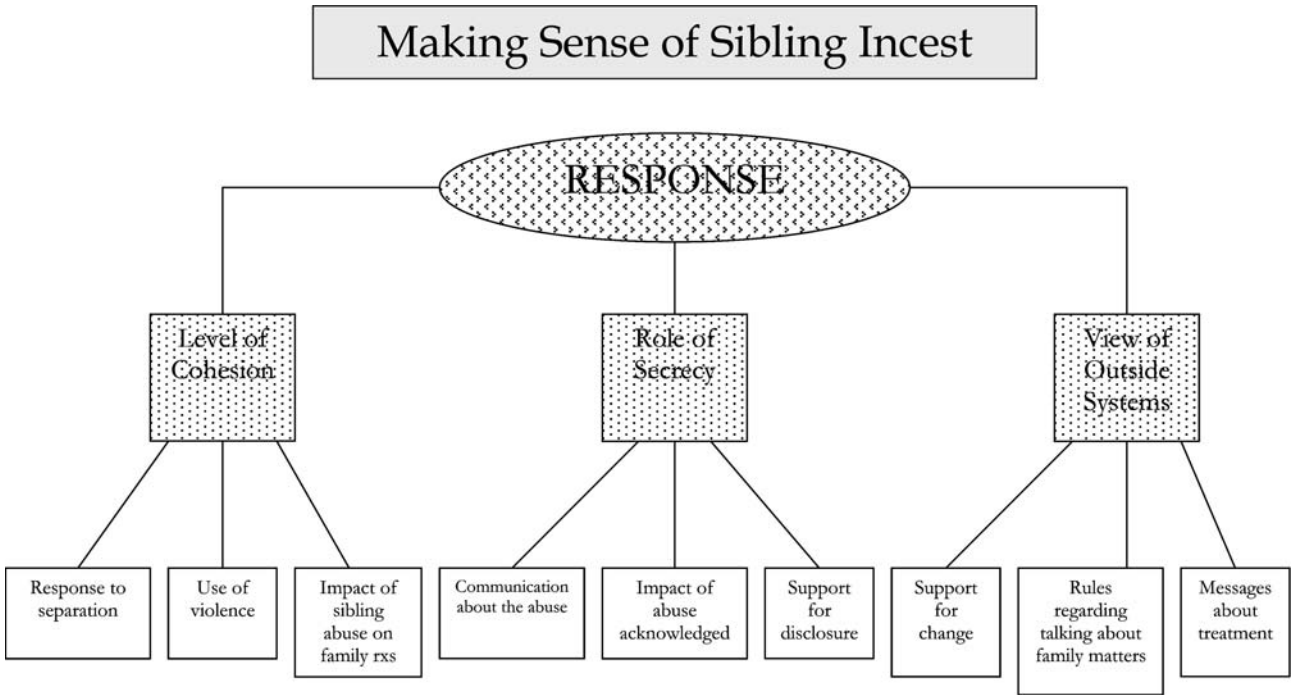

FIGURE 1

Making Sense of Abuse Overview Diagram

The Hernandez family spoke about the abuse as being consistent with the family environment. For example, the offending sibling referred to the occurrence of the sibling incest as "inevitable" and "not a big deal," suggesting that this type of behavior was normal or expected. Other family members described the abuse as fitting with the high levels of violence and aggression in the family:

> They [brothers] don't know how to play with me, they think it's cool to grab you by the neck and squeeze really, really hard and then say oh, I was just playing.

Boundaries in the Hernandez family appeared to be routinely violated. The reoccurring themes of violence in the stories told by the Hernandez family suggested that abuse was considered normal.

Abuse as a Mistake

The second case involved the Gonzalez family. The two sibling participants, Saul, age 11, and Ernesto, age eight, were both victims of sibling incest by an older brother. The larger family included a younger sister, two older brothers, parents, a maternal aunt, and grandparents that resided together. Six months of therapy sessions were used for this case, and involved both individual and sibling sessions. The concepts organizing the meaning of the abuse in this family included: (a) family relationships characterized as connected, (b) use of secrecy to protect, and (c) outside systems viewed as legitimate. The separation caused by the placement of the children into foster care appeared to cause additional pain and sadness.

