The Broken Covenant: Incest in the Latino Family

Yvette G. Flores-Ortiz

Introduction

"It doesn't get any easier", she said, after four years of psychotherapy, after so many sessions we had both stopped counting. The young woman sitting across from me had requested therapy initially due to academic problems. Eventually, gradually, and painfully, her story emerged. She had been sexually abused since childhood, first by her father, then by her brothers. Raped, sodomized, forced into unspeakable acts, she had learned to survive through dissociation, blunting of affect, and chronic depression. Suicidal since early childhood, she had survived largely through her creativity. Hiding in a closet, literally and figuratively, she had written poems in her head, and painted pictures in her mind, which would emerge during the course of therapy.

In-cest
is a terrible
word.

You can't get more in
than In-cest

It comes from the inside
Out
Slides through the gap
between your front teeth,
no matter how small

Incest is never
a whisper

It screams
Claims flesh

You can see it
just as clear as a lava snake
slithering into the sea
Steam, boiling
Ignited rock, cold rock
Breaking, bursting
Blasting, falling
It's all me.

I am In-cest.
Touch me.....[1]

This paper offers an analysis of father-daughter[2] incest in Latino families and addresses the psychological sequelae of such abuse. While there is a significant amount of research and clinical information on this subject, there is a paucity of data about Latina incest survivors.

Consequently, this paper could only be written through the words and stories of survivors because it is their voice that can best describe the trauma of incest. Thus I rely extensively on clinical data from my own psychotherapy practice and the narratives generated by participants in a qualitative study of the effects of violence on Latinas (Flores-Ortiz, 1997).

Definition

The legal definition of incest refers to acts of sexual intercourse within prohibited relationships: a father and his child, a man with a woman who is his sister or half-sister, mother or grandmother, and a woman over the age of 16 with a man who is her father, brother or half-brother, son or grandfather, or with her daughter. In the first instance, the female is seen more clearly as a victim of sexual aggression. In the second, she is viewed as an active agent of inappropriate and legally prohibited sexual acts.

The legal definition guides the prosecution of sexual abuse in the family, and distinguishes these acts from other acts of sexual violence against minors by non-family members (sexual abuse,

rape, molestation) or against adult non-relations.

This definition, however, does not address a fundamental characteristic of father-daughter incest, unlike abuse by a stranger or acquaintance, incest violates an ongoing bond of trust between a child and a caretaker. It is precisely the violation of this bond of trust that can have the most devastating psychological consequences.

"If you cannot trust your father, who is supposed to protect and care for you, who can you trust?" (Amelia, age 12).

Furthermore, incest combines all the forms of abuse that can happen to a child. It contains the violence of physical abuse, the self-esteem consequences of emotional abuse, and often the actual or perceived abandonment of the non-violating parent. In addition, children in incestuous families must deal with the chaos and confusion generated by dysfunctional patterns of relating, and the destructive efforts of the adults who try to create an illusion of normalcy to maintain the secret.

Prevalence

Child abuse in general is largely under-reported. Typically the crime is detected by school or health personnel who routinely come in contact with children. Family members rarely report intra-family abuse, and children often maintain the secret out of loyalty to the family, or out of fear that the abuser will be removed from the home. Threat of withdrawal of love by the abusing parent is usually coercion enough to insure secrecy.

Incest, more so than physical abuse, is a hidden crime. Often there are no physical traces of its occurrence; thus it is more difficult to determine its prevalence rates.

No specific figures on the prevalence of incest among Latinos are available since such data do not specify ethnicity or subsumes Latinos under the "white" racial category. Moreover, in 1984 "Hispanic" children were 12% of all reported cases of physical abuse even though they constituted only 9.7% of the total number of children in the U.S. Thus Hispanic children were over-

represented by about a fifth in the official child abuse statistics (Straus and Gelles 1989).

Incidence

Overall incidence of child abuse figures are conflicting. Retrospective studies of adult women produce rates of abuse prior to age 18 ranging from 28% (Finkelhor et al. 1990) to 45% (Wyatt 1985). The rate for victimization of male children ranged from 3% (Kercher and McShane 1984) to 16% (Finkelhor et al. 1990). The incidence rates for Latinas are even more difficult to ascertain since most studies do not specify the ethnicity of their samples or completely exclude Latinas (Mennen 1994).

Furthermore, the available research is contradictory. Some studies (Kercher and McShane 1984) found higher rates of sexual abuse among Latinas in Texas. Sorensen and Telles (1991), however, found lower rates for Latinas in their Los Angeles catchment area study. Some studies find a difference in the age of first victimization across ethnic groups.

