

## CASE REPORT

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# A Father Marries His Daughters: A Case of Incestuous Polygamy

**ABSTRACT:** Polygamy is a risk factor for incest. This case report of incest and polygamy portrays the dynamics that dominated this family's identity. The father indoctrinated and groomed his biological daughter and stepdaughter for sexual gratification in a cult-like atmosphere, and secretly married both of them. He justified his acts to the family members under the guise of religion, but he later denied allegations of polygamy and sexual contact with his daughters when confronted by the authorities. Ultimately, his parental rights were terminated in family court. The authors interviewed the primary victim and reviewed extensive evidence, including videotapes of the victims talking with detectives and also privately amongst each other. Videotape dialogue excerpts capture how these young girls individually coped with the sexual abuse and responded to becoming child wives in a polygamous family. Criminal charges ultimately were not pursued because the key witness refused to testify against her biological father.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic science, incest, polygamy, children, sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse remains a serious problem in American society. Community and college surveys indicate that about 19–38% of females and 9–16% of males are sexually abused at some point during their childhood (1–3). According to The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, the estimated number of sexually abused children rose from 133,600 children to 300,200 between 1986 and 1993 (4). As the estimated total U.S. child population increased by only 7% during this time, these figures suggest a more than doubling of suspected child sexual abuse victims over this seven-year period (5). Random community surveys conducted by interview reveal a gender ratio of 2.5 women to each man sexually traumatized (6). Government statistics tend to underestimate the prevalence of incest, while independent surveys overestimate it (7).

Incest, the sexual exploitation of children by family members, is a subtype of child sexual abuse. Roughly 15 million women in the United States have been objects of incestuous attention, and a third of all sexually abused individuals have been molested before the age of nine (8). Prevalence rates of incest victimization, often determined by surveying adult women, range from approximately 1% (9) to 10% of women (10). Among reported incest cases, about 75% involve contact between fathers and daughters; however, sibling incest is far more common but infrequently reported (11,12). Father-daughter incest is the most traumatic type of incest, with the

experience worsening as the age difference widens (13). The age of onset of incestuous behavior between fathers and daughters typically occurs when the child is between eight and ten years of age (14). Teenagers are at even greater risk of sexual assault (15).

Polygamy is the practice of one man taking several wives. The male's motives for this behavior are varied, ranging from a religious desire to husband many children for God's Kingdom to a lust for multiple sexual partners. Polygamous families tend to be large (16) and isolated from persons who do not share their value system. Polygamy is a risk factor for incest, as incest is associated with large family size and isolation in rural areas (17). Likewise, abused children are twice as likely to come from families with four or more children compared with the general population (18). Since polygamy is illegal, its prevalence and characteristics are not well known. It is believed that polygamists commonly choose pubertal girls to marry in unlicensed secret religious ceremonies (19). Presently, 20,000 to 40,000 of fundamentalists Mormons practice polygamy in secret in defiance of the law (20).

### Historical Accounts of Incest

The earliest accounts of incest are found in biblical stories. In Genesis, Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at the destruction of Sodom. Seeking refuge, Lot takes shelter in a cave near Zoar, due south of the Dead Sea. From Genesis 19:31–32 of the Holy Bible:

“He and his two daughters lived in a cave. One day the older daughter said to the younger, our father is old and there is no man around here to lie with us, as is the custom all over the earth. Let us get our father to drink wine and then lie with him and preserve our family line through our father (21).”

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\* Previously presented in part at the 14th Annual Meeting of the Southern Association for Research in Psychiatry, March 10th, 2001, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL.

Received 6 Feb. 2002; and in revised form 6 April 2002; accepted 7 April 2002; Published 31 July 2002.

Lot's two daughters each bore a son. These sons were the fathers of the Moabites and the Ammonites, who later became enemies of the Israelites.

Another enemy of the Israelites was Egypt, where pharaohs, kings, and queens were worshipped. One of the most famous queens of Egypt was Cleopatra VII of Egypt, descended from Macedonian royalty. To keep the bloodline pure, the Ptolemy Dynasty practiced incest (22). Cleopatra's parents, Ptolemy Auletes XII and Cleopatra V Tryphaena, were brother and sister (23). Cleopatra's mother gave birth to her in 69 BC and died a year later (24). Losing health and power, Ptolemy XII appointed in 51 BC his daughter Cleopatra to the throne of Egypt with her brother, Ptolemy XIII (25).

In a folk tale from 7th century Ireland, a bereaved Chieftain sought to marry his daughter after his wife made him promise her on her death bed to marry only someone as beautiful as his wife (26). His daughter, Dymphna, flees to Antwerp with her Christian confessor to find refuge (27). Her father eventually catches up with her and cuts off her head, leaving the body for wild animals to devour. Dymphna's relics were enshrined, and many cures of insanity or possession were attributed to her. She became the Patron Saint of the Mentally Ill (28).

