

FATHER-DAUGHTER INCEST: DEGRADATION AND RECOVERY FROM DEGRADATION

Raymond M. Bergner

ABSTRACT

Father-daughter incest is a degradation. The purposes of this paper are (a) to articulate the concept of degradation, (b) to show precisely how the incestuous involvement of a child constitutes a degradation, and (c) to exploit the heuristic suggestiveness of this way of viewing incest by describing numerous therapeutic strategies which may be employed to help incest survivors to recover from their degradation.

A young woman, as she both experiences father-daughter incest and thinks about what has befallen her, formulates for herself an answer to the vital question, "What does this make me?" She draws conclusions about what sort of a person, with what sort of human worth, eligibilities and future possibilities this sexual involvement has rendered her. Using

Advances in Descriptive Psychology, Volume 5, pages 285-305.

Editors: Anthony O. Putman and Keith E. Davis.

Copyright © 1990 Descriptive Psychology Press.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 0-9625661-0-1.

the technical concept of a "degradation ceremony", (Garfinkel, 1957; Ossorio, 1976, 1978; Schwartz, 1979), I shall try in this article to document some of the more common and more important conclusions drawn by incest survivors, and the implications of these conclusions for their lives. Most importantly, I shall also describe numerous therapeutic strategies which are heuristically suggested by viewing incest as a degradation ceremony and which have proven effective in my own work with incest survivors. While father-daughter incest will be the main focus of this discussion, much of what is said here applies equally well to other incestuous misinvolvements of female and male children.

THE CONCEPT OF A DEGRADATION CEREMONY

The concept of a degradation ceremony was initially formulated by Garfinkel (1957) and has been heavily employed by Descriptive Psychologists (e.g., Bergner, 1982, 1985; Ossorio, 1976, 1978; Schwartz, 1979) in their accounts of psychopathological phenomena. The paradigm cases of degradation ceremonies are formal public rituals in which the place or "*status*" of an individual in some community is drastically diminished or even eliminated. Examples of such rituals would be court martials, rites of excommunication, impeachment hearings, and the like. The essence of such ceremonies is that the individual in question, for reasons bearing on his or her (allegedly) discreditable conduct, is publicly declared to be "no longer one of us", no longer a member in good standing of this community. In lesser cases (e.g., demotions), he or she is declared to be still a member of the community, but one of lesser status. Unless the individual finds some way to effectively refuse these denunciations, he or she is rendered no longer *eligible* to participate in the community in question in the same way as before, and perhaps not at all. His or her entitlements, opportunities, and future possibilities are all radically curtailed. And, in the emotional sphere, the individual is now, as the bearer of his or her disqualifying stigma, provided with abundant reason for shame, depression, and anxiety.

Two important derivative (non-paradigm) cases must be mentioned here. The first is *non-ceremonial* degrading treatment of one person by another. Person A, by resort to the likes of insults, condescension, disregard, the stigmatizing employment of labels, etc., treats person B in a way which diminishes or "de-grades" the latter as a human being. The teacher who humiliates a student in front of a class, the husband who consistently treats his wife as irrational, and the therapist who patronizes his or her clients are all perpetrators of such informal degradation ceremonies.

The second derivative case is that of *private self-degradation ceremonies*. Here the individual *privately declares himself or herself* to be a certain sort of degraded person, e.g., a "slut" or a "loveless person" or an "evil person". In Camus' relevantly titled novel, *The Fall*, we observe a man who has always esteemed himself as a morally superior individual degrade himself as a hypocritical, morally inferior sham following his refusal to rescue a drowning man. With this self-degradation, numerous life changes ensue. From a participant in the community, he changes to a marginal, shadowy, introspective observer. He exiles himself; he becomes riddled with self-loathing; he is no longer in his own mind "one of them".

Father-daughter incest is almost always a degradation ceremony. In it, the parent subjects the child to degrading treatment. All but the most remarkable or fortunate of children prove unable to refuse this degradation; they suffer a "fall" in Camus' sense of that term. They are diminished. They are devalued. They are no longer able to assume a place with other persons as whole, good, fully entitled members in good standing of the human community. They have, to borrow a religious metaphor, "fallen out of grace", and in the bargain acquired the stigmas, eligibilities, future prospects, and emotional states that go with this fallen status.

In every case that I am aware of, the degradations that have ensued from incestuous involvement of a child have been *multiple*. The child suffers not one degradation, but several, and these will tend to vary from person to person. In the pages that follow, I shall attempt to articulate the precise nature of the five most common of these degradations. I shall do so by describing the precise *statuses* which have been acquired as a result of the incest. Following each such description, I shall make some therapeutic recommendations. Each of these has the form, as one might logically predict, of an attempt at restoration of lost status—of reinstatement of the individual as a fully entitled member in good standing of the human community.

DEGRADATION #1:

Acquisition of the Status "Devalued Sexual Goods"

With the advent of sexual abuse from her father, a young woman may undergo a degradation in which she ceases to regard herself as sexually whole, good, and valuable. Now, via the sexual involvement, she is "used", sexually devalued, "tainted", "dirty". She can no longer stand out in the world among others and present herself honestly as "one of them", for she is the bearer of a shameful, stigmatizing, disqualifying secret.