While there is no definitive evidence to suggest a higher rate of incest in Latino families when compared to other ethnic groups, Rao et al. (1992) found that male and female Latinos tended to be abused by a male relative more often than African American or Anglo children.

These figures must be taken with caution, however, given the large under-reporting of incest, along with the tendency of professionals to recognize and report abuse involving ethnic minority or lower income children more often than when European American or middle class children are victimized (Hampton and Newberger 1985).

Incest within the context of family violence

Battering is the most frequently occurring violent crime in this country (Straus and Gelles 1989). Moreover, several researchers have found a correlation between wife battering and child abuse (Finkelhor 1979 and 1990, Herman 1982, Straus and Gelles 1989).

Furthermore, incest tends to occur in families that are physi-

cally abusive. Truesdall, McNeil and Deschner (1986) found that about 75% of the wives of men who sexually abused their children reported at least one incident of physical attack; the same percentage reported psychological abuse. A quarter of the women reported abuse that was life-threatening.

While specific figures on the prevalence and incidence of incest among Latinos are not available, there is evidence that family violence is a major problem.

In their study of violence in American families, Straus and his colleagues (1989) derived population estimates based on 8,145 families. While their "Hispanic" findings are compromised by the absence of national origin indicators, the results of their survey of 711 Latino families found an extremely high incidence of family violence. Almost 1 out of 8 Latino husbands physically assaulted their partner; 7 out every 100 Latinas were assaulted in a severe and potentially lethal way (being kicked, punched, bitten or choked). Latinas assaulted their partners at high rates, but generally in less severe ways and most often in response to or in defense of spousal assaults.

The Straus et al. (1989) survey did not obtain information on incest, but it inquired about acts universally regarded as abusive. Their data indicated that 4.8 per 100 Latino children were kicked, bitten, punched, beat up, scalded, or attacked with weapons. Applying this rate to the 6.1 million Hispanic children living in the U.S. at the time of the survey (1985), the authors concluded that at least 288,000 Latino children were severely assaulted by their parents.

Nearly 14 out of every 100 Latino children were hit with an object (such as a belt or stick). Using the same ratio, the authors concluded that over 804,000 Latino children were abused in this manner (Straus and Gelles 1989).

Moreover, while it is generally assumed that physical punishment decreases as the children grow, the Straus study found that even in the late teens 1 out of 5 Hispanic children in the sample were being hit by their parents. Furthermore, forty percent of the adult respondents indicated they had been hit by their mother when they were about 13, and 28% reported having been

hit by their father at that age. Clearly, the data suggest a multigenerational pattern of use of corporal punishment that can become abusive.

Sorensen and Telles' (1991) study of Latinos in Los Angeles, California found much lower rates of child abuse when compared to whites, as well as differences in rates of family violence between U.S. born Latinos and Mexican born immigrants.

The absence of more precise demographic indicators in the Straus and Gelles (1990) study precludes an analysis of the role of generational level or immigration status on patterns of abuse in their sample. However, their findings suggest that the role of physical punishment as a method of childrearing is central to the understanding of child abuse and family violence. It may be that among Latinos family violence is not just a problem of men who are out of control. Instead "It is built into the family system and the society as it is presently constituted" (Straus and Smith 1989, 465).

Moreover, because the same threats, shame, and resulting secrecy shrouds violence against wives as surrounds incest, both are under-reported.

> *When angry because I had done something wrong, or dumb, he would begin by yelling. If I stood very still and listened, he might run out of steam. If I were to even budge, he would begin to throw things, sometimes at me. If I cried, he would grab me and push me against the wall. All the time he would be telling me that I was making him crazy, that it was my fault he lost control. Sometimes, he would push me so hard against the wall I couldn't breathe. A few times I lost consciousness. Eventually, I think, the beatings, my fear began to arouse him. It wasn't long before he would beat me and then rape me. My mother had seen him batter me. She would plead my case, she would cry. She never saw the rapes and other violations. By then, I had learned not to cry, not to whimper, not to speak."* (Ana, age 24, sexually abused since age 13).

Understanding the Unspeakable: Why Incest Occurs

A number of structural factors are identified as contributing to high rates of family violence: economic disparity, under-education, and unemployment (Straus and Gelles 1989). Incest is associated with these factors along with problems and conditions that cross class and racial boundaries: alcoholism and drug abuse, social stress, reduced social supports, and social isolation.