From Biblical Patriarchs to Catholic Saints, religion permeates stories of incest. In the United States, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints intermingled prophecy, polygamy, and sometimes incest. On occasion, child brides—such as stepdaughters or orphans living in their homes as adopted daughters—were selected.

### Mormonism and Polygamy

Incest is not only taboo, it is forbidden and punishable by law in the United States and most western countries (29). Freud theorized that the prohibition of patricide and incest together were the beginning of mankind's culture, morals, and religion (30). Folk tales, fables, and myth reinforce the incest taboo by recounting disastrous outcomes when sexual activity between parent and child are not checked (31).

Practitioners of polygamy commonly justify their practice as an expression of their religious freedom. While fear of God may deter some men, other men use religion to justify their behavior (32). This can lead to deleterious societal effects, as polygamy loosens rather than reinforces the incest taboo (33). Meadow and Kahoe have commented, "Ideas of 'a chosen people' . . . can make one feel inappropriately superior to others" (34) and thus not beholden to the prevailing mores and laws.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints founder Joseph Smith introduced polygamy to American pioneers in the Utah territory over 150 years ago, and as a consequence indirectly sanctioned incest. He identified himself as a prophet and revealed "God's word" to the new chosen people. Cairncross recounts that Joseph Smith began floating the idea of polygamy by his followers in 1835, the same year Fanny Alger, a 17-year-old orphan living in his household, became pregnant (33). He reportedly "applied the veneer of religion" to sanction his seduction of teenage maidens (33). By the time of his lynch mob murder on June 2, 1844 by anti-Mormon militiamen (35), Joseph Smith had a total of 48 "spiritual wives," and had taken brides as young as 15 years old under the veil of spiritual revelation (33). Joseph Smith compared himself to King Solomon to whom God granted every desire of the heart. Smith insisted, "Things which to those incompletely enlightened might seem abominable were in reality right, because God sanctioned them by special revelation" (33). In particular, Smith seduced some of his lovers by telling them they would be his queen

in the afterlife if anointed his earthly spiritual wife (33). Not until 1890 did the Mormons prohibit incestuous practices (11). Federal authorities pressured the Mormon Church to abolish polygamy, as a condition of Utah statehood (20).

Nineteenth-century doctrine developed by Joseph Smith promoted the idea that man and wife live as king and queen in the hereafter, in their own heavenly universe, surrounded by their children. When Smith performed a marriage, he promised an eternal marriage, which extended forever in the heavenly realm (20). Smith encouraged women to claim this eternal reward by choosing only a righteous man, even if this righteous man already had wives. Early Mormons believed they needed to have many children for the heavenly existence to come. Plural marriage allowed the select yet few truly righteous men to have many children (20).

It is reasonable to assume that not all polygamists are driven by pure intentions, genuinely believing they are following God's will. Rather, some are guided by a narcissistic, controlling personality structure, exploiting susceptible females for their own sexual and procreative gratification. Richard Swenson, a physician and futurist writer, has commented on the perversion of scriptural authority, whereby one first looks at what is wanted, and then builds a theology to justify it (36).

Utah recently held its fourth anti-polygamy trial in 50 years. In this 2001 trial a judge convicted defendant Tom Green, self-professed "fundamentalist" Mormon, of four counts of bigamy. A district court judge ruled that a legal marriage had existed between Green and Kuntz from November 1995, and that probable cause existed to bind Green on four counts of bigamy (37). Tom Green appealed the ruling, which was upheld by the Appellate Court (38). Green married Kuntz in 1995, when she was 13 and his stepdaughter at the time (39). At the time of the trial, he had 35 living children, with three more on the way (39). In response to the prosecuting attorney describing him as sexually deviant, Green responded, "If I could be considered sexually deviant for being a polygamist who married teenage girls, then the same could be said of the prosecutor's polygamist ancestors, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young (39)." Sexually deviant or religiously enlightened, the debate continues, with some fundamentalist Mormons in Utah supporting Tom Green's assertion of religious freedom.

The following case of incest and polygamy portrays the dynamics that dominated this family's identity. The father indoctrinated and groomed his biological daughter and stepdaughter for sexual gratification, and secretly married both of them. He justified his acts to the family members under the guise of religion, but he later denied allegations of polygamy and sexual contact with his daughters when confronted by the authorities. Ultimately, his parental rights were terminated in family court. Criminal charges were not pursued due to the unwillingness of the key witness—his biological daughter—to testify against her father.

### Case Report

#### Overview

Our contact with this case came about through a court-ordered evaluation of a 13-year-old female incest victim to assess her capacity to testify against her parents. They had been charged with child abuse and neglect. The accused father reportedly practiced polygamy with his two wives, and had convinced them that God came to him in a dream and told him that his oldest biological daughter and stepdaughter (hereafter referred to as Annie and Nina respectively) would each bear him two children. His wives consented to him marrying their oldest daughters to accomplish this

task. It was further agreed the marriages would be dissolved once their duty of having children for him was completed.