The young woman, as one immersed in a culture, is a sharer in certain cultural value assignments. Weakened, but far from dead, are some of the following such assignments. (a) A woman who is a virgin is more estimable and worthy than one who is not. The loss of her virginity, and even lesser forms of sexual activity such as petting, should they occur outside the context of marriage, or at least a love relationship, represent a degradation. She may now be regarded as "easy" or "cheap". (b) If a woman has consented to the loss of her virginity or to other sexual acts, her status as a responsible perpetrator renders her fully culpable; she has deliberately incurred her degradation. However, even if she did *not* consent, even if she was the unwilling victim of another's sexual coercion, she is still often regarded as used and devalued. One has only to think here of the turning away of many husbands and lovers upon learning that their partners have been raped. (c) If a woman has had her sexual initiation in the context of her family, thus violating the incest taboo, this is basis for further devaluation. (d) Finally, Goffman (1963) long ago noted that, in the value-assigning activities of a culture, stigma is transmittable. With the advent of sexual abuse, a young woman's father becomes in the eyes of a culture a heavily stigmatized "sexual deviant". She becomes, therefore, the "issue of a sexual deviant", which is itself a stigma. Not only is the young woman now a sharer by birth in her father's stigma, but this perception may also lend an almost genetic, "bad seed" aura to her supposed sexual badness.

I noted above that in our culture, a young woman's consenting participation tends to confer on her full culpability for sexual acts. In my experience, it does seem to be the case that almost all incest survivors *perceive* that they were responsible for the incestuous happenings. The degree of such perceived responsibility varies quite widely, from almost total responsibility to *almost* none. This perception may be based on a survivor's doubts as to whether or not she was seductive with her father, on having cooperated or taken an active role in the sexual encounters, on having received money or favors from her father subsequent to sexual contacts, on not having reported the incest sooner, on having experienced a measure of enjoyment, and on other (often quite flimsy) evidential bases. Whatever the basis, this perception of responsibility deepens the conviction of sexual devaluation and stigma.

Assigning oneself the status of damaged, sexually devalued goods logically entails a number of devastating consequences. To the degree that one feels responsible for the incestuous happenings, there is a corresponding *guilt*. The status assignment itself is an instance (not a consequence) of *low self-esteem*: to view oneself in this manner *is* to esteem oneself poorly. This degraded, devalued conception of self carries with it a corresponding *loss of a sense of eligibility* for relationships with

fully valued "normals" and, consequently, continual reason for *depression*. And finally, all of this is reason to "take what one can get", what one's devalued "social market value" will bring. In many cases, this is a logical underpinning for brief or prolonged *promiscuity*; in extreme cases, it is a basis for *prostitution*. Both of these will be seen as "in character" and will serve as further confirmation of this sexually devalued, damaged identity.

Therapeutic Interventions: "Devalued Sexual Goods"

Reformulate the Incest Survivor's Sexual Participation. Since the individual who has been subjected to incestuous involvement almost invariably overestimates her personal responsibility for what has transpired, a key task will be to help her to reconstrue herself as a *victim*, not a *perpetrator*, in this regard. The task here is to help the individual to see or to recall, evidence permitting, that she did not initiate or seek the contact, that she in fact took great pains to avoid it, that she was under great pressure not to report what was happening, that she was a great deal less physically and intellectually powerful than her father, that it was he who possessed the parental awareness and responsibilities, and so forth.

For example, one rather self-blaming incest survivor brought a picture of herself at age 10 to our session one day. Trying to put this woman into a more detached, observer position, I instructed her to look at the picture and began to talk to her about "that little girl" in the picture. I asked her how strong that little girl was compared to her, and how fast, and how smart, and how aware of sexual meanings, etc. In response to my questions, she responded that she was currently far stronger, more capable, more aware, etc. than "that little girl". At length, I instructed her to talk to that little girl in the picture and tell her that she could have fended off her 180 pound father, that she could have found a hiding place that he could not, that she could have found a way to outwit her father, and so forth. Having reviewed her factual powers as a child, she found herself unable to look at the picture and seriously accuse "that little girl" of being responsible for the incest.

There is at times a surprising degree of resistance to this idea of victimization and non-responsibility. The individual has stronger reason to hold herself responsible than to declare herself innocent. Such reasons, needless to say, must be assessed and dealt with. For some individuals, acknowledging their victimization and powerlessness rekindles strong feelings of helplessness, and causes them to feel *currently* helpless. Other individuals have been socialized into a personal ideology in which somehow, even if the evidence doesn't stack up this

way, everything is *always* their fault. For others yet, family loyalty functions as resistance (Gelinias, 1983): to declare themselves innocent and their fathers responsible is to violate an important commitment to family loyalty.