Yet, incest occurs among families that do not face those structural factors. Thus, intrafamily sexual abuse also must be understood with consideration to individual psychological characteristics that potentiate such violence (Flores-Ortiz 1993, 1994, Walker 1979).

At the core of all violence are social conditions of inequality based on race, ethnicity, social class, sexualities, ability, and geder which promote the development of unfair interpersonal relatioships. Unjust social structures create imbalanced systems of relatedness where the more powerful feel entitled to dominate.Within this context, the dominated are isolated, rendered powerless, and silenced. As such, they are more vulnerable to victimization (Flores-Ortiz 1993).

At the core of violence also lies the perpetrator's need for power and control over another. Through his violence and abuse, the male perpetrator gains control over the victim in order to feel competent, capable, powerful. Without an internal sense of agency, the abuser externalizes blame and responsibility, holding the victim accountable for her victimization (Martin 1976, Walker 1979).

Feminist scholars argue that the root of all violence against women is the patriarchal empowerment of men, the privatization of family life, and the creation of systems and values rooted in patriarchy which objectify women and dehumanize men (Butler 1978, Flores-Ortiz 1993, 1995, 1996, Herman 1992).

Within the context of patriarchy a man's home is his castle impervious to outside influence or interference, wherein all types of violations can occur in secret (Butler 1978). Incest persists because it is a crime easily ignored and dismissed. As Straus and Gelles (1989) argue, society would rather focus on the 85% of

families that do not have serious problems with violence, than on the 15% that do. Moreover, social institutions often patently ignore the terror that occurs within the presumed safety of the home.

Incestuous families

Incestuous families, as dysfunctional families in general, are characterized by rigid and hierarchical gender roles that insure male supremacy and over-privileging of male children. Likewise, these families typically have diffuse boundaries, unclear and indirect patterns of communication. Such families create a climate of fear wherein women and children have no voice. Much of what happens in these families, however, is normalized and hidden under a mask of culture; that is, secrecy is labeled good behavior, behavioral compliance motivated by terror is considered respect, and silent suffering of the abuse is reframed as loyalty (Flores-Ortiz 1993, 1995).

In most families where paternal incest occurs, the caste system of the nuclear family is rigidly enforced. Herman's (1982) study found that the father's role as breadwinner was honored with almost ritual solemnity, while the women and children had little worth. Incest perpetrators, like male batterers, exercise total control over the lives of their wives and daughters. The women often are virtually confined to the house as prisoners, presumably to protect them from an unsafe world. Women's sexuality and their presumed lack of control over it, are viewed as necessitating strong measures of protection and control. Thus, the women themselves are held responsible for the isolation imposed on them. Likewise, the incestuous men often enlist the boys in the family as "deputies in the policing role" (Herman 1982, 150).

"My brothers were sent everywhere with me, dad said it was a cultural thing, I needed chaperones. My brothers were supposed to report who I had talked to or seen, if I had behaved "provocatively". I never understood what that meant. I felt I wasn't trusted by my family. In time, one of my brothers told me he knew I was my 'father's mistress', and that he was going to take me too. I was 11 years old..." Sofia,

age 27.

The social isolation of women and children ensures the maintenance of the secret and the continuation of the abuse as there is no one outside the family to help or serve as resource.

In addition to social isolation, diffuse boundaries, physical violence and a rigid family organization, incestuous families are characterized by a climate of fear.

Battered women and physically and sexually abused children have been likened to survivors of state terror and prisoners of war. The process of victimization attempts to rob the individual of her will, her sense of self, her ability to control even basic physical functions. The victims' thoughts and behaviors are subject to the control of the more powerful perpetrator (Herman 1992).

Mothers of incest survivors usually are depicted in the psychological literature as unwilling co-conspirators. But such an analysis fails to consider that the mothers often are victims of spousal abuse, or were victimized in their childhood and are psychologically unable to protect their children. The women, fearful of the partner or economically dependent on him, sometimes will not see the signs of incest in order to avoid having to confront the pain and consequences of the crime.

Moreover, as Stark and Flitcraft (1988) have indicated, women who fail to protect their children and control the perpetrator are then blamed for ***his*** crimes. They are labeled "bad mothers" and face the possibility of losing custody of their child. Rarely do social systems examine whether the woman herself is abused, or consider the social implications of blaming women for the crimes committed by men.

