Appendix F: Profile of Male Perpetrators

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Appendix F
Profile of Male Perpetrators

Sociologists David Finkelhor and Linda Meyer Williams have recently completed a thorough study of men who have sexually abused their daughters. The sample consisted of 118 incestuous fathers—fifty-five men in the U.S. Navy and sixty-three civilians from treatment centers around the country—and a carefully matched control group of nonincestuous fathers.

In this landmark study on the characteristics of incest offenders, Finkelhor and Williams set out to determine whether men are socialized to see all intimacy and dominance as sexual, whether fathers separated from their daughter for long periods soon after birth are more likely to molest her than fathers who have not been absent, and whether incestuous men had themselves been abused as children more often than had nonoffenders. The researchers also sought to learn each man’s feelings about his daughter, his outlook on sex, and his attitudes toward incest.

Many theories have been advanced about why fathers molest their daughters. Everything from alcoholism to a frigid wife has been blamed. This study has brought to light new information. They found, for example, that there are distinct differences in the onset of abuse: daughters ranged in age from 4 weeks to 15 years old when the incest began. “Fathers were more likely to start abuse when their daughter was four to six years old or ten to twelve years old,” the study reveals, “than to initiate abuse when she was seven, eight, or nine years old.” Men reported various behaviors leading up to the abuse. Some of the fathers
said they had masturbated while thinking of their daughter, had exposed
themselves to her, or had made her touch their genitals before they
began touching hers. A substantial percentage of the men—63 percent—
had been sexually attracted to their daughter for a period of years before
the abuse began. Most significantly, the findings reveal that there are
many paths to incestuous behavior and that there is not just one type of
man who commits such abuse.

Each man was interviewed for at least six hours and was asked
hundreds of questions. The results presented here dispel some common
myths and prompt the following typology.

Type 1: Sexually Preoccupied

Twenty-six percent of the fathers studied fell into this category. These
men had “a clear and conscious (often obsessive) sexual interest in
their daughters.” When they talked about what attracted them to their
daughter, they talked in detail about her physical qualities—the feel of
her skin, for example, or the smell of her body.

Type 1 Subcategory: Early sexualizers

Among the sexually preoccupied fathers, many regarded their daughter
as a sex object almost from birth. “One father reported that he had been
stimulated by the sight of his daughter nursing and that he could never
remember a time when he did not have sexual feelings for her. . . . He
began sexually abusing her when she was four weeks old.” Many of
these offenders were sexually abused as children. “These men are so
sexualized that they may simply project their sexual needs onto every-
body and everything.”

Type 2: Adolescent Regressives

About a third of the fathers—33 percent—became sexually interested
in their daughter when she entered puberty. They said they were “trans-
fixed” by her body’s changes. For some the attraction began when the
daughter started to act more grown up, before her body changed. Some
of the fathers in this group became aroused by a daughter after having
been away from her for a long time. Sometimes the fathers let the
attraction build for years, masturbating to fantasies of the daughter, before they acted.

These men acted and sounded like young adolescents themselves when they talked about their daughter. One said, “I started to wonder what it would be like to touch her breasts and touch between her legs and wondered how she would react if I did.”

“The father-adult in me shut down,” said another offender, “and I was like a kid again.”

**Type 3: Instrumental Self-Gratifiers**

These fathers accounted for 20 percent of the sample. They described their daughter in terms that were nonerotic. When they abused her, they thought about someone else—their wife, even their daughter as an adult. They blocked what they were doing from their minds: “They used their daughter’s body as a receptacle.”

While one man was giving his seven-year-old a bath, she rubbed against his penis. “I realized that I could take advantage of the situation,” he said. “She wasn’t a person to me.” Another man said, “I abused her from behind so I wouldn’t see her face.”

Instrumental self-gratifiers abused sporadically, worried about the harm they were causing, and felt great guilt. To alleviate the guilt, some convinced themselves that their daughter was aroused.

**Type 4: Emotionally Dependent**

Just over 10 percent of the sample fit this category. These fathers were emotionally needy, lonely, and depressed. They thought of themselves as failures and looked to their daughter for “close, exclusive, emotionally dependent relationships,” including sexual gratification, which they linked to intimacy and not to their daughter’s real or imagined sexual qualities.

The average age of the daughter when the incest began was six to seven years. One man, separated from his wife, saw his five-year-old daughter only on weekends. “It was companionship,” he said, “I had been alone for six months. We slept together and would fondle each other. The closeness was very good and loving. Then oral sex began.”
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Type 5: Angry Retaliators

About 10 percent of the men were in this category. These fathers were the most likely to have criminal histories of assault and rape. They abused a daughter out of anger at her or, more often, at her mother for neglecting or deserting them. Some denied any sexual feelings for the daughter. One father of a three-year-old said, “My daughter has no sex appeal for me at all. What I did was just an opportunity to get back at my daughter for being the center of my wife’s life. There was no room for me.”

Sometimes the daughter was abused because she resembled her mother, sometimes because of the father’s desire to desecrate her or to possess her out of an angry sense of entitlement. Some angry retaliators tied up, gagged, beat, and raped their daughter and were aroused by the violence.

Other Findings

Alcohol and drugs. While 33 percent of the men reported being under the influence of alcohol when the abuse occurred, and 10 percent reported that they were using drugs, only 9 percent held alcohol or drugs responsible. It’s more likely that alcohol or drugs are used to lower their inhibitions to abuse.

Marital discord. Forty-three percent of the men felt that their relationship with their wife was part of the reason for the incest. “However, the wife was rarely the only factor mentioned. . . . Different men probably come to incestuous acts as a result of different needs, motives, and impairments.”

Sexual abuse of the offender as a child. Significantly, 70 percent of the men said they themselves had been sexually abused in childhood. Half were physically abused by their father and 44 percent had been physically abused by their mother. “Although not all who are abused go on to become perpetrators, it is critical that we learn more about how child sexual victimization affects male sexual development and male sexual socialization.
Profile of Female Perpetrators

Women who abuse fall into four major categories according to psychologist Ruth Mathews. The first is a teacher-lover—usually made up of older women who seduce young adolescents. The second category is experimenter-exploiter, which encompasses girls from rigid families where sex education is proscribed. They may take baby-sitting as an opportunity to explore small children. The third category is the predisposed, meaning women who are predisposed to offend by their own history of severe physical and/or sexual abuse. The victims are often their own children or siblings. The final category is male-coerced women—women who abuse children because perpetrated men force them to.