The Gonzales family spoke about the sibling incest as being inconsistent with their family environment, or abuse as a mistake. Saul expressed this understanding as he contemplated the issue of forgiveness:

> Yeah sure I forgive him because you know it was a mistake, like you know when somebody smokes a cigarette, it's a mistake and their mom and dad should forgive them 'cause it was a mistake that they wanted to try one...I will forgive them if they come to court because people make mistakes.

The Gonzalez family spoke about each other in loving ways, and the sibling incest, though damaging, was often placed aside by the willingness of family members to forgive one another for mistakes that were made and the pain that was caused by these mistakes. They were

motivated to change their behavior, so that they could reconnect. Ernesto described his hope that he would be able to go home, "I have to be good, and so do my parents...and maybe we can go home." He was concerned that his behavior would negatively affect the family, "I worry [that I am not smart enough] and won't be able to go back. They [parents] miss me a lot."

Level of Cohesion

Family members responded to the sibling incest in a manner consistent with how they viewed their relationships. The family that was connected, the Gonzalez family joined together around the issue of the abuse; while the family that was distant, the Hernandez family, focused on their individual positions within the family. The level of cohesion also appeared to be linked to the impact of the abuse. The family with high levels of cohesion seemed more able to acknowledge the negative impact of the sibling incest both to the family as a whole and to the individual. Saul, a victim, acknowledged his responsibility to disclose, "I feel like I should have told them about what happened to me at the first place...I didn't have the strength to stand up and tell my mom that this happened." On the other hand, the Hernandez family with low levels of cohesion appeared to disregard the impact of the sibling incest or focus only on how it affected them individually. Cesar further distanced himself from his siblings, "I don't even remember any of them [brothers]...they are the dumbest people in the whole world."

Sibling relationships that were highly cohesive seemed to display stronger bonds despite the abuse, whereas sibling relationships with weak cohesion levels found this task more difficult or even impossible. In Saul's case the connection he felt to his brothers that had harmed him made him concerned about their punishment. Saul was alarmed that his older brothers were placed into the Juvenile Detention Center and believed this punishment was too much. Instead, he wanted reconciliation that included their apology and his forgiveness.

> What I want to happen is for them to say sorry to me...I will forgive them...and I would hope that the officer would say yes...now is now and then is then.

On the other hand, Cesar, a victim in the Hernandez family with distant bonds expressed no hope or expectation of change and no desire for reunification,

> Everyone in that house fights a lot, and you know if they fight a lot that means they shouldn't live together.

Cesar and his brother Beto experienced a sense of relief when they were freed from the abusive sibling relationship, and were unwilling or unable to consider the relationship outside the damaging, boundary violating interactions.

Secrecy

Secrecy was used in both families, yet in very different ways. In the Hernandez family, where abuse was viewed as normal, secrecy was used by the perpetrator to maintain the sibling incest and by other family members to promote their personal gain. In the Gonzalez family, where sibling incest was viewed as a mistake, secrecy was used in order to prevent the shame and embarrassment that was linked to the stigma of abuse. The use of secrecy was damaging to both families in that it allowed the abuse to continue, created an opportunity for additional violation of the victims, and supported the idea that the abusive behavior and boundary violations were acceptable.

This difference in meaning surrounding the secrecy in these two families can be explained to some extent by the distinction between adversarial and collaborative secrecy. Adversarial secrecy occurred when individuals in the family maintained the secret of the abuse for personal gain. In this type of secrecy, the victim's needs continued to be unimportant and the secret kept the victim in a one-down position. For example, Antonio told his victims that he would kill them if they disclosed the abuse. Beto described how the older siblings in this family used the secret for their own benefit.

> He [older brother] found out and he didn't tell my mom. He was like bribing us; it was more like blackmail, if we did something he didn't like, he would say he was going to tell.

Collaborative secrecy, on the other hand, occurred when family members united to maintain the secret of the abuse to insulate both individuals and the family from shame and embarrassment. Though the sibling incest was kept a secret, this was done with the hope of guarding the victim(s) and family from additional pain and discomfort. Saul expressed his worry about what others would think if they learned of the abuse.

> It would be embarrassing and like sad, 'cause probably they would be teasing you or calling you a loser or something like that.

Saul expressed a similar protective view about the sexual abuse his father had done.

> Well, they are going to think he [father] is crazy...so as long as I keep it a secret nothing will happen.

Thus, rather than being used to dominate or intimidate, collaborative secrecy served to maintain family bonds and insulate them from shame.