Within incestuous families, women may be unable to protect their children. Furthermore, central to the maintenance of an incestuous relationship is the perpetrator's "brainwashing" of the victim that she is special, loved, desired and privileged by being chosen for this "special relationship". With time, seduction becomes coercion. The child is treated as a sexual replacement for the wife/mother and is obligated to perform sexually for the father. In his mind, however, she is the seductress (regardless of her age), "she asked for it, she wore provocative clothing, she needed teaching". Ultimately, the incestuous perpetrator convinces his victim that she is to blame.

Children crave attention and affirmation from the parents. The incestuous perpetrator violates the bond of trust and the ethical obligation to care, nurture and provide for the offspring. Instead, the perpetrator uses the child to satisfy his emotional, psychological, and sexual deficits. The objectification of the child, her parentification, is then excused and perversely described as an act of love. Depending on the age of onset, the child may come to believe that sexual violation is in fact love.

In the climate of fear created by the perpetrator and supported by social institutions, women and children suffer their violations silently, or turn against one another[4]. In these families nuclear and extended family members may collude in the maintenance of the abuse as love is confused with sex, loyalty with obligation, and respect with silent endurance of violations.

Latino family dynamics

It is unknown whether incestuous Latino families differ significantly from other abusive families in terms of their structure and organization. The structural factors that potentiate abuse are more frequent and serious among Latinos. Additional stressors include migration and acculturative stress, and the insidious impact of racism and discrimination which can result in powerful barriers to upward mobility and in feelings of insecurity, shame, and rage. Ultimately, the rage can be externalized against intimates (Flores-Ortiz 1993, 1996).

Among Latino families adverse socio-economic conditions and a legacy of social victimization often correlate with the victimization of children and women. Straus and Smith (1989) found that Latino families with low income, or characterized by a husband with a low status occupation or who was unemployed, had the highest rates of both child and spousal abuse. Clearly these structural barriers facilitate the development of unjust patterns of relationship, which, within a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal

context, set the stage for the male to vent his oppression on those who have less power than he, his partner and children.

However, it is not clear what role, if any, generational level, history of migration, or acculturative stress play in the incidence and prevalence of incest among Latinos.

Elsewhere (Flores-Ortiz 1993, Flores-Ortiz, Esteban and Carrillo 1994) I have described dysfunctional patterns in physically abusive Latino families. These include: cultural freezing, parentification of the children, indirect or intrusive patterns of communication and intergenerational problems.

In addition to these characteristics, clinical data with incestuous Latino families suggest a multigenerational history of abuse with a concomitant distortion of cultural values and ideals and a perversion of the meaning of loyalty and respect.

Incestuous Latino families often confuse dysfunction with cultural patterns or values. *Familismo*, becomes a rigidified code of behavioral expectations, distorted to insure compliance, secrecy, and submission under the guise of loyalty and respect to parental authority. For example, the perpetrator exercises absolute control of his family by hiding under the shield of "machismo". He attempts to convince his family that in an alien, hostile "gringo" environment, he must protect the family at all costs. He may argue that to preserve Latino cultural values, the family must have little contact with Anglo institutions. This isolation ensures no outside interference, no opportunities for escape.

In families where children are raised with frozen cultural values of absolute obedience, without questioning the fairness of adult actions, children are forced into compliance. This pattern facilitates the psychological manipulation of the children when told that they are the chosen, special ones for erotized interactions with a parent.

> *"Tu eres mi niñita preferida, te doy besitos en lugares especiales, solo a ti, porque eres mia, mi niñita linda, la que mas amo. Pero no le digas a nadie, porque tendrán celos de ti, y entonces tus hermanas no te van a querer"*

> *"You are my favorite little girl, I give you little kisses in special places, only you, because you are mine, my beautiful child, the one I love the most. But don't tell anyone, because then they will be jealous, and then your sisters won't love you"*. Julia's father, who said the same thing to all three daughters he molested.

Latinas who suffer sexual abuse in the family often are silenced by the code of familismo; they feel responsible for preserving the family and protecting its image within the larger social context. They are situated in the untenable position of suffering the abuse to prevent "el que dirán". Family rules about loyalty make women feel they must sacrifice themselves to preserve the family. This belief is reinforced by the fact that upon disclosure of incest, social institutions will intervene and the family will be separated, if only temporarily.

By hiding behind a mask of culture, the perpetrator shifts the blame from himself and further binds the child to dysfunctional patterns of relating. The Latina who keeps the secret of her victimization to save her family pays a high psychological price. She feels betrayed by her father, her family, her culture, and herself.