There are on occasion instances where a girl does indeed cooperate and even seek involvement with her father. In such cases, what needs to be assessed is just exactly *what she was seeking in doing so*, i.e., the *significance* of her actions. For example, in one such case, a young woman's characterization of what she was doing was "seeking out Dad for sex". And what sort of person would do that? Well, somebody "dirty". When questioned, however, about what she was doing by "seeking out Dad for sex", a very different formulation emerged. Essentially, she was seeking affection from her father in the only way he made it available (i.e., sexually), and this in the contexts of an unavailable mother and of a child's non-conception of sexuality and its adult implications. What sort of a child would do that? Well, any child who wanted parental love and found herself in those precise circumstances. When the significance of what young women are doing when they cooperate in the incest is closely examined, it usually proves quite possible to generate new, evidentially-based descriptions of their actions which are far less degrading than their current, usually concretely sexual ones.

Reformulate the Father's Actions. It is often the case that the incest survivor has a very concrete formulation not only of her own actions, but also of her father's actions. Her view is that he was *simply* sexually abusing her, simply using her in an illicit way to achieve sexual gratification. And what this makes her is a sexual *object* or sexual *plaything* (cf. the dehumanized "goods" in "devalued sexual goods").

However, as clinicians we know from our experience and from our literature (e.g., Forward and Buck, 1979) that the actions of the abusing father have other significances. He is not *simply* reducing sexual tensions. He may also be exacting revenge, seeking love, seeking nurturance, seeking accreditation as a male sexual being, and more.

It is not usually possible, because of the daughter's limited information about her father, to get adequate data to build a case about the significance of the father's actions. However, when this can be done, it may be possible to reformulate the actions of the father in a way that is far more status enhancing to the daughter. For example, in one case, it was possible to reformulate a father's actions from a case of "just using me to get his rocks off" to a case of his having been emotionally abandoned and sexually discredited by mother and turning in a very needy way to daughter for love, emotional sustenance and accreditation as a sexual man. While this in no way excused or justified his actions,

this portrayal rewrote the daughter's personal history in such fashion that she *never was merely a used sexual plaything*. Rather, she was also a provider of rather desperately needed love and emotional support to her father and an accreditator of him as a man. This, it goes without saying, is a status of far greater dignity, humanity, power, and eligibility than that of "mere object of sexual release". (I wish to underscore that there was no question in this case of condoning or excusing this father's actions. The entire point was to salvage from this tragedy the accrediting elements that were there.)

Disqualifying Other Degraders. Thus far I have been focusing on private self-degradations. What may also have to be dealt with are degradations attempted by other persons. A general strategy here is to attempt in whatever way, evidence permitting, to disqualify these others as competent, reasonable, and thus *credible* critics with respect to these attempted degradations.

For example, the mother of one adolescent girl held her daughter to blame for her previous sexual involvement with the father. The evidence suggested the following picture of reality, which was presented to the daughter: "Your mother would have to see it that way. As you've described her, she has let herself become tremendously dependent on your father in financial and all sorts of other ways. Her dependence seems so enormous that she cannot even envision herself surviving without him. If she saw your father as to blame, she would have to leave him. But leaving him is unthinkable for her, and so she simply can't see it that way—can't see things as they are." Here, without attacking mother needlessly, a portrayal of reality was provided in which mother's indictments of the daughter were disqualified as legitimate, well-founded ones. The mother could not be counted a status-assigner to be taken seriously in this regard because she had powerful interests that dictated that she not see things as they actually were.

Not only the status assignments of individuals in the client's life, but also some of the status assignments of our very culture may need to be undermined. Cultural assumptions such as those which devalue the loss of virginity (in women but not in men), those which blame and devalue the victims of certain sorts of mistreatment, and those which devalue the offspring of stigmatized individuals do not bear well close scrutiny and may profitably be examined and called into question.

Normalize. One of the more painful and stigmatizing beliefs that the incest victim labors under is that she is the only one, or one of the very few, who has undergone the secret and shameful things that she has. This illusion is beautifully dispelled in groups for incest survivors. It is

also dispelled, but in a weaker way, by the increasing attention that sexual abuse is receiving in the popular press, the thrust of which is that such abuse is so widespread as to constitute an epidemic.

In individual therapy, however, it remains important to convey the fact that the client is not unusual in having been sexually abused—that many, many others have been through what she has been through. There are many ways to do this. For example, the client might be encouraged to read some of the better autobiographical accounts of incest victimization, such as *Daddy's Girl*, (Allen, 1980). Or she might be instructed, if a college woman, to look around an auditorium and realize that likely one woman in seven there has been sexually abused (Finkelhor, 1979).

The incest survivor's ignorance of the extent to which her experience is a shared one extends to other actions and reactions surrounding the incest. For example, many clients experience intense guilt and shame because they did not reveal their father's actions to others, and thus bring them to an end. And their (usually implicit) belief is that any "decent, normal girl" would have done so. To be informed that secretiveness is the rule, not the exception, for other girls, and that the reasons for this secretiveness are also shared by other girls, can effectively undermine some of the sense of difference, stigma, and degradation that the incest survivor experiences.