Response to Outside Systems

Larger systems such as CPS, court, and the counseling agency were regularly discussed in both cases. The way in which the families made sense of the abuse also influenced the victims' response to outside systems. For example, the Hernandez family viewed the sibling incest as consistent with their environment, and resented the interaction with outside systems such as CPS and other treatment groups. As a result they viewed these systems as intrusive. Antonio spoke negatively of the stress CPS was putting on his mother,

> They took us away because they thought she [mother] was stressed out and everything. She was, but you know she's even more stressed now, they've got all kinds of classes for her.

Messages guarding against communication about family matters created potential roadblocks in the treatment process. For example, Cesar felt caught when the therapist asked questions about the incest, "She [mother] doesn't really like for me to say, and she's like if you are going to tell them...we like our business to stay with us."

In contrast, the Gonzalez family viewed the abuse as inconsistent with their family environment, or as a mistake. They were more receptive to the involvement of outside systems. Though the removal of the children by CPS was painful, they were more open to making changes to prevent additional abuse and to discussing the issue with treatment professionals. They believed that the CPS system held legitimate power to decide if and when they could be reunited, so,

pleasing the system became a family goal. The brothers quickly learned about the power of the court and what they needed to do to comply, "I got to talk to you good, my mom and dad need to take some classes and therapies." They accepted learning behavioral limits.

> As Saul stated, they can touch me, like hug me and high five or pat me on the back, but they can't go lower than the waist.
> Ernesto: I could hug them and then, bye; we can't be alone.

Concluding Themes Around Secrecy

Figure 1 diagrams the linkages between the meaning of the abuse and the families' responses to it and to treatment. In the case where abuse was viewed as normal, distance between family members was heightened through aggression and violence that limited opportunities for closeness and expressions of caring. Family members responded to the incest by secrecy that continued the distancing, violence, and coercion. So long as the abuse was considered normal, outside systems were regarded as intrusive and antagonistic. Family members were discouraged from cooperation and openness to change appeared limited. In contrast, defining abuse as a mistake was associated with efforts to create change. Though the second family was not free of violence, they sought to maintain close bonds and used secrecy collaboratively to avoid the shame of incest. In this case outside systems were viewed as the legitimate vehicle through which the family could be reunited.

DISCUSSION

The stories of abuse told by the siblings in each case provide a detailed view of how these families made sense of the sibling incest immediately following disclosure and involvement of the CPS system. The purpose of this study was not to discover why the sibling incest occurred in these families but to make visible the unique ways that sibling incest is experienced and how family issues such as secrecy, violence, forgiveness, and communication are understood and dealt with by those involved. Despite the differences in experiences, their stories show that sibling incest is painful and damaging, whether families are relationally connected or distant. Participants from each

of the families reported feelings of sadness, contemplation of self-harm behaviors, nightmares, reoccurring thoughts of the abuse, and poor school performance. Yet, the stories of the participants from the Gonzales family also include themes of forgiveness, suggesting the possibility that family bonds can be restored, and trust can be rebuilt. Participants in both cases described reactions by parents consistent with previous research findings that non-abusing family members may respond negatively by ignoring, blaming, or failing to intervene (Carter & Van Dalen, 1998). In the Hernandez family the mother blamed the children. She demanded that Antonio, who was abusive to Saul and Beto leave the house, but also blamed her children who were victimized for their removal from the home because of their own anger and aggression. After learning of the incest, the adults in the Gonzalez family ignored the problem in order to prevent the shame and embarrassment that they feared would occur. Parents' negative responses, however, appear to stem from very different constructions of the problem than the parents in the Hernandez family.

These two case analyses appear to suggest that the on-going relationships between these siblings may be affected by incest in various ways. When family bonds are experienced as distant and violent, as in the Hernandez family, sibling incest could create further distance and be experienced as yet another form of domination and control. Victims respond with anger and aggression. In the Hernandez family even siblings not directly involved in the sibling incest used knowledge of it to their own advantage (see also Carter & Van Dalen, 1998). When family connections are close, as in the Gonzalez family, the sibling bonds could transcend the abuse. Siblings may respond to the disclosure of abuse with guilt, sadness, and a desire for forgiveness. Even when there is relief that the incest is discovered and ended, separation from their siblings can bring deep feelings of loss.