> *"I could not tell anyone what was happening to me. I knew from the time I was small that la chota (the police) used any excuse to beat up our guys. The cops never came when we needed help, they only came to harass or arrest us for no reason. I could only image what they would do to my dad if I told...Besides, what was my mom going to do with all of us kids and no job and no husband...I couldn't tell, I just couldn't. I didn't want to be a traidora. So I just betrayed myself." Alicia, age 40.*

Clearly, Latino cultures per se do not cause incest, but rigid frozen patriarchal practices contribute to female oppression and facilitate child abuse and incest.

Las huellas del incesto/psychological sequelae of incest

The child in a sexually abusive situation must face the formidable task of trusting individuals who are untrustworthy, seeking safety in a chronically unsafe situation, control in a predictably unpredictable situation, and power in a situation of absolute powerlessness (Herman 1992).

The experience of incest erodes the fundamental fabric of human relations: trust in the accountability of others. There may be no greater challenge to the human spirit than to survive incest. Three major forms of psychological adaptation can occur when children are victimized: "the elaboration of dissociative defenses, the development of a fragmented identity, and the pathological regulation of emotional states" (Herman 1992, 110). These ways of coping may begin in childhood and persist into adulthood. While preserving the psychological and emotional integrity of the person, these defenses also can affect women's psychological and interpersonal functioning.

Childhood manifestations of trauma

Children lack mature psychological defenses and implicitly trust the parents, thus they are most vulnerable to the multiple violations of incest. As the child is not completely able to care for or protect herself, she does the best she can with her developing psychological structures. The order of her universe, however, is fundamentally altered. The psychological challenge is to survive and preserve the illusion that she is loved, despite the violations.

In order to survive, many children will "forget" the experience of incest; through the psychological process of repression the victimized child closes the door to the conscious memory of betrayal and violation. But the body remembers; thus a number of physical symptoms may occur with no medical explanation: gagging responses, food phobias, vomiting spells, strange corporal sensations of being strangled or suffocated:

> *"I could never understand why I would wake up in the middle of the night feeling a pressure on my chest, as if someone were sitting on my chest. I would drool and have the sensation of choking, as if something were in my mouth and I was trying hard not to swallow. I never knew what it was, until I remembered him straddling me and forcing his penis into my mouth".* Sonia, age 34, remembering the incest that began when she was 9.

Incested children are often depressed and inattentive. They suffer night terrors and nightmares; they may experience academic and social difficulties. They may be withdrawn and isolative. However, because girls are expected to be quiet and passive, their sadness often is confused with good conduct and not considered a problem. At the same time, victimized children may be hyper-aroused; as they must try to anticipate the adults' every move, state of mind, and potential assault (Herman 1992). Thus, they often appear over-solicitous.

Given the psychological mandates of the parent-child bond, the child must make sense of what is happening to her and attempt to find explanations for unexplainable horrors. This can lead to states of unreality or dissociation.

> *"I would simply look out the window when he came in the room late at night, I would focus on the blackness of the sky, on the stars if there were any out there. I would imagine I was somewhere else, in a far away place. Sometimes I would imagine I was an Aztec princess about to be sacrificed...When my own heart was torn out by my father, I would come back to my own room, my own bed, my own nightmare....."* Marcy, age 27, describing the dissociative process that occurred during her father's sexual assaults, beginning when she was 7.

Through the development of a fragmented identity the child can survive the horrors of incest. She can be the good child, the loyal daughter who remembers nothing in order to be respectful and devoted to her parents and siblings. A parallel reality exists, however, where she sees or feels herself to be the evil seductress who is making her father do terrible things to her. *"By develop-*

ing a contaminated, stigmatized identity, the child victim takes the evil of the abuser into herself and thereby preserves her primary attachments to her parents" (Herman 1992, p.105):

> *"I knew I was a malinche, I knew it was my fault, how could a father, a brother hurt a child this way, I had to be doing something to provoke them".*

Melida was 3 when the abuse began, yet she was convinced she was the cause of her own victimization. The use of the cultural archetype of Malinche is not accidental, as many Chicanas are taught that Malinche epitomizes the treachery and evil of woman. In fact, Malinche is an early cultural representation of the abused and defiled woman who is then blamed for her own victimization.

A correlate of incest is a blunting of feelings, or a disconnection from them. In this way the child does not directly experience the pain of her victimization. This allows her to blame herself and exonerate the perpetrators. The price for such loyalty, however, is the development of a pervasive sense of shame, a well of repressed rage, and the potential for self-destructive acts, particularly in adolescence.