DEGRADATION #2:

Acquisition of the Status "Powerless"

In dealing with incest survivors, we are usually dealing with persons who have been overpowered to an extraordinary degree. During those developmental years when their conceptions of autonomy and personal power were being formulated, they were subject often to an array of overwhelming circumstances. First, they were usually overpowered in the sexual activity itself. Second, they were often effectively restricted from exerting power to extricate themselves from their predicament; e.g., from telling their mothers or anyone else who might have been able to help them. They were threatened into silence—told that they would be physically harmed, that the family would break up and Dad go to jail, that mom would have a nervous breakdown, and more. Third, in some cases, they may have been generally overpowered by a parent or parents who were physically abusive, verbally adept at turning blame back on them, and/or intolerant of any dissent from them. Certainly, overall histories of living in terror in their own families, of being isolated, and

of being unable to find any effective, powerful means of altering their predicaments are the rule for sexually abused children.

It is little wonder, then, that these individuals typically emerge from their families with conceptions of themselves as profoundly powerless, vulnerable, and endangered. Their predicaments have been quite like those of Seligman's (1975) experimental animals who, being prevented from learning to solve and cope with threats, emerged with a thoroughgoing "learned helplessness". Geiser (1981) puts the matter well when he says, "Just as a person whose house has been burglarized feels a sense of having been psychologically violated, so the child incest victim feels overwhelmed, vulnerable, and violated. She may lose her confidence in her own ability to protect herself in the future; and feel she is at the mercy of outside forces" (p. 297).

The consequences of such a conception of oneself as powerless and violatable are numerous and important. If self is so vulnerable, then it follows that others are potentially overwhelming, and relationships with them must be approached in an appeasing, nonconfrontational fashion. For the incest survivor, then, life must be curtailed, personal goals and desires forsworn, and issues left unaddressed in order to avoid confrontation, resulting in *depression* and *anger*. Such an appeasing approach will also at times result in continual exploitation and misuse at the hands of others. The incest survivor's sense of vulnerability also leads to certain situations reminiscent of the earlier overwhelming ones (e.g., sexual encounters with factually safe, nonexploitative men) provoking *fear* and even *panic*. *Mistrust* must become an issue: when one's sense of self is that one is "alone and helpless in a potentially hostile world" (Horney, 1945), one must, like a spy in enemy territory, be continually on the lookout for possible dangers and continually live with one's guard up.

The basic goal here is to help the individual to a conception of herself, and to a *reality*, in which she is able to defend herself, to initiate assertive actions, and to steer her life course based on her own loves, wants, interests, values, and life goals even in the face of pressure from others to do otherwise. A parallel goal would be to help this individual to reformulate the world as a less menacing and overpowering place than her personal experience has given her reason to believe. Some of the means which I have found helpful in promoting such changes are the following.

Reviewing Factual Adult Powers

It is ordinarily the case that the incest survivor has not revised her estimate of her factual powers and capabilities as an adult. In her mind,

she is no more powerful, capable, or resourceful than she was as a child during the period of abuse. In fact, of course, her physical strength, ability, and speed are usually far greater. Her intellectual capabilities for verbally defending herself, for problem-solving, for seeing and exploiting new resources, for sizing up developing situations, and more, are also far greater. She would do well, therefore, to bring her self-concept and her behavior more in line with these realities, and any way of bringing these facts home to her will be beneficial.

Subsequent to a session devoted largely to this goal, one client who had cowered in her father's presence for years, confronted him in a rather strong but constructive way. In response to his counterattack, she remained firm in her position, and more than held her own throughout the encounter. In our next session, after relating this incident, this woman reported that "all the time I was talking to him, I kept hearing your voice saying, 'You're not a little girl anymore. You are much bigger and you are much stronger, and knowing this was true was a source of tremendous confidence for me.'" Her revision of her estimation of her own powers proved a key contribution to her ability to confront her father, and this confrontation in turn proved to be an important turning point in this woman's ultimately successful therapy.

Assertiveness Training

There is an extensive clinical literature on techniques for helping people to behave assertively and to view such behavior as desirable, acceptable, and moral (Alberti and Emmons, 1974; Goldfried and Davison, 1976). The promotion of assertiveness through observational learning, through behavioral rehearsal with feedback, through in vivo practice, through cognitive behavior rehearsal, and through education in its supporting ideologies are all promoted in this literature and have all proven in my experience beneficial practices when tailored to the specific needs, values, and capabilities of incest survivors. Since these matters are so much discussed elsewhere, I shall not discuss them further here.

Exploiting Other Entitling Statuses

Years ago, it became apparent to me that there are a fair number of people who, while very non-assertive on their own behalf, could be quite forceful and effective on behalf of others such as their children, their clients, or members of oppressed minorities whose rights had been transgressed. This suggests that the whole matter of personal assertiveness is sometimes less a matter of skill possession than of

entitlement. These people were clearly not *unskilled* at defending personal rights; rather, they did not feel *entitled* to do so in their own behalf.

Any way in which an abused client can realize that she has statuses which are more entitling will be helpful in also conveying enhanced personal power. Statuses such as "dirty", "used", "evil", "ugly", "crazy", etc. will ordinarily convey low entitlement. They convey a sense of "who am I to assert my rights or wants with others? They are my betters, the okay "normals" of the world; I cannot presume to think that I have rights in relation to them, or that my wants would count for anything with them." Statuses such as "sexually okay", "basically good", "innocent", "rational", and any other status which has value for a particular client (e.g., "good writer", "sensitive to others", "devoted teacher", "devoted friend") will ordinarily convey greater entitlement, a greater sense of being a coequal member of the human community, and should therefore be promoted.