Implications for Assessment and Treatment

How sibling incest is experienced and responded to varies depending upon how families construe themselves and the outside world. We found three important dimensions particularly relevant in these two families: (a) family cohesiveness, (b) secrecy, and (c) view of outside systems (see Figure 1). These influence communication about the sibling incest, the meaning of removal from the family, and the openness to treatment and change.

When family relationships are experienced as distant, separation may be accepted. In fact, when the Hernandez children were placed in

foster care it was described as a "relief" and "vacation." When family ties are connected, such separation may be intolerable. The removal of the children from the care of their parents was devastating to the Gonzalez family, and the brothers spoke about their placement in foster care as traumatic and painful. Responses to family separation may also vary from one family member to another and include mixed feelings. For example, even though Cesar Gonzalez (a victim) distanced himself from his brothers and described separation as a relief, at other times he expressed a desire for their family to be closer. We cannot generalize to all families based on two case studies, but findings suggest that it is important to assess the nature of family bonds prior to the incest, during the abuse, and post-abuse, and to consider patterns of family cohesion when developing interventions.

The use of secrecy by families experiencing sibling incest is well documented (Baker, Tabakoff, Tornusciolo, & Eisenstadt, 2003). This analysis suggests that secrecy can carry different meanings depending on the family context. The Hernandez family used adversarial secrecy to gain individual advantage in a family where distance between family members was frequently maintained through violence and personal attack. In contrast, collaborative secrecy was used to protect the family unit from shame in the Gonzalez family. When secrecy is collaborative, communication about the impact of the sibling incest is permitted and the impact can be acknowledged. When secrecy is adversarial the impact of the abuse is denied and talk about the incest to outside systems is also viewed as adversarial. Thus, a child's response to questioning and therapeutic conversation about the abuse may vary depending on the meaning of secrecy in the family.

Willingness to disclose sibling incest and willingness to commit to change appear to be parts of different family processes. For example, as in previous research (Devoe & Coulburn Faller, 1999) the close relationship between the Gonzalez siblings limited their willingness to disclose the incest. When Mrs. Gonzales discovered the abuse, concern for family reputation kept her from reporting it (e.g., Titelman, 1998) until her son reported it to a teacher. Previous research suggests that children frequently do not disclose a second time (Devoe & Coulburn Faller, 1999). However, once the secret was disclosed, the Gonzalez family accepted the legitimacy of the CPS system to determine what changes the family needed to make in order to reunite, and willingly cooperated to repair what they viewed as a family mistake. This suggests that resistance to disclosure may not mean resistance to treatment.

Family communication processes about the incest are also affected by the larger systems within which the family has contact. Though previous research concluded that child protective services and other involved systems tend to minimize the seriousness of sibling incest and often fail to intervene appropriately (Busby, 1996; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro, 1998), CPS actively supported the disclosure in these cases, consistently telling the participants that reunification with their families required open communication about the abuse. The therapists supported this position as they encouraged the children to talk about how they and their family had been affected by the abuse.

When working with families such as the Hernandez family, where outside systems are viewed as intrusive, the therapist may need to proceed slowly and allow the family members to express their dislikes, concerns, and fears about the treatment process. Family messages that may prevent or discourage involvement in treatment need to be explored. The therapist may wish to involve parents and other family members who are responsible for reinforcing these messages with the goal of working toward having this person give permission to other family members to talk about personal issues in treatment in order to build connection and investment in the process. The therapist will need to proceed at a pace that feels safe for the client(s) and allow them to share their fears, anxieties, and concerns about the treatment process. By validating these emotions the therapist can work toward supporting the client in overcoming the fears that prevent them from being fully involved in the treatment process.

When working with families like the Hernandez family who are eager to please outside systems that they view as powerful, the therapist may need to be aware of the family's desire to provide what the members may perceive to be the right response. The fear, anxiety, and concern that may be connected to the involvement of a powerful system will need to be validated and explored with the family. Intervention can take place through exploring with the family ways that the members can be powerful and successful in creating a safe environment thereby decreasing the risk for future abuse. By highlighting and reinforcing the ways that the family system can empower itself, members will be less likely to hand over continued responsibility for managing the level of safety to an outside system.

The Appendix provides a list of questions that may help child protective service workers and therapists as they attempt to get a better understanding of the ways a family is defining and experiencing abuse and their relationship to larger systems.