Psychological manifestations of trauma in adolescence

Adolescence brings forth a number of challenges for women, central among these is the blossoming of sexuality. Incest survivors, however, have been robbed of the normal awakening of sexuality. Instead they were objectified by adult perversion. Normal physical stirring of sexual desire can feel dirty and shameful, even if the young woman does not remember the abuse.

This is also the time when many perpetrators cease the abuse for fear of impregnating the young woman. Thus, she may suffer not only the guilt of having participated in the sexual relation, but the loss of the "special place" she believed she had in her father's life. She may feel abandoned and betrayed, guilty and ashamed.

Sexual acting out in adolescence, promiscuity and exploitative sexual encounters can occur. By placing herself in dangerous situations, the young woman convinces herself she is unworthy and exonerates her father. He is not bad; she is, that is why bad things happen to her. It is her fault. Other young women may experience absence of sexual pleasure, fear of sexual intimacy, and shame at the awakening sexuality that normally occurs.

Unable to regulate her anger and lacking the permission to express it in gender and culturally appropriate ways, the incest survivor becomes convinced of her innate badness when she feels the rage. The anger may turn inward into depression, suicidality or self-abuse, or may be manifested in acts of social aggression which will further label her as delinquent.

It is common for adolescent incest survivors to become runaways, alcohol abusers and addicts. Many victimized women begin a life of sexual promiscuity, prostitution and degradation as a direct result of father-daughter incest (Butler 1978, Herman 1982). Many live seemingly normal lives, not remembering but sometimes also not feeling their emotions since feelings might open the door to repressed memories of the abuse.

Psychological sequelae in adulthood

Adult survivors often experience and manifest cognitive deficits, emotional and psychological difficulties, and impaired social relationships as a consequence of their abuse[5]. The survivor often hopes that adulthood will bring freedom and escape from the horrors of family life. Moreover, the adult survivor has not been equipped in the home with skills of self-protection; this renders her vulnerable to victimization in adult relations. Herman (1992) and Russell (1986) report twice the rate of rape, sexual harassment, or battering for women sexually abused as children than for women not victimized in childhood. In my own practice, all incest survivors were raped in adolescence or adulthood; many were involved with physically and emotionally violent men:

> *"I always felt worthless, it is no surprise that when I was*

raped by a man I had just started dating, I blamed myself. After all, I always was attracted to losers and abusive men. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy...I was bad so I would attract bad men. Good women don't attract bad men". Helen, age 28.

Clearly this woman's sense of shame and cognitive distortions (victimization has nothing to do with being good) kept her from challenging the fundamental unfairness of her victimization for it might lead directly to the underlying causes of her shame and her "attraction" to abusive men.

Many victimized women live their lives in ways that reinforce their self-perception of badness. An example are female offenders who commit violent crimes or who are involved with criminal males (Rolison 1993). Violent female offenders most often were sexually abused in childhood. They tend to become violent against their perpetrators; in turn these women are punished by society through much stiffer sentences than those received by men who kill their partners (Flores-Ortiz 1995).

Adults survivors of incest also may manifest problems in intimate relationships and sexual functioning. Incest survivors often see repeated victimization as an unavoidable consequence of intimacy. When love, sex and violence are intertwined, men and women grow up confusing possessiveness, jealousy, and control for love, and sexual abuse for passion.

As a child, the incest survivor had no control of her body. If she experienced any pleasure as a result of the sexual abuse, she felt dirty, evil, and bad. These feelings can recur in adult sexual encounters inhibiting arousal and pleasure. When adult survivors initiate voluntary sexual behaviors, they often experience intrusive thoughts or memories of past victimization:

"They (the brothers and father who abused her) are always in my bedroom. When I try to make love to my husband, sometimes his face becomes their face, or they look at me from the corner of my room, mocking me, telling me I am a bad little girl..)." Susana, age 38.

Many survivors experience panic, anxiety, and fear when they anticipate sexual encounters. To avoid these feelings, they may avoid the possibility of dating or even social encounters with men. The experience of falling in love or feelings of sexual arousal often trigger childhood memories of the victimization.

At the very minimum, many survivors experience confusion with sexual identity and sexual desire and assume the problem lies with them; to question the origins of their sexual difficulties and fears might lead directly to remembering and reliving the original trauma.

Since their ability to trust has been compromised, incest survivors also can have difficult relationships with women. Survivors often view women as weak and impotent, particularly if their mothers were unable to protect them from the abuse. Adult female relationships are further compromised when the victim told her mother or a female relative and she was either silenced or not believed. Thus the social and emotional isolation that was created by the abuse may persist into adulthood.