DEGRADATION #3:

Acquisition of the Status "Provoked Without Redress"

The ongoing position of many abused individuals is that they have been degraded by another, and have never effectively undone the degradation or redressed the wrong done them. They stand degraded. They stand provoked. Their enduring status is that they are *provoked without redress*.

In my experience with rape victims, it has been my observation that those individuals who report the crime to the police, bring the whole matter to the courts, and successfully prosecute the offender generally do very well personally with respect to overcoming the ill effects of the rape. In effect, they successfully refuse the degradation attempted on them: their actions say, "This is *his* action; I not only had no consenting part in it, but I abhor it and have successfully made this case (status claim) in a public forum." They refuse, or in some good measure undo, the attempted degradation. They emerge with their (pre-rape) self-conception relatively intact; they experience comparatively little residual anger.

In contrast, those who are unwilling or unable to redress the wrongs done them do far worse. In effect, they "take" the degradation; they let it stand. Such individuals are left more degraded, and in comparison with their more retaliatory sisters, are left with far greater residual senses of fury and of powerlessness. To have let this sort of degradation stand without effective redress has proven very devastating for them.

All of this applies point for point to the incest survivor. If it is the case that she has been abused, but has never redressed this successfully,

then she stands (ordinarily) on an enduring basis in a certain relation to the world: degraded. Something humiliating and degrading has been done to her, and has been allowed to stand. The degradation has not been effectively refused or undone. She has unfinished business, and the legacy of this unfinished business is enduring degradation, anger, powerlessness, depression, and vengefulness.

Confrontation of the Abusive Father

The first, most direct, and most obvious therapeutic goal in this regard would be to help the client to confront her father about his past actions. The client would do well here to express her outrage, her repudiation of the sexual contacts, her disaffection at her betrayal by the father, her utter disappointment with this whole turn of the father-daughter relationship. The critical therapeutic elements in this stand against her father have little to do with hostility catharsis. Rather, they are (a) a repudiation of the father's actions, (b) a self-affirming declaration that those actions were not hers and "not her" (i.e., not an expression of the sort of person she is) and (c) yet another self-affirming declaration to the effect that she will not in the future stand for this or other sorts of degradations. The critical elements here have everything to do with self-affirmation and the undoing of degradation.

The hoped-for response on the part of the father would be a sincere statement of apology. Such an apology is a "mea culpa", a statement that "it is *my sin and my fault, not yours*". It is an exoneration and accreditation of the daughter and, no doubt for this reason, seems to be an almost universally desired response on the part of daughters. (For those daughters who wish restoration of a relationship with their fathers, it is also an important move to such restoration.) However, such a response is in my experience rarely forthcoming. It therefore behooves the therapist whose client undertakes such a confrontation both to insulate the client in advance from her father's lack of response and to affirm lavishly her actions and the status claims inherent in them. It is the therapist's task, in short, to provide what the father has not provided in his response.

I do not mean to imply here that such a confrontation must always occur if therapy is to be successful. I mean only that undertaken successfully, it can be one long, often dramatic step to recovery.

Self-Affirmation with Others

With respect to this "provoked without redress" status, another course of action which may be promoted by the therapist is that the client tell her story to *very carefully selected* others, e.g., to her spouse (if she has

not already), to her best friend or friends, to her mother, to a sibling—in short, to trustworthy sensitive persons with whom she has the sort of relationship where this could be shared, and where a desirable response could be anticipated.

Often enough (obviously, there are no guarantees here), the response of sensitive, supportive intimates to disclosures about sexual abuse are moral outrage against the abusing parent, deep sympathy for the abused victim, and general confirmation of her as one who was entitled to better parental care. The individual's story is treated by the sensitive other as a self-affirming one, and he or she lends affirmation to the incest survivor. Obviously, this is precisely one of the things which ought to occur in the relationship with the therapist: the therapist serves in this precise role of affirming, accrediting other.

Reconstructing the Degradation/Provocation

In everyday life, yet another way to deal with standing provocations is that of reformulating the provocation as either less provocative than one had initially taken it to be, or even as non-provocative. This accomplished, one stands less provoked or unprovoked (Bergner, 1983; Ellis, 1962, 1973). In the discussion above of therapeutic responses to the "devalued sexual goods" status (pp. 289-290), I mentioned the tactic of reformulating the father's actions. I need only note here that such reformulations are also instances in which the father's actions are reconstructed as less provocative, and thus the tactics discussed there are also responsive to this "provoked without redress" status.

DEGRADATION #4:

Acquisition of the Status "Unloved and Unlovable"

Classical discussions of love have tended to distinguish types of love (e.g., romantic love vs. filial love, eros vs. agape, etc.). If one searches for some common element in all these types, some element that transcends all of them, this element would seem to be something like "the wanting and choosing of another's good *because it is that other's good*". If John is to be said to love Mary, a core requirement would seem to be that he has a relation to her such that her best interests are a valued end for him (as opposed to being only a means to his own ends). And, since "actions speak louder than words" (or feelings), the evidence par excellence that he loves her is that he *acts* in her best interests. This is a discrimination that people, including relatively young people, make. They discriminate, and attach a great deal of importance to, for example,

gifts which are clearly bought for them in contrast with those bought in some way for the giver. They discriminate actions which seem to be performed in their best interests from ones that seem motivated by self-interest of the actor. Such actions far outweigh verbal declarations for most persons in their assessment of how much they are loved by another individual.