Annie was the first daughter to marry her father. When she turned 12 a secret wedding was held at the family home. As a bride, she dressed in a white gown, and the family bridesmaids wore white gowns as well. The father performed the ceremony. Wedding rituals included him binding his hand to Annie's with ribbon, and Annie swearing to secrecy in a blood pact with her parents—they each signed the oath using their finger prick blood. Following the nuptials, the family participants ate wedding food and took pictures. The father-groom had sexual intercourse with Annie on their wedding night. Coincidentally, this day also happened to be her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Two months later the time came for Nina, age 13, to marry her father. The girls talked about this upcoming event, and Annie informed Nina that she too would be having sex with their father until she had two children. Nina participated in the wedding ceremony, but two weeks later attempted suicide by taking an overdose, successfully avoiding the incestuous relationship. In response to this crisis, Nina's mother went to the authorities and reported the husband for sexually abusing children.

Annie felt betrayed by her stepmother's actions. She resented the stepmother for ruining the arrangement and causing the breakup of her family. She was unable to forgive her stepmother for this "betrayal." The father took steps to discredit this wife (Annie's stepmother) in hopes of avoiding criminal charges. Specifically, he filed an *ex parte* petition with the court to have her involuntarily committed for a mental health evaluation, and told authorities she was psychotic. The involuntarily hospitalization was short-lived, and no evidence of such mental illness in the stepmother was discovered.

### Interview Results with Annie at Age 13

Annie presented as a pseudo-mature yet highly intelligent teenager. She fondly recalled living an idyllic existence on a farm with her nine siblings, mother, father and stepmother. She described her life as happy and adventurous, despite the father restricting her friends and time away from family. Her chores included tending to the vegetable garden and animals. She had been home-schooled while in the family. However, once she was in protective custody she began public school and made excellent grades.

Annie acknowledged that her father was a polygamist. Regarding the marriage, she recalled feeling "honored to be chosen," and had looked forward to becoming a "sister-wife" with her biological mother and stepmother. She reported the life of polygamy "could be very fulfilling," and referred to the closeness "sister-wives" enjoyed, like the "best of friends who trust each other and are always there for each other." She noted religion had to be involved for polygamy to be successful so that personal jealousy did not interfere. The family read the Book of Mormon, yet they did not worship with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. She explained that polygamy was not a Mormon practice.

Annie's facial expressions became animated as she talked about polygamy. Conversely, she became sad when discussing the possible incarceration of her parents. She was guarded when asked about the sexual abuse, believing the information would be used to prosecute her father and block reunification of the family. She remained angry with her stepmother for having called the police, yet paradoxically denounced incest as "sickening." Annie did not identify herself as a victim of incest, and planned to testify in defense of her parents; nor did she believe the legal system had her best interests in mind.

### Investigative Findings

Annie's physical exam following removal from the home revealed hymenal changes consistent with coitus. However, she denied any sexual contact with her father. Later, while under videotape surveillance, Annie confessed to Nina that she lied about there being no sexual contact between her and the father. She explained that she wanted to prevent her and her siblings from being sent away to foster care. The marriage pact and video images of her wedding were not located by investigators, and presumably were destroyed.

On another videotape made by law enforcement, Nina asks Annie how she was able to have sex with their father. In this passage, Annie has explained to Nina that she psychologically coped with the incest by dissociating—placing her mind elsewhere—while having intercourse with her father-husband:

Nina: "How did you deal with that, I mean how could you have sex with someone [her father], and be married [to him]?"

Annie: "I thought of something else."

Nina: "What?"

Annie: "I thought of something else."

Nina: "You thought of?"

Annie: "Whatever popped into my head; I managed it; it saved me a lot of problems."

In this videotape Annie also provided an over-determined decision to acquiesce to the incest: she wanted to save her siblings from the threat of family disintegration and foster care, and also follow the command of God to have two children:

Nina: "Your marriage? You have to admit it is kind of, you know, a little different. I know you really did not want to do it."

Annie: "Who would?"

Nina: "I know you didn't, if you did, I would have thought, 'Well, Annie, you are kind of weird.'"

Annie: "Have you ever wondered the reason why I did this? It was for children."

Nina: "I didn't know that!"

Annie: "They [law enforcement] don't know about it [the incest] . . . but if they do find out, our younger brothers and sisters are all going to foster care. I wish they could just leave us alone."

Nina: "Did you want this relationship to really go on?"

Annie: "No, that's why I wanted to pretend. Yet, you feel kind of honored. Whatever, when the Lord tells you [that you] are to have special children . . . you feel honored to be called out by the prophecy. I am alive you know."