Adult incest survivors often describe feeling that a child and "childish" emotions inhabit their adult body. They may feel controlled by their emotions, not in control of them. Consequently, many survivors often feel "crazy". Emotional lability, however, may signal the beginning of the process of remembering.

Throughout their life, Latina incest survivors may experience depression, reduced satisfaction with social networks, feelings of low self-esteem, and difficulty trusting and forming mutually satisfying sexual relationships. They may experience academic and employment difficulties (Flores-Ortiz 1996). An underlying cause of female delinquency, criminality, and addiction very often is intrafamily abuse.

The long term consequences of incest also include the potential for the replication of dysfunctional parenting as incest survivors may be unable to prevent the sexual victimization of their own children. Sometimes women opt to not have children, even though they desire motherhood, in fears that their children will be doomed to the same fate. For many survivors, sexual violation is an inevitable part of family life:

"How will I know beforehand that a man I may marry won't be a child rapist. I have no judgment in choosing men, I can't trust any of them. I cannot take the chance. Besides, if there are any good men out there, which I seriously doubt, they wouldn't want me, estoy sucia, degradada, no tengo valor para ningún hombre (I am dirty, degraded, I have no value for any man)". Julia, age 35.

Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest injustice suffered by incest survivors is that often it takes years of painful exploration to feel whole again, to cease blaming herself, to confront the horror, the nightmares, the fears, the monsters that hide in the closet or under the bed, or that lurk in the darkness. Sometimes it takes years to feel safe again in the family and in the culture.

There are many ways to come out of the darkness, to cease living in denial shielded by repression. The road from victim to survivor of incest is painful and difficult. For Latina survivors, however, the road to recovery entails challenging patriarchy, frozen culture values, and even religious beliefs. Above all, the road to recovery entails breaking the silence, disclosing the secret, and finding voice.

"It does get better, doctora, sometimes it just doesn't feel that way. I can't believe sometimes that I can feel my own feelings, that I can experience things in the moment, that I can say, and sometimes shout, NO. It doesn't get easier, but it does get better".

Before me stands a beautiful young woman, whose invisible scars continue to heal. After so many sessions we have both stopped counting, she stands before me having crawled up, sometimes with my help, most often alone, from the bottom of the precipice. I smile and thank her for her courage, for teaching me just about all I know about the nightmares of incest and the resilience of the human soul. She hands me a flower and I hand her back her heart.

Notes

1. Fragment of poem "Incest" by Rebecca Carrillo (1995), used with permission.
2. While incest occurs also between siblings and mothers and sons, little information is available on these violations among Latinos. For a discussion of male incest survivors, see N. King, Speaking our Truth, 1995, published by Harper Collins, New York.
3. All names are pseudonyms. Fragments of narratives and clinical material have been edited to insure confidentially and are used with permission of those whose voices are heard in these pages.
4. See Straus and Smith (1989) for a discussion of the role of victimization in sibling violence and anti-social behaviors of children. Family system theorists propose that maternal child abuse often is connected to the mother's own domestic victimization.
5. In fact, Herman (1992) proposes that given the extent of potential impairment, sexually abused women should be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. This diagnoses is far more comprehensive than the disparate psychiatric labels used to describe the degree of impact of child abuse.

Works Cited

Butler, Sandra. 1978. Conspiracy of Silence: The Trauma of Incest. San Francisco: New Glide Pub.

Finkelhor, David. 1979. Sexually Victimized Children. New York: The Free Press.

Finkelhor, David., Hotteling, Gerald., Lewis, A, and Smith, C. 1990. The Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 2(4), Dec., 348-366.

Flores-Ortiz, Yvette. 1993. La Mujer y la Violencia: A Culturally Based Model for the Understanding and Treatment of Domestic Violence in Chicana/Latina Communities. In Norma Alarcón et al. eds. Chicana Critical Issues, 169-182.

Flores-Ortiz, Yvette. 1995. Pintas: Policy Implications of Chicana Inmates. Paper presentation. National Association for Chicana/o Studies Conference.

Flores-Ortiz, Yvette. 1997. Latinas/os Narratives of Intrafamily Abuse. University of California, Davis, research project.

Flores-Ortiz, Yvette. 1997. A reconstructive dialogue with a couple with a problem of violence. In T. Nelson (Ed.). 101 Interventions in Family Therapy. N.Y. Haworth Press, in press.

