

INCEST: O

Researchers are turning their attention to a subject that has been avoided for centuries. Why? Because it's there — and apparently with more prevalence than most would suspect.

BY JOEL GREENBERG

Now that homosexuality has stepped confidently into the public consciousness, the psychosexual closet holds perhaps just one last bit of dirty laundry: incest. As one of the few sexual acts that remain almost universally condemned, incest is attracting considerable attention from behavioral scientists. And according to preliminary impressions, incest of varying types seems to occur far more often than even many researchers might guess.

Because the subject essentially has been avoided for centuries, ignorance and confusion continue to surround incest — even its definition; strictly defined as sexual intercourse or marriage between two close relatives, incest for research purposes can also include any of a wide range of sexual overtures made to youngsters by adult relatives or older siblings. And because little or no data have been available on the subject, “we cannot know if the incidence of incest is increasing, decreasing, or that we are coming to recognize a new norm,” says psychologist David Baskin of the Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center in Riverdale, N.Y.

What is known is that reports of incest and other sexual abuses of children are rapidly increasing, and the statistics thus far suggest that incest occurs with a frequency that belies society's prohibitive moral stance. “One cannot ignore the fact that the taboo which is supposed to inhibit incestuous behavior from happening does not in reality stop it from happening,” according to Baskin and co-researcher C. Georgia Simari.

In a recent survey of 795 undergraduates at six New England colleges, 19 percent of the women and nine percent of the men reported at least one childhood experience of sexual victimization. “It is interesting to know this is so widespread in a group of ‘normal’ college students,” says study author David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire Family Violence Research Program. He estimates that if the

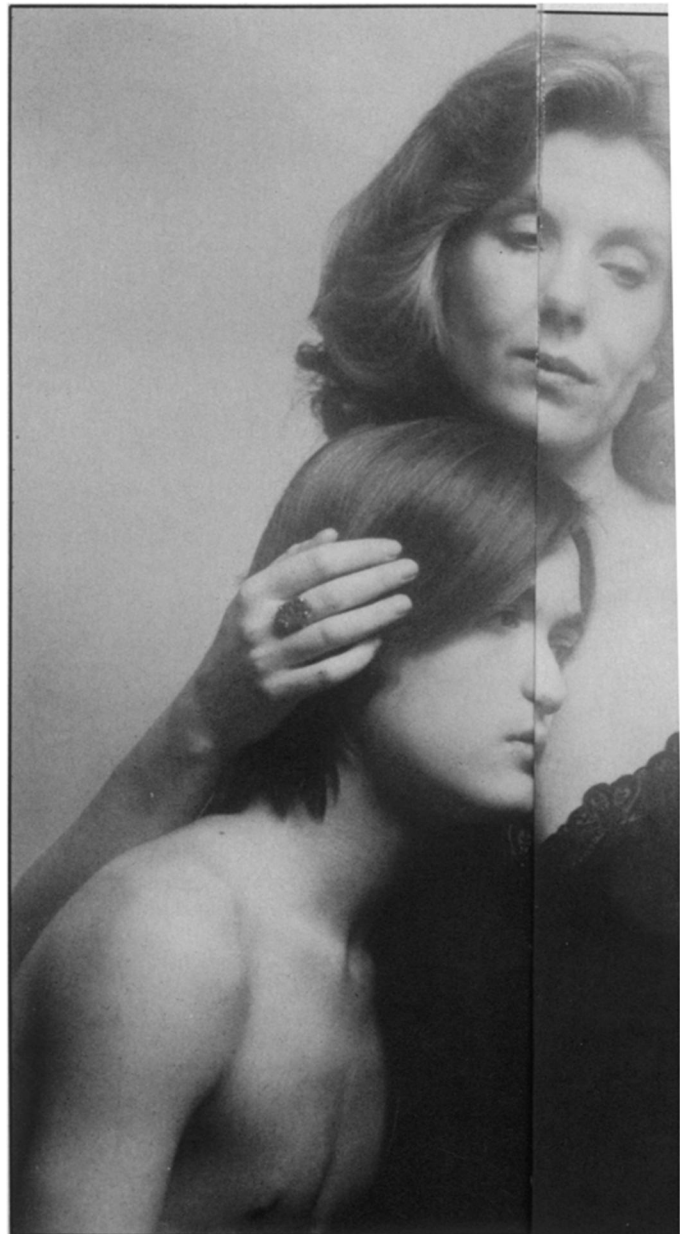
sample were expanded to include non-college students, “I’d expect the rates to be doubled... about 40 percent of all women would have some type of [childhood sexual abuse] experience.”