Obviously, a child subjected to incestuous involvement with a parent has grounds to draw rather devastating conclusions about the degree to which she is loved. As her awareness of human meanings and sexual mores develop, it becomes only too clear that in a most fundamental way her best interests are being betrayed, while her father's desires and interests are given priority over hers. In some number of cases, the betrayal of her best interests extends to her mother, who may be using her in other ways (see the following section on parentification) and who may even be aware of the father's actions, yet permit them to continue. Barring some other favorable state of affairs (e.g., a teacher, grandparent, or neighbor who takes a very special interest in her), it is easy to see how a conception of herself as unloved and unlovable may develop in such circumstances. She is someone, it seems to her, whom "*not even a parent can love*". She is not the sort of person whose own good, whose own best interests, *could be* a valued end for another.

Such a conclusion about herself, obviously, has numerous implications. Among the more important of these are, first of all, *low self esteem*. To be "not one whose best interests could be an end for another", to be an unlovable person, *is* to esteem oneself poorly. It is also to take it that one is *ineligible for love*. And it is to have reason to *mistrust* anything which could be taken as a genuine interest in oneself for one's own sake. The motivation of an interested teacher or neighbor are suspect; in contrast with the policy of the judicial system, the friend must be regarded as guilty (i.e., exploitative) until proven innocent (i.e., caring). Emotional sequelae of these states of affairs will include *depression, fear, and loathing*.

The general therapeutic goal here is that the individual reformulate her own status as "one who is lovable, whose best interests could be the genuine concern of another human being". Applying a general truth about change in self-conception here, it is strategically preferable (evidence permitting) to stake out a position that the client was or is *already* loved, and is therefore lovable, than it is to stake out a position that the client has never been loved, but still may be in the future (Farber, 1981). The former secures her status, makes it a fact; the latter renders it merely a hope. The following suggestions are proffered with this heuristic in mind.

Therapist Care

One key antidote to the incest survivor's unlovable status is simply that the therapist have, and be able to help the client see that he or she has, a genuine interest in her well being for her sake. There is a voluminous literature on the general subject of therapist care (e.g., Driscoll, 1984; Ossorio, 1976; Rogers, 1951, 1980), and I shall here make only a few brief points.

It is obvious that one cannot "turn on" a genuine interest in another's best interests by a free act. Achieving such an interest, achieving care, seems more in the nature of a happening than an intentional act. Fortunately, in general and for us as therapists, achieving an intimate knowledge of another, as one ordinarily does when hearing an individual's plight and personal history in the course of therapy, usually causes us to have such an attitude. Should it not develop, the barriers to our genuinely caring for the client will often be removed by becoming aware of what is behind the client's "off-putting" anger or cynicism or flip attitude, or dealing with our own countertransferences.

In any event, while such care may not be an indispensable ingredient in some therapy, (e.g., some crisis work, or some therapy where the deficit is more an educational one), it is certainly an indispensable ingredient in the relationship of the therapist to the incest survivor, and most especially one who has formulated her status as that of an unlovable person. Such a relationship is itself an ongoing "accreditation ceremony" (Garfinkel, 1957; Ossorio, 1976; Schwartz, 1979), an ongoing relationship in which she truly *is*, and is *treated as*, one whose best interests are a valued and primary concern for another. I think it not at all radical to suggest that, if one is unable to genuinely care for a particular incest survivor, it is best to refer this individual to another therapist.

Underscoring Parental Care That Was There

At times, the data revealed in a reaccounting of her personal history indicates a radical overall lack of caring on the part of the incest survivor's parents. There simply is little evidence to suggest that the child's interests constituted any sort of priority for the parents. Often enough, however, the evidence suggests that there was love, sometimes considerable love, even on the part of the abusing parent. Should the latter picture emerge in cases where the incest survivor has taken it that she was not loved, it behooves the therapist to underscore this care at a point where it appears that the client can hear it. The basic

therapeutic message here is: "You were loved, even though you were also betrayed in a basic way; and to have been loved is to be lovable."

For example, one of my abused clients was tormented and obsessed by a question as to whether or not her abusive father loved her. For her, the answer to this basic question turned on the answer to a second question: "Did my father act with malice; did he knowingly and willingly do something he knew to be very harmful to me?" Detailed review of her overall relationship with her father, a single parent who raised her and seven other children, indicated a father who in almost every other respect save the incest acted in the best interests of this woman and her siblings, and went to rather heroic extremes to do so. For example, he took a very active interest in how she was doing and feeling, encouraged her in activities of her choosing, worked extremely hard to raise eight children by himself, and more. Finally, this man seemed monumentally ignorant of female meanings, perspectives, and implications in the sexual area. He was, for example, embarrassingly crass in his sexual talk around women without seeming to be aware of how this would be taken. From this and considerably more evidence, a portrait emerged of this man as someone who loved his daughter (and her siblings) a great deal and who generally worked very hard in her behalf. His incestuous involvement with her, while a basic violation of the parental relationship and in no way excusable or condonable, did occur, it seemed, in the context of a radical stupidity as to its consequences and implications for his daughter. It did not seem a deliberate planful act of hatred or malice toward her. This portrait proved tremendously reassuring to the daughter, and seemed to lay to rest her longstanding preoccupation with questions about his malice, and therefore love, for her.