### Synopsis of Nina's Marriage to Her Father and Suicide Attempt

Nina reported that when she was 13, her stepfather called her, along with his two wives, to read a revelation from God. He told her he had received God's word that she was going to be blessed by two children because she was a "virtuous person." He directed her to marry him so he could husband these two children through her, and that afterwards the marriage would be dissolved. However, Nina felt loyal to her boyfriend, and spurned her stepfather's sexual advances following their marriage. The stepfather discovered her journal and read about her sexual activities with the boyfriend. He informed her she was going to die as a result of God's displeasure if she continued this infidelity, and that she was now married and this was against their religion. There was also the threat that she was going to get leprosy. Overwhelmed, she took an overdose of Tylenol.

The following excerpts demonstrate Nina's description of the wedding and her attempt to escape the marriage and impending in-

cestuous abuse through a suicide attempt:

Detective: "You said you guys were married, tell me about that."  
 Nina: "OK. It was late at night. We wanted to take pictures, so we brought the camera in and Annie was there and this took place in my mom's bedroom. It was a ceremony. He did everything. We did some weird hand thing and he took a ribbon and twined it around [our hands] and tied it and said this represents our marriage for two children. He stated the fact that it would be dissolved after the children. Then I had to make a blood pact. If you do anything wrong, like have sex outside of marriage, you were going to burn in hell. Whatever, I pricked my finger and I put my hand down."

Detective: "OK, with this wedding did you dress up?"

Nina: "We wore all white. I wore Annie's wedding dress and veil. I just put on some make up and tried to act like really, really sad because I was."

Detective: "After the ceremony was over, what happened?"

Nina: "He gave me a kiss on the lips and after that we all took pictures."

Detective: "How did you attempt suicide?"

Nina: "I took 20 Tylenol pills"

Detective: "When was that?"

Nina: "After we were married. I felt really bad about all the stuff going on and the sexual thing. I could not deal with it, and another thing, people were not realizing I was in trouble. I told my mom after I took the pills that I needed her to take me to the hospital. I did not want to die really."

## Discussion

A patriarchal structure, large family size, rural isolation, and cult-like group cohesiveness are risk factors for incestuous sexual abuse in polygamous families. Green observed that incest occurs most frequently in rigid, patriarchal families, with the father maintaining his dominant position by force and coercion (6). Paralleling the actions of other cult leaders, the father in this present case report invoked the authority and alleged commands of God, rituals, and threats to control the family members (40). The adult women and children of this family were unable to challenge the domineering father's authority, and instead were coerced into identifying with his code of beliefs and rules.

Galanter (41) described cults of charismatic leaders as close knit groups ascribing to the leader a transcendent role defining a strongly held, cohesive belief system that members are expected to defend when the system comes into conflict with surrounding society. Annie became strongly indoctrinated into her father's system, refusing to equate it with incest. The imperviousness of Annie's uncritical regard for her father was also reminiscent of cult members.

This case has provided a unique glimpse into the victim and family dynamics of a polygamous family complicated by father-daughter incest, and highlights the difficulties investigators may face in similar cult-like settings. For example, the father restricted the children's social life, limiting their chances to disclose to outsiders the truth about the family. Next, although some family members experienced conflicting emotions about the polygamy and incest, the rigid family structure and rules, and apparent sanctioning of the situation by God, appeared to have fostered their conformity. In fact, the wives' participation indirectly contributed to the ritualized abuse of their daughters. Finally, Annie denied the incestuous relationship out of loyalty to her father, sister-wives and God, and a desire to protect her siblings from family disintegration and foster care.

Children's denial of incestuous contact with a parent is not uncommon for various reasons; some never disclose childhood sexual abuse until surveyed or interviewed as adults (42,43). Reasons for nondisclosure include fear of not being believed, shame, feeling responsible for its occurrence, dread of legal repercussions, and anxiety over parental loss and family breakup (44).

For the teenage incest victim, disclosure often comes at a time of crisis when mental health professionals become involved with their families and police. Unfortunately, as in this case, child sexual abuse victims often end up in foster care, becoming "victims" in yet another way. Illustrating this widespread phenomenon, the Surgeon General's Report on Children's Mental Health noted that 10–15% of the children in the child welfare system had been sexually abused (45).

The girls' coping strategies in response to being forced to marry their father and become polygamous child wives were disparate. Nina's rejection of her stepfather's advances and ensuing suicide attempt to escape incest, although a successful cry for help, could have ended up tragically. Alternatively, Annie used the psychological mechanism of dissociation to cope with the incest. Dissociation is frequently found in sexually abused children, with higher levels of dissociation found among sexually abused children compared with those who were physically abused (46).

Incestuous polygamy, as illustrated in this case report, is presumed to be a rare occurrence. The reporting of similar cases will likely promote further elucidation and understanding of this phenomenon.

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