Incest

Prohibited sexual relations between members of a close kinship group, such as between parents and children or between brothers and sisters. The term is often expanded to include not only actual intercourse but other sexual acts as well.

While the incest taboo is nearly universal and exists in nearly all societies, notions of kinship vary greatly from culture to culture. Thus, some cultures would consider sexual relations between first cousins incest, while others would not. The same premise holds true for intercourse between a stepfather and stepdaughter. The very rare exceptions to incest, such as those found in ancient Egyptian and Incan societies, usually involve mandatory incestuous unions within royal families, which may have been motivated by economic or theocratic considerations.

In classical psychoanalytic theory, the psychosexual development of children between the ages of three and five is characterized by incestuous desires toward the parent of the opposite sex. Sigmund Freud called these desires in males the Oedipus complex, referring to the inadvertent incest between the title character and his mother in the classical Greek tragedy, Oedipus Rex. Freud asserted that young boys form a sexual attachment to their mothers, accompanied by resentment and hostility toward their fathers, whom they regard as rivals for their mother’s attention. The fear of retaliation by the father, which takes the form of castration anxiety, leads the boy to renounce his forbidden desires and begin to identify with his father, thus assuming his proper gender identity together with a superego composed of his father’s moral values. Freud posited roughly the same condition, in reverse, for girls, which he called the Electra complex. While largely recognizing the widespread existence of incestuous desires (which many claim is indirectly demonstrated by the very universality of the incest taboo), contemporary psychologists differ widely with respect to the developmental and other importance they attribute to these desires.

Among the various types of incest, sexual relations between brother and sister and between father and daughter are thought to occur more frequently than mother-son incest, which is believed to be rare. The phenomenon of covert incest has been noted between mother and son, however, in which the mother acts toward her son in a sexual manner without actually seducing him. Usually, other members of the family are aware of the incestuous relationship, and it will govern the psychodynamics of the entire family structure. According to contemporary reports by incest survivors, most child sexual abuse is committed by male relatives. Fathers who abuse their daughters tend to have a history of psychological problems and emotional deprivation, and will often implement an incestuous relationship with more than one daughter. In many cases, the mother is aware of the abuse and either feels powerless to stop it or colludes with the father for reasons of her own.

Contrary to popular assumptions and stereotypes, incest occurs at all levels of society, is likely to happen in middle and upper-class families as in poor families, and takes place in families that appear outwardly happy, respectable, and well adjusted. Adults who have been incest victims in childhood are prone to depression, sexual dysfunction, and abusive behavior. Incest involving an adult victim is extremely rare. Although there has been increasing public awareness of this problem in recent years, it is believed that most cases of incest remain unreported due to the stigma involved and the powerlessness of dependent children ensnared in incestuous relationships. Over the years, many (more or less speculative) theories have been advanced regarding the origin, nature, structure, function, and interpretation of the incest taboo, but none has been generally accepted as completely definitive. One practical function of the taboo is that the prohibition of incest decreases the incidence of birth defects and recessive genetic disorders.

Further Reading

Independent variable

The variable the experimenter manipulates.

In experimental research, psychologists create two or more groups that are as similar as possible except for a single change that the psychologist makes from one group to the next. That single element that varies across groups is called the independent variable. In more complex research, the experimenter may include more than one independent variable.

In one experiment dealing with eyewitness testimony and jury decisions, researchers exposed the eyewitnesses to staged crimes and then had them “testify” what they observed. One group of participants saw the staged crime under good lighting conditions; a second group had a less favorable viewing condition, and the third group had only a poor view of the scene. The independent variable was the viewing condition which had three levels, or different variations: good, moderate, and poor visibility. The researchers investigated whether the “jurors” accepted the testimony as believable and the degree...
of confidence of the eyewitnesses in their own testimony. The degree to which the jurors accepted the testimony and the stated degree of confidence by the witnesses themselves were dependent variables. The results revealed that the jurors were more likely to believe witnesses who had seen the crime in the best lighting.

The researchers concluded that the independent variable (e.g., the amount of light available for viewing the crime) had affected one dependent variable (e.g., the jurors’ acceptance of the testimony). At the same time, the independent variable did not affect the confidence of the eyewitnesses concerning their own testimony.

Further Reading

Inductive reasoning
Way of thinking that uses comparisons to reach conclusions.

When a child uses inductive thinking or reasoning, he or she engages in the evaluation and comparison of facts to reach a conclusion. Inductive reasoning progresses from observations of individual cases to the development of a generality. (Inductive reasoning, or induction, is often confused with deductive thinking: in the latter, general principles or conditions are applied to specific instances or situations.) If a child puts his or her hand into a bag of candy and withdraws three pieces, all of which are red, he or she may conclude that all the candy is red. Inductive reasoning, or induction, is the process by which a general conclusion is reached from evaluating specific observations or situations.

Industrial psychology
The subfield of applied psychology in which practical problems in the workplace are addressed through the application of psychological principles.

Some industrial psychologists, also called personnel or organizational psychologists, may be employed by companies to administer tests which measure employee aptitudes or skills in hiring and placement programs. Others work for consulting firms which offer their services to companies on a contractual basis to solve specific problems. The projects which they work on may include facilitating interpersonal relationships within a company by training management personnel in human relations skills, analyzing and recommending changes in employee training programs, or conducting research to determine what influences consumers to purchase particular products. A distinguishing characteristic of industrial psychology is that the focus of research and other work is to solve specific practical problems.

See also Applied psychology; Vocational Aptitude Test

Infancy

Very early childhood, generally referring to the period up to age two. During this important formative period, children begin to develop habits and behavior patterns, and acquire many basic skills, including speech.

Compared to the young of other mammals, human infants are precocious in some ways—notably sensory development—and relatively helpless in others, such as physical strength and mobility. At birth, the average American infant weighs approximately 7.5 pounds (3.37 kg), although a baby born 28 weeks after conception may weigh as little as two pounds (0.9 kg). The average length of an American newborn is about 21 inches (53 cm).

Infants are born with several reflexes that are activated by particular stimuli, such as the grasping reflex when a finger is placed in the palm of a baby’s hand. Other reflexes include rooting (turning the mouth toward the breast or bottle) and sucking. Many early reflexes—such as reaching and performing a step-like motion—disappear, only to reappear later. While the most important senses in human adults are vision and hearing, infants acquire much of their information about the world through touch. At birth, a baby’s eyes and the pathways between the eyes and the brain are not fully developed; the eyesight of a newborn is estimated at 20-600 (an object viewed from 20 feet [609 cm] away appears as a distance of 600 feet [182 m] by an adult with 20-20 vision). The senses of newborns are particularly well adapted for bonding with their caregivers. Infants can see large objects close up and are especially interested in faces, and their hearing is most acute in the range of human speech.

In the first year, the shape and proportion of an infant’s body are better suited to crawling on all fours than to walking erect. During the first three months of life, infants also lack the lower body strength and muscular control to support their weight standing upright. The