DEGRADATION #5:

Acquisition of the Status, "Obligated Caretaker, Unentitled to Reciprocity"

A number of previous authors have noted that incestuous father-daughter involvements often evolve in the context of a family pattern of parentification (see e.g., Gelinas, 1983, for an unusually clear and excellent account). They occur in familial structural patterns in which father is a rather needy, dependent, underfunctioning individual, mother has become depleted in her efforts to provide care for father and children, and daughter has therefore been charged excessively with adult, caretaker roles and responsibilities. Her premier role assignment in the family is to give care to mother, to dad, and to her brothers and sisters. A key part of this role is to be selfless—to be sensitive to others' needs

and responsive to them, but not to consult herself regarding what she might personally need or want. The ethical value par excellence in this role enactment is the obligation to respond to a needy other.

It is not difficult to envision how incest might more easily occur in such a family. Mother, depleted, abdicates her maternal roles and responsibilities, while daughter in turn assumes these. The daughter becomes, in effect, the spouse vis-a-vis the father. The father-daughter relationship becomes something much closer to a spouse-spouse relationship, and the transactions which occur come to reflect this relational change (e.g., father, when he comes home, may recount to his daughter, not to his wife, what a rough day it has been). In such circumstances, sexual transactions will seem less a radical violation and departure, and more a natural extension of other adult-adult spouse roles already being enacted. Further, the daughter, already heavily socialized in a way of being in which she is to take care of others' needs and make them feel better, but not to extend the same beneficence to herself, will be much more likely than the average daughter to accommodate her father in this one further request.

The status which emerges from such a personal history, is one of "obligated caretaker, unentitled to reciprocity". One's place in this world is that of an obligated giver, not a co-entitled giver and receiver. The eligibilities for relationships are more those of a personal servant or nurse than those of a co-equal peer. Having been socialized so heavily in this role, the incest survivor's role repertoire is often limited; roles of friend, peer, and self-defender, while needed, are usually underdeveloped. Finally, the danger is created here of a recapitulation in the next generation of a family pattern conducive to incest: viz., the danger that she will marry her natural complement, a needy, underfunctioning man, eventually become depleted in her efforts to give, and abdicate the role of caretaker to her daughter (Gelinias, 1983).

Therapeutic Interventions: Altering the Obligated Caretaker Status

Consciousness-Raising. What I have been describing will often constitute the reflexively accepted "given" for the incest survivor; it is her way of being in the world and has been hers for so long that it is the unconsciously accepted "only way to be" for her. Thus, an obvious beginning step toward liberation will be to raise her consciousness about what it is she is doing. Therapeutic efforts here would be devoted to bringing to the client's awareness such facts as that she was as a child excessively charged with adult caretaker roles, that this represents a contrast to other children, that she has brought into the present a tendency to adopt caretaker roles, that this represents an "I don't count,

you do" stance vis-a-vis others, that she depletes herself in her efforts to take on the responsibilities of others, that she renders herself prone to exploitation, that her natural complement will be a male who wants to be taken care of, and so forth. These sorts of realities need to be brought to the fore, and perhaps crystallized in the form of a concrete image, e.g., the notion of "caretaker" itself, which can be used over and over as a central problem and theme of the therapy.

Using Caretaker Values to Alter Caretaker Ways of Being. It is a truism that you can only begin where the client is (Driscoll, 1984). You cannot expect to get far by assuming or expecting the client to act on reasons or values or motives that are not hers. Thus, a worthwhile endeavor will be to use existing caretaker values as motivational bases for change. What these are in any given case is a matter to be assessed. But, assuming the usual constellation of reasons, values, and perspectives outlined above, the following represent some usually beneficial lines of therapeutic endeavor for mobilizing existing motivations in the cause of personal liberation.

Caretakers tend usually to be especially sensitive to the needs of children. With those who are or wish to be parents, one can often ask them if they want *their* children to be caretakers—if they want them to be people who neglect themselves and their own happiness in a life of service to others? The only answer I have ever gotten to this line of questioning is "No!" And I have then followed up with remarks to the effect that what we want our children to be reflects *our own deepest values*.

Caretakers often do not *give* one important thing. They do not give others the opportunity *to give to them*, and thereby to be needed and important to them. Their value for giving and their knowledge of the importance of feeling needed can here be evoked to motivate and legitimize their beginning efforts to allow others to give to them.

Caretakers are interested in the welfare and best interests of others. If it can be sensitively brought home to them that their caretaking activities at times *deprive* others of motivations to help themselves and of opportunities to be competent and responsible, this can prove an important reason to change. The message here is along the lines that, in certain circumstances, the *best help is not to help*.