While “these figures confirm the growing suspicion that sexual victimization of children is very widespread,” Finkelhor says “they also show that it is very much a family problem.” Among the women, 44 percent of the incidents involved family members such as uncles, grandfathers, brothers-in-law, fathers and brothers, 22 percent were within the nuclear family and 6 percent were strictly with fathers or stepfathers. The men's experiences were primarily homosexual and were less likely to involve immediate family members.

“If we were to extrapolate on the basis of this data, something we are [statistically] not entitled to do given the limitations of the sample,” he says, “we would estimate that about 9 percent of all women are sexually victimized by a relative, and about one and a half percent are involved in father-daughter sex.” In Finkelhor's sample, the experiences range from exhibitionism to intercourse, which was “rather infrequent [5 percent of the cases]... in part because it is physiologically difficult with a prepubertal girl and in part because the offenders in most cases are motivated to seek a kind of childlike form of gratification that is not fulfilled by intercourse,” he says. The most frequent act was genital manipulation, which accounted for 40 percent of the reported cases.

Like several other researchers, Finkelhor has found that certain types of families appear more prone than others to childhood sexual abuses. Factors of susceptibility included low income families headed by a stepfather, lack of emotional closeness between mother and daughter and a sexually punitive or repressive mother. Stepfathers were found to be five times more likely than natural fathers to victimize a daughter; girls with stepfathers were also five times more likely to be abused by a friend of the parents. Finkelhor attributes this partially to an attitude among such “friends” that because the child is not the father's real daughter, they need not restrain themselves.

In a study of 151 sexually abused pre-adolescent children — average age seven and a half — all but 17 percent were assaulted by family members, other relatives or close friends; nearly half the incidents took place in the child's own home. But in contrast to the low rate of actual intercourse found by Finkelhor, researchers in this study, at the Children's Hospital National Medical Center in Washington, re-



Films such as *Luna* are one indication of a growing public

port that “56 percent of the cases with female victims... involved the allegation of vaginal intercourse.” This suggests, says chief researcher Neil K. Makstein, that more serious cases of sexual molestation are likely to show up at such pediatric facilities than elsewhere. Like Finkelhor, Makstein also was “surprised” to find that a high percentage (22 percent) of the cases involved abuse of young boys.

Such studies are among the first to attempt to lay the basic statistical groundwork involving the incidence of incest in the United States. However, there has long been curiosity, even fascination, about the

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OUT OF HIDING



of a growing public focus on incest.

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Whether or not many of the perpetrators of incest are "nice," may be open to discussion, but the Justices have profiled some of the typical characters often involved in incest: The father tends to be socially isolated — himself the son of a mother who is either aloof or smothering, and only minimally capable of sustaining warm, loving relationships. He frequently is attracted to and marries a woman of similar characteristics and the marriage deteriorates on both a sexual and nonsexual level. The man then turns to his non-threatening daughter for the missing love and attention, while the passive mother may willingly accept, even encourage, this role reversal with the daughter (in an unconscious effort to obtain the love she never received as a child). These ingredients, combined with pressures at work, alcoholism or other environmental contributors, are relatively common in father-daughter incest, which the Justices and others suspect may be the most common type, although brother-sister incest has been the most often reported.

Data obtained thus far also suggest that incest is often intertwined with — or may later trigger — other behavioral disturbances. Lenore Walker of Colorado Women's College reports that in a study of Denver-area families referred for incest problems, more than half also revealed husband-wife abuse incidents; in a separate study, Walker found that a significant percentage of battered wives had been incest victims as children. Herbert J. Freudenberg of New York City reports that many youngsters involved in prostitution and pornography had been incest victims at home. Many such children, he says, push these incidents deep into the unconscious by "blocking them out" while they are happening and later denying or forgetting them.