Future Directions

Very little qualitative study of research in marital and family therapy has focused on child abuse (Faulkner, Klock, & Gale, 2002). This study focused on participants from two underrepresented groups: Latino families and male victims of sexual abuse. It also expanded previous research by focusing on the perspectives of multiple family members directly following the occurrence of sibling incest.

Though the results suggest issues that are likely to be relevant to a wide range of families dealing with abuse, it is important to consider the cultural influence of their Latino backgrounds. For example, inclusion of members outside of the nuclear family becomes important in working with or researching Latino families, as these individuals often play a very active role in everyday life. It may also be particularly difficult for Latino families to disclose sexual abuse, especially when it involves a male child (Comas-Diaz, 1995). In this study, the Gonzalez family may have decided to keep the sibling incest a secret in order to prevent shame and embarrassment. The victims believed others would make fun of them if they learned of the abuse. Since male–male sibling incest is thought to be the least common type of sibling incest, this raises questions about the frequency of this type of sibling abuse, and whether it might be under-reported.

This research study does not draw conclusions about the reason why the sibling incest occurred in either of the families. Ascherman and Safier (1990) found that intersecting individual and intra-familial factors provided a context for their case of sibling incest. Many of the individual factors such as unmet needs for nurturance and dependency, and family factors such as isolation, poor communication, secrets, and blurred roles between family members were present in one or both of the participating families. Research focusing on the entire family can help clarify the connections among these conditions.

Kahn and Lewis (1988) drew a distinction between nurturance and power-oriented sibling abuse. Though our findings also suggest different contexts and meanings for sibling incest, the participants in our study did not clearly fit within the categories described by Kahn and Lewis. Their experiences were more complex, suggesting that there may be overlap between these categories and that additional research is required to fully understand the various factors that contribute to the occurrence and meaning of different types of sibling incest.

The divergent experiences of the families in these case studies raise questions regarding what other experiences might exist within families dealing with sibling incest. How would families of other ethnic

backgrounds or families with differently gendered children make sense of the abuse? This research also was not able to include the direct perspectives of the parents and the perspectives of all the siblings not directly involved in the incest. We wonder how their experiences might differ. It is also important to determine what treatment models would work best with families that define the abuse as normal and what would work with those who define the abuse as a mistake.

The issue of sibling incest needs to be addressed both qualitatively and quantitatively in future studies. Additional qualitative research studies are needed that focus on families that have recently experienced sibling incest, such as this study, instead of retrospective data when the victims are adults recalling childhood experiences. A research project that involves all of the family members would provide additional viewpoints and insight into how the family makes sense of the abuse. We believe one of the important contributions of this study is demonstrating that information collected in clinical sessions can be systematically analyzed for research. The use of interviews in conjunction with the data derived from the therapy process would add depth to the information gathered in other forms of research. In sum, this study has shown that sibling incest will best be understood by taking a relational, systemic approach that takes into account multiple perspectives of family members and the contexts in which they live.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONS FOR TREATMENT PROFESSIONALS

Level of Cohesion

- How do family members respond to separation (if one or more individuals are removed from the home)?
- How is the sibling relationship impacted by the incest (assess all sibling dyads including those not characterized by abuse)?
- Is violence or aggression present? Is there a history of violence/aggression (i.e. other forms of abuse, domestic violence)?
- How are sibling and parental bonds described and how were they impacted by the presence of sibling incest?
- Do family members view forgiveness to be part of the treatment/healing process? If so, what messages are being given to the victim(s) about forgiveness?

Role of Secrecy

- What are the rules regarding talking about the sibling incest?
- Is there support for the person(s) who disclosed the sibling incest?
- Do family members acknowledge the impact of the sibling incest? If so, in what way?
- Can the impact be discussed? If so, by whom? Who would agree/disagree?
- How did the family respond to the disclosure of the sibling incest?
- Was secrecy used following disclosure? If so, what purpose did it serve (i.e. prevention of guilt/shame, self-gain, etc.)?

View of Outside Systems

- Is change supported by family members?
- How do family members view the treatment process? Treatment professionals?
- What are the family messages/rules about treatment? (i.e., What do the parents say to the children about how they should respond to the treatment process?)
- What is the relationship between the family and other outside systems? How does the family view the involvement of outside systems such as Child Protective Services?

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