

Tell It Like It Is

Incest Disclosure and Women of Colour

BY SMITA VIR TYAGI

Les rôles de la culture et de la famille sont examinés dans cette question: Quelles sont les conditions qui font que les femmes de couleur ont de la difficulté à révéler l'inceste? Pour y répondre, un cadre théorique socio-culturel est appliqué et les facteurs communautaires, individuels, familiaux, culturels et sociaux en rapport avec la révélation de l'inceste, sont discutés ici

Although there is a great deal of theoretical and empirical writing on incest most of it is based on research on White North American women. This body of knowledge assumes a homogeneity of experience for all women who have experienced incest including women of color, Native women, poor or disadvantaged women many of whom have different social and cultural dimensions to their lived experience. These are salient and significant factors that need to be considered in understanding the process of disclosure of incest for women of colour. Some writers have pointed out that the abuse of children should always be understood within the constructs of the culture in which it is being studied and have warned against the unilateral transfer of knowledge and assumptions from one culture to another (Finklehor and Korbin; Segal).

It has been contended that a feminist analysis of male supremacy and female oppression is the best and perhaps only way to understanding the phenomenon of incest in any culture and the issues that facilitate or prevent its disclosure (Herman 3). Going one step further, Black Feminist writers have argued that stereotyping, racism, and sexism are issues that need to be incorporated into any understanding of sexual abuse in women of colour (hooks; Wilson). They observe that incest like other forms of sexual violence, should be understood within the broader historical oppression of Blacks for example, and the racist construction of Black people in a White society.

While these approaches provide a valid and valuable context within which to understand the violence of incest against women of colour, a broader framework is needed that incorporates the multi-layered socio-cultural dimensions of incest and the conditions that prevent its disclosure. Obikeze's three-dimensional analytic framework, originally used to examine child physical abuse and neglect, is one that can be used to understand incest disclosure in women of colour. The framework describes abuse at three operational levels—the global, the cultural, the individual. Obikeze has expanded the

framework to include a dimension named Community-in-Context to represent a salient aspect of immigrant and refugee experiences in a dominant culture. It is proposed that this framework, within a feminist paradigm, provides a useful method for understanding incest in communities of colour as well as strategies that may be adopted to deal with it. Particular attention is paid to cultural variables in the analysis supported by observations of women of colour who are incest survivors.

I conducted twelve in-depth interviews with women of colour who discussed their experiences of disclosure, coping, helpseeking. Some of their views are reported in this paper.

Global level

In Obikeze's framework at a global level, child sexual abuse is considered a function of the socioeconomic/power structure of society which occurs in spite of the widespread cultural taboos against incest (Durkheim; Westermarck). It is a function of gender relations in patriarchy that inter- and intra-familial sexual abuse of girls is not considered as violating common norms of humanity (see, for example, Coomaraswamy). The oppressive nature of patriarchy, the power it assumes over women and children, provides the license with which to exploit them sexually and is proposed as a basis for contextualizing incest at a broader social level. This power is seen to be the force that limits the capacity of women and children to disclose, ask for help, or escape by imposing social sanctions, brute force, and even death. Consequently, at this level, solutions are advocated that lie in the radical transformation of society.

Cultural level

At the cultural level prevailing attitudes towards girls, female sexuality, and childrearing are factors that create conditions that prevent incest disclosure. These conditions

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include pervasive endemic cultural attitudes and beliefs that do not value girl children, promote sexual purity, place lesser importance on the roles of girls and women (Lau), and treat girls and women as having no agency (Karlekar). They also include externalization of negative behaviors such as "It doesn't happen in our community," hypocrisy, saving face (Okamura, Heras and Wong-Kerberg), and fear of further ostracization from the dominant culture (Abney and Priest). One survivor Melaine, a 24-year-old Latin American, states that

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I couldn't tell anybody because I didn't have anybody to tell... and the great reason not to tell was to think of the scandal. Disclosing this thing would be like unleashing a tornado.

Victim blaming ("She's only doing this to break up the family"), cultural taboos against discussing sexual matters, and silencing of victims (by force, shaming, shunning, minimizing, inaction on victim's behalf, or advocating for the perpetrator) are responsible for creating a milieu within which a

culture shrouds the perpetration of incest. Another survivor Geeta, a 21-year-old South Asian, West Indian, comments:

According to them things like this don't happen to our communities and if it does it is totally the girl's fault because she is probably doing some thing wrong with some man that's why she is saying the things she does. I was ashamed, I never wanted anybody to know what was happening 'cause I thought they wouldn't understand that it is not my fault and I did something to deserve it ... like in our community... everyone talks and everyone knows each other and the story gets around... they watch your every move.