In a study of 18 female psychiatric outpatients, Stanford University psychiatrist Alvin Rosenfeld found that one-third said they had experienced incest as youngsters. Since many patients are reluctant to volunteer such information (only one in this study told of her incestual experience without prompting), Rosenfeld says his findings may reflect a truer picture of incest occurrence — one that is considerably higher than estimates from routine clinical statistics. "Even if half of the reports were false, there would still be an unusually high incidence (17 percent)," he reports in *THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY* (Vol. 136, No. 6). And in a study of 22 psychiatric inpatients, psychiatrist Robert K. Davies of Fair Oaks Hospital in Summit, N.J., found that 17 had abnormal

electroencephalograph measures of brainwave activities. He offers that "neuropsychiatric handicaps" may "create a vulnerability" to incest and other types of abuse (SN: 10/13/79, p. 244).

Just why the thought of incest has horrified most societies throughout history is a matter of interpretation. Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss suggested that marriage was established in primitive societies as a system of exchange. In this view, the incest taboo "guarantees the exchange of women," social worker Kate Rist of Walnut Creek, Calif., writes in the *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ORTHOPSYCHIATRY* (Volume 49, No. 4). "The incest taboo also encourages the child's concept of self as an individual separate from the family," says Rist. This meshes with the Freudian/analytic concept of a sexual, Oedipal instinct present between the child and the parent of the opposite sex. Contemporary clinicians have updated this concept somewhat and added some practical implications, notes Rist: "If these [incestuous] bonds are not closely regulated, overstimulation (or 'smothering') may occur. In our culture, this results in neurotic conflict or in a lack of separation from the family, both of which tend to produce conditions unacceptable to society: the individual unable to form attachments is less likely to procreate; the individual unable to separate from the family is less likely to form an attachment to a mate."

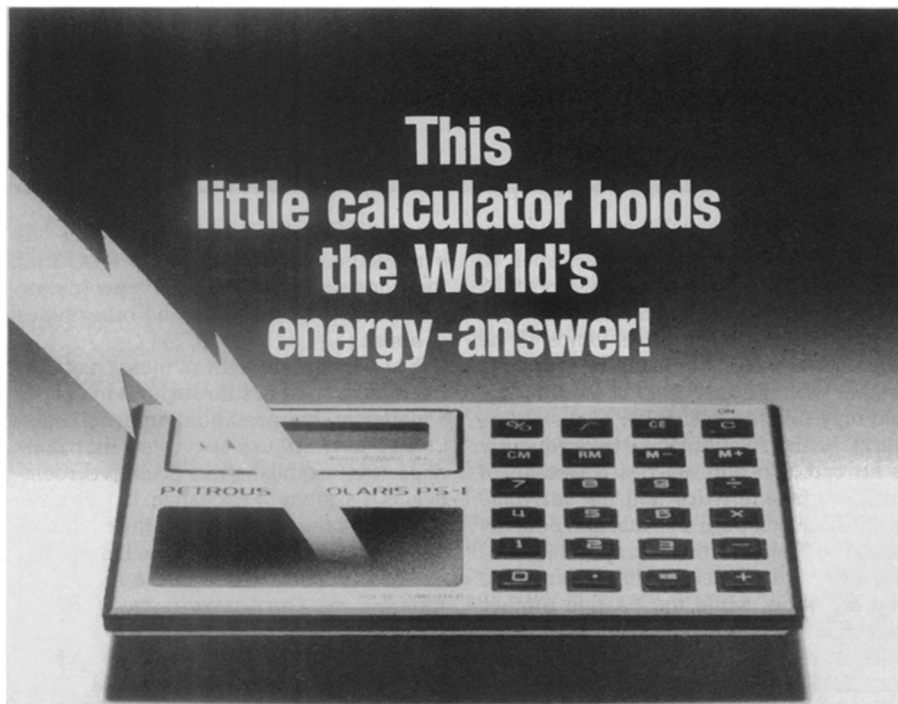
The biological view argues that inbreeding substantially increases the chances that a physically or mentally defective child will be born. "The many deleterious effects of inbreeding, such as albinism and dwarfism, are so dramatic that the connection between incest and abnormality may have been noticed by primitive man, leading to the development of an incest taboo," Rist says. But scientific evidence is conflicting, and many dispute the contention that an incestuous union fosters mutations significantly more often than would otherwise occur.