Flores-Ortiz, Yvette, Marcelo Esteban and Ricardo Carrillo. 1994. "La Violencia en la Familia: Un Modelo Contextual de Terapia Intergeneracional." Revista Interamericana de Psicologia, (28),2, 235-250.

Herman, Judith Lewis. 1982. Father-Daughter Incest. Cambridge, Massachussetts.: Harvard University Press.

Herman, Judith Lewis. 1992. Trauma and Recovery. N.Y.: Basic Books.

Kercher, G.A., McShane, M. 1984. The prevalence of child sexual abuse victimization in an adult sample of Texas residents. Child Abuse and Neglect, 8, 495-501.

Martin, Dale. 1976. The Battered Woman. San Francisco: Glide Pub.

Mennen, F.E. 1994." Sexual Abuse in Latina Girls: Their Functioning and a Comparison with White and African American Girls Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences,16(4), November, 475-486.

Rao, K., DiClemente, R.J. & Ponton, L.E. 1992. "Child sexual abuse of Asians compared with other populations." Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent

Psychiatry, 31, 880-886.

Rolison, G.L. 1993. Toward an Integrated Theory of Female Criminality and Incarceration. In Fletcher et al. Women Prisoners: A Forgotten Population. Conn.: Praeger, p. 27-44.

Russell, D.E.H. 1986. The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women. N.Y.: Basic Books.

Sorensen, Susan B. and Cynthia A. Telles. 1991. "Self-Reports of Spousal Violence in a Mexican-American and Non-Hispanic White Population." Violence and Victims, 6(1), 7-15.

Sorensen, Susan B., Stein, J.A., Sieel, J.M., Golding,j.M. and Burnam, M.A. 1987. " The Prevalence of Adult Sexual Assault: The Los Angeles Epidemiologic Catchment Area Project." American Journal of Epidemiology, 126, 1154-1163.

Stark, E., Flitcraft, A. 1988. "Women and Children at risk: A feminist perspective on child abuse." International Journal of Health Services, 18(1), 97-118.

Straus, Murray and Richard Gelles, eds. 1989. Violence in American Families: Risks and Adaptations in 8145 families. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

Straus, Murray and Christine Smith. 1989. " Violence in Hispanic Families in the United States: Incidence Rates and Structural Interpretations." In M. Straus and R. Gelles (Eds.). Violence in American Families: Risks and Adaptations in 8145 Families. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, p. 341-367.

Truesdall, D.J., McNeill, D. & Dreschner, S. 1986. " Incidence of wife abuse in incestuous families." Social Work, March-April, 138-140.

Walker, Lenore. 1979. The Battered Woman. N.Y.: Harper and Row.

Wyatt, G.E. 1985. "The sexual abuse of Afro-American and White American Women in childhood." Child Abuse and Neglect, 9, 507-519.

Acknowledgements

For Becky and Rebecca
and all the others
who gave me the gift of their trust
with their stories
For my mother, who in forgetting
has finally remembered her past
Para todas las mujeres de mi familia
las victimas y las sobrevivientes
For all the survivors
For the homegirls, las pintas, las obreras
y las "academics"
For all of us who fight injustice
who struggle to survive
con integridad
For my children who have been spared

The Journey Home: Defining Identity in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

Ibis Gómez-Vega

[Different people react to their own exile in different ways.] During an interview in 1988, Magdalena García Pinto asked Isabel Allende, "How do you think being in exile has affected your writing?" Allende avoided the issue of her own pain as an exile from Chile and answered that:

> Exile has had an effect on hundreds of thousands of human beings. We live in an era where masses of people come and go across a hostile planet, desolate and violent. Refugees, emigrants, exiles, deportees. We are a tragic contingent. This situation, which we became involved in through a fluke of fate, has changed our lives, but I don't have any complaints. We've been very fortunate, because we've stayed together and we were able to choose what country to go to. We live in a democracy, in a warm, green land where we feel free, where we belong, which we love like a homeland. (*Women Writers of Latin America* 27)

Allende, the fortunate exile, speaks here of her own flight to Venezuela in 1973 after a military coup overthrew the government of Salvador Allende and instituted a reign of terror. Many people were tortured; others disappeared. In *De amor y de sombras*, Allende herself documents the plight of the *desaparecidos* and the impotence felt by those who could not do much more than witness the horror of a people gone mad. As their country slipped into chaos inexorably, as if of its own volition, Chileans like Isabel Allende felt powerless to effect change and alter the course of history.

Faced with the collapse of life as she knew it, Isabel Allende escaped to Venezuela, where she and her family "were welcomed with generosity and hospitality in that warm, green