Caretakers are usually permitted to carry on in their caretaking ways with the unquestioned assumption that virtue is on their side. One way of tapping into their value structures to mobilize motivation would be to "poison this well" at a point where clinical judgement indicates that this would not be damaging. For example, a caretaker's value for not being grandiose may be tapped into by showing her the grandiosity of

her stance. "What makes you think that you can support the weight of the entire world on your shoulders? Just who do you think you are, Atlas?", is one possible sort of joking-but-not-really-joking appeal. Another would be to point out to her, in line with the previous paragraphs, that she is at times a "thief", and that what she is robbing are others' motivations, responsibilities, and opportunities for enhancing competence.

Education and Practice in Alternative Role Behaviors. Being a competent caretaker is *part* of being a friend or a lover. It is a value, it is a competence to be preserved. The relational distortion occurs if the relationship is lopsided, that is, if caretaking is engaged in too extensively by one partner toward the other without the reciprocal being enacted enough in the relationship, and without other transactions occurring (e.g., mutual decision making, having fun together, intimate disclosure between equals, lovemaking, etc.) This broader relational territory can be related to the incest survivor/caretaker and, when the motivation seems there, *observation* of others who transact such roles, and *participation* in such activities may be encouraged.

Exploiting Other Entitling Statuses. Finally, a reminder here (cf. p. 300): positive changes in other statuses will help the incest survivor to alter this rather self-negating, servile, caretaker status. If the incest survivor comes to realize that she is, for example, loved, lovable, powerful, innocent of sexual wrongdoing, etc., it will ordinarily become harder for her to see herself as eligible only to stake out the "I don't count—you do" stance inherent in the caretaker role.

SUMMARY

There is considerable explanatory and practical therapeutic value in viewing incest as a degradation. Through incest, a woman's formulation of her own status, of her own position in the scheme of things, is devastatingly diminished. She becomes in her own eyes any or all of the following: (a) a sexually devalued person, (b) a powerless person, (c) a person who has been provoked without redress, (d) an unlovable person, and finally, (e) a person who is obligated to give unremittingly to others but who has no corresponding rights to receive from others or to act in her own best interests. These status assignments render intelligible the classic symptoms of incest survivors (e.g., chronic depression, abysmal self-esteem, rage, powerlessness), provide a sharp focus for therapeutic attack, and heuristically suggest numerous therapeutic interventions. Psychotherapy is here promoted as an accreditation ceremony in which

the central business is the alteration of the incest survivor's formulation of her own status in such a way that her eligibilities are increased, the emotional consequences of her degradation diminished, and her participation in the world in a way which is meaningful and rewarding for her is radically enhanced.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Raymond M. Bergner, Ph.D. is an professor of clinical psychology at Illinois State University, Normal, IL, 61761.

The author wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Drs. Mary Roberts, Laurie Bergner, Richard Driscoll, and Jane Littmann for their very helpful responses to an earlier draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Alberti, R., and Emmons, M. (1974). *Your perfect right: A guide to assertive behavior*. (2nd ed.) San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact.
- Allen, C. V. (1980). *Daddy's girl*. New York: Wyndham.
- Bergner, R. (1982). Hysterical action impersonation and caretaking roles. In K. Davis and T. Mitchell (Eds.), *Advances in Descriptive Psychology* (Vol. 2). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Bergner, R. (1983). Emotions: a conceptual formulation and its clinical implications. In K. Davis and R. Bergner (Eds.), *Advances In Descriptive Psychology*, (Vol. 3). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Bergner, R. (1985). The cover story: a descriptive and practical study of the paranoid personality style. In K. Davis (Ed.), *Advances In Descriptive Psychology*, (Vol. 4). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Driscoll, R. (1984). *Pragmatic psychotherapy*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.
- Ellis, A. (1962). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy*. New York: Lyle Stuart.
- Ellis, A. (1973). *Humanistic psychotherapy*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Farber, A. (1981). Castaneda's Don Juan as psychotherapist. In K. Davis (Ed.) *Advances in Descriptive Psychology*, Vol. 1. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Finkelhor, D. (1979). *Sexually victimized children*. New York: Free Press.
- Forward, S. and Buck, C. (1979). *Betrayal of innocence: Incest and its devastation*. New York: Penguin.
- Garfinkel, H. (1957). Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63, 420-424.
- Geiser, R. (1981). Incest and psychological violence. *International Journal of Family Psychiatry*, 2, 291-300.
- Gelinas, D. (1983). The persisting negative effects of incest. *Psychiatry*, 16, 312-332.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goldfried, M. and Davison, G. (1976). *Clinical behavior therapy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Horney, K. (1945). *Our inner conflicts*. New York: Norton.
- Ossorio, P. (1976). *Clinical topics* (LRI Report No. 11). Whittier, CA and Boulder, CO: Linguistic Research Institute.
- Ossorio, P. (1978). *"What actually happens"*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Rogers, C. (1951). *Client centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Rogers, C. (1980). *A way of being*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Schwartz, W. (1979). Degradation, accreditation, and rites of passage. *Psychiatry*, 42, 138-146.

Seligman, M. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death*. San Francisco: Freeman.