Cultural attitudes towards children such as viewing them as property, children's obedience, respect for elders at all costs (Wilson) and filial piety are examples of culture-specific attitudes and beliefs that create conditions which legitimize the sexual abuse of girls and women. These conditions provide perpetrators social and cultural invisibility and help lower their inhibitions in perpetrating incest within families. Lana a 24-year-old Chinese survivor observes that:

It's like you don't talk about family business to people outside, specially like if they are white. They are not going to understand.... You keep the family stuff hush, hush. Like you don't go bother other people with your

personal business. That was the other thing too.... It's a bother... to other people.... The concept of going outside of the family to ask for help was really not existent when I was growing up. It was just like the whole being brought up like there its no one else's business, the embarrassment or shame...

As Long has pointed out, the impact of culture upon interfamilial abuse is significant as it occurs within a context of community standards with regard to what is acceptable, unacceptable by way of impulse control, punishment, or retaliation. Consistent with this unit of analysis, proposed strategies for changes are community education, consciousness raising, attitudinal shifts in community, acceptance of survivors, shifting social responsibility to perpetrators, and culture change in values and dogmas.

Community-in-context

This is a dimension that has been added by this author to help understand the workings of sub-cultures which create conditions where disclosure of incest cannot occur. Communities of colour, particularly new immigrants and refugees, have subcultures that operate differently from the dominant culture, particularly if they are struggling to survive in a hostile or racist host environment. In order to deal with stresses inherent in discontinuity and change communities turn naturally to known, familiar values, behaviours, and beliefs (Lau). Many turn further inwards to their sense of ethnic identity and accompanying values in an effort to enhance community belongingness. To do so however, it is axiomatic that (a) the subculture's own cultural values be constructed as good and therefore worthy of preservation; (b) problems, dissonant ideas be externalized as a disruptive, coming from the outside, i.e. the host-culture; (c) a mythology be created that the values from the source (the motherland, country of origin) are the standard and impervious to change; (d) the only method of ethnic identity preservation is to preserve that standard; and (e) these positions be legitimized and endorsed by community leadership. This process creates the psychological foundation upon which entire communities can rest their denial of incest. Values from the subculture can be invoked to protect the perpetrator and shame the victim through community chastization. The honour of the community can be employed to silence victims, externalize blame, and preserve a sense of community self even in the face of damning evidence of wrongdoing. This effectively closes the door to disclosure by those who have been violated by incest.

Salli, 22 years old, a survivor of mixed race, states:

I think in order to fight it we need to start talking on a personal level about how oppression has affected us and made us abuse... made us have the hatred and insanity

inside ourselves, that can push us to abuse, you know. That's a lot of dirty laundry that doesn't get talked about you know. But I think we need to start being less concerned about putting on a good face to the public and showing that we're normal... just like white people, and taking care of our own stuff even if it gets really complicated to deal with.

Survival in a hostile dominant culture requires that communities protect themselves from attack. To do so, social and psychological boundaries are drawn such that problems and conflicts stay within the community thus reducing the exposure to risk, ridicule, and racism. Abney and Priest make the point that in many African Americans there is the attitude of "see no evil and hear no evil," coupled with the belief that acknowledging child sexual abuse would be used in some damnable way to further exclude them from the American mainstream. This is supported by Okamura *et al.*'s observations that in an oppressive dominant culture Asians, like other people of colour, fear further rejection, stereotyping, and discrimination in acknowledging child sexual abuse and strive to "save face" not only in their own communities, but in the larger social order. Racism in the justice system and mental health system also contributes to creating conditions for community inaction. The knowledge that the ramifications for men of colour are severe, that exposure of incest may result in further stereotyping, or that the system will not treat either victims or perpetrators fairly, keeps incest within communities borders. For immigrant and refugee communities who are already struggling with establishing a place in the new social order, these are issues that can shut down disclosures and even discourse on incest.

Community-in-context and women

Within community-in-context the positions and roles of women in communities of colour is one that also creates difficulties of disclosure for incest survivors. Women often work in low-paid jobs, they may live in a marital relationship characterized by violence, and face survival pressures that are tremendous (Ratna and Wheeler). Children's disclosures of incest may mean that women have to take on perpetrators who may hold emotional, social, physical, and financial control over their lives. They may feel that the punitive consequences for themselves and their children far outweigh any benefit to the child in question. Janine, a 35-year-old Black West Indian survivor reflects that,

You know you're sort of divided, like oh, I have to be loyal to my parents but yet he's doing something wrong but you can't go to somebody because you are not sure they will believe you because it's family... and then you know they will be even worse so you might as well be quiet and carry

on and every body will be happy... Then I have my mom ... she would be upset ... everyone will come to know ... my dad, him to have that shame and then if my dad divorces my mom? She was having a hard time with five kids so I thought ... well you know I guess subconsciously is like well who is gonna look after us you know if he is not there? I guess I just grew up very quiet and, you know into myself, and I never really tell anybody because, you know, what do you do?