Incest themes have cropped up historically in literature, the arts and mythology — the Oedipus myth being the prime example. Rist hypothesizes that "perhaps such fictionalization of forbidden practice allows the audience to experience vicariously their incestuous desire. ..." Whatever the reasons, the existence of a taboo at all suggests that "there is a strong tendency, perhaps with the force of an instinctual drive, to perform that activity," Rist says. "So if we assume there is an incest taboo, it follows that there are incestual drives."

There are those who believe that an in-

"taboo" of incest — or, rather, the breaking of that taboo. Even today, there remains a type of sideshow interest in the subject among the public.

"Society doesn't want to see how very ordinary conditions can contribute to something so abhorrent," University of Texas psychologist Rita Justice said in a recent interview. "That's a comforting thought to believe there's something else wrong. We don't want to believe that nice people do this," says Justice, who along with her husband, Blair Justice, recently published the book *The Broken Taboo* (see p. 223).



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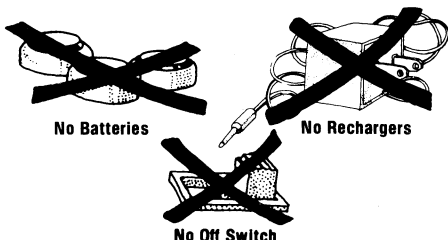
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cestual drive may not only exist, but that its fulfillment may not always produce negative results. Amherst College English professor and social critic Benjamin DeMott goes as far as identifying a "movement to weaken the incest taboo" in an essay in the March *PSYCHOLOGY TODAY* headlined "The Pro-Incest Lobby." While it may be premature to conclude that such a "movement" exists, at least the seeds of neutrality are evident among several of those studying incest.

Various researchers have reported that boys do not appear to exhibit as many ill effects as girls do following an incestual experience; others suggest that some percentage of girls may not be adversely affected. "Individuals who have not experienced negative effects are never filtered through a social system in order for statistics to be documented," says Baskin. Particularly in cases of brother-sister incest, or where no other physical abuse or societal punishment is involved, he says, "it could very well be harmless... it depends on what it's like for the child." But, he concedes, "we don't see those cases."

Depending on the environmental situation, "incest [can have] an entirely different meaning for a child [than what an adult might expect]," says Brian Stabler of the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. "They [children] may not see it as aberrant at all — In western North Carolina, incest is almost a way of life; we have to deal very gingerly with some of these families." Joseph D. LaBarbera of Vanderbilt University's Division of Child Psychiatry says that although some research indicates that short-term effects of guilt and depression and long-term effects, such as sexual problems, may be associated with incest, "some research is unable to uncover any adverse effects... It is only conjecture to attribute adulthood difficulties to incest. ... The literature is weak — the answers simply are not there."

It is on this question of "harm" that the incest-related ideological lines are drawn most sharply. Finkelhor insists that existing data are strong enough to show a link between incest and later problems, particularly drug use and prostitution. But he adds, "whether or not it [incest] causes harm — and I believe it does — I think sex between adults and children is wrong, no matter what the values. What goes on between consenting adults is between them, but a child doesn't have the knowledge or ability to consent."

Of those who suggest incest may not be harmful, DeMott writes: "All that we can know with certainty, I think, is that shock and outrage are not the appropriate responses to many in the new abolitionist [of the incest taboo] camp. In their tormented defiance, their saddening isolation, these voices cry out the loudest for pity."

Adds Finkelhor: "I think 99 percent of the men who commit incest know it's wrong, and they're no more deserving of empathy than bank robbers." □