Furthermore, women as mothers may feel powerless to take action or may themselves have internalized oppressive, sexist cultural messages that perpetuate the sexual abuse of girls and women. They may also be manipulated by the perpetrator. As Finklehor points out, often it is not only children who are groomed for sexual abuse by perpetrators with a sexual interest in children, but partners are also targeted such that they become less effective as external inhibitors to sexually abusive acts. As a result of various circumstances women may choose minimization, fatalism, even benign neglect, as a method of dealing with incest disclosures in their families.

The following strategies are proposed for dealing with some of the issues raised at this level. Community education through consciousness-raising, initiatives by credible community leaders to discuss these issues, profiling of sexual abuse issues in ethnic language media, community outreach to young people, women, and survivors, support services for survivors within ethno-racial and mainstream services, challenges to sexist thinking by women writers, advocates, academics, and activists within diverse communities.

Individual level

At the individual level family values, religious beliefs, low parental tolerance thresholds for children's needs, and family discord are seen to play a role in creating conditions that prevent incest disclosure. In many ethno-cultural communities the notion of interdependence, extended family, and harmonious relationships are highly valued as are the roles of the head of the family (father, grandfather) and adherence to religious customs (Lau). Revealing incest not only shames the community but also splits open the family, the central organizing principle in a community's social order. Victims may find themselves under tremendous pressure from families to recant their disclosures in order to prevent the family from breaking up. The unstated message to victims is

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that the costs to the victim are secondary to those incurred by the family (such as loss of standing, respect, and "good" family name).

At the individual level, attitudes and beliefs in relation to girls or women's sexuality are often subordinated to reflect the dominant values of the subculture which further perpetuates conditions that prevent incest disclosure. Chastity, held in high esteem by many cultures and its violation, holds that women become "unclean" through sexual transgression *even* when they have been violated by others (Lau). For example, a woman raped by her Uncle is pressured not to tell anyone she is not a virgin because it might ruin her chances of a good marriage. In some instances abuse such as incest or rape is almost regarded as a man's right if sexual gratification is not forthcoming by any other means (Wilson 123). For example one survivor, Mehrunissa, a 42-year-old Middle Eastern woman notes that

I knew in my community . . . in my culture, in traditional society if a girl loses her virginity and then she gets into a traditional marriage there would be a scandal.

Also parents have power over their children and, in the case of incest, can use this power to compel children to meet their own needs (Herman). Unquestioning obedience to adults, the value of virginity for girls, shame for victims, social mores that construct sex as a taboo subject are all factors that work within the family to prevent incest disclosure (Fontes; Comas-Diaz). Family interactions in authoritarian households encourage female children to subsume their own needs in order to meet the needs of the males in the family (Edwards and Alexander). Suffering in silence, many female children accept their "fate" and have a sense of obligation to the family (Okamura *et al.*). Filial piety (Tang and Davis; Wong) and respect for elders at all costs (Abney and Priest) also contribute to creating conditions under which incest disclosure cannot occur. Although not a focus of this article, the perpetrator, his/her pathology, psychological make-up, and his/her idiosyncratic choice of abuse within the family also fall into this unit of analysis. At this level, proposed strategies are individual in nature, focused on the individual survivors (therapy, self-help groups, empowerment of women, disclosure to authorities etc.), family therapy for the survivor's family, and/or treatment for the perpetrator.

Research on cultural factors in incest disclosure

The role of cultural and systemic factors in non-disclosure of incest has been supported by various studies. Shame in disclosing and the resulting bad reputation acquired by family and community, loyalty to family members (Gunawan), the presence of extended family in the household (Herrerias; Mindel), respect for male authority

(Derezotes and Snowden), and a tradition of silence among women and children (Levy) have been found to be barriers in sexual abuse disclosure in many communities of colour. Language difficulties for non-English speaking women, finding themselves alone in the criminal justice system, community distrust of outsiders, and the fact that support from their own cultural groups is either slow in coming or non-existent, problems with police, racism, lack of trust in institutional agencies, and preference for problem-solving within a network of family and friends have also been found to be obstacles to disclosure for women of colour (Danica Women's Project).

Conclusion

In asking the question "What conditions exist to prevent women of colour from making disclosures of incest?" women identify barriers at different levels. Broader social systems, cultural values, and family values—all of which work together in ways that create conditions that not only silence women's disclosures of incest but support community inaction—constitute important sites for transformation. Respecting cultural values and challenging them at the same time are not mutually exclusive events. In fact, as survivors have pointed out, it can and must be done if a culture is to grow, change, and ultimately develop new values systems that account for, and protect, all the vulnerable members of that culture. How it will happen will be determined by each community and each culture somewhat differently, but there is no doubt that it must begin. Women of colour survivors, researchers, clinicians, academics, writers, and women's advocates need to work together in making sure that this process of transformation will occur in ways that empowers not just women of colour but *all* women.


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