CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

The summary of the findings will be discussed with specific reference to the research question, which was based on the effects of the father-child incest on the mother and her daughter, as well as its impact on their relationship. The researcher will also discuss the conclusions that she deduced from this study. The limitations of the study will also be looked at in this chapter, and the researcher will then discuss the clinical implications these results have for mothers and also for the professionals working with the sexual abuse cases, with recommendations for the mothers’ therapy and directions for future research.

2. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The results of the study revealed that mothers experienced the disclosure of their children’s sexual abuse by their partners as traumatic. They went through a range of emotions as they experienced this as a personal attack in their womanhood and motherhood. They experienced feelings that ranged from guilt related to self-blame, inadequacy, powerlessness and helplessness, failure, and so on. They found themselves in a torn situation between the father and the child, not knowing who to believe and what action to take because of the losses they were faced with, whichever action they had to take, whether to preserve the marriage or the relationship and fail the daughter, or vice versa. This resulted in the negative feelings towards their daughters whom they saw as the cause of this dilemma. These feelings ranged from anger, hatred, jealousy, and attribution of blame to the daughter, to name a few. As a result they could not provide full support to their daughters post disclosure.

The results further indicated that children were also traumatized by the sexual abuse experience with their fathers. They were reported by their mothers to have experienced
ranges of emotional and psychological difficulties, which were also displayed through physical symptoms and behavioral problems. Some feelings were directed at self, some at the mother and the father. Among the feelings noted were anger and hatred, guilt feelings and self-blame.

Because of the issues noted above, the relationship between mothers and their daughters was characterized by ambivalence. They grew apart because of the anger they felt towards one another, but at the same time the mothers felt the need to become close to their daughters so as to protect them, as a result they became overprotective and got over-involved with them in a way that undermined their independence and autonomy. This further damaged the relationship as the daughters negotiated their independence and autonomy by rebelling against their mothers. This overprotection resulted from mothers’ guilt feelings that they were to blame as they could not protect their daughters, or they missed the early signs. In addition to that the mothers tended to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy by spoiling their children.

The results of this study also revealed that these mothers were also victims of some sort, as indicated by the reports of spousal physical and emotional abuse in all these mothers, which was a way of keeping them in dependent and powerless positions. This supports the idea that the incestuous family is a multi-problem family. This could have also been the source of anger for the children as they felt that their mothers could have protected them or stopped the abuse earlier.

Mothers demonstrated supportive responses and protective action towards their children but their support was partial. They experienced ambivalence towards their children and their spouses. The study failed to support the previous findings that the number of fully supportive mothers is higher than the number of partially supportive mothers. The mothers did believe the children’s allegations and the identity of the perpetrators, who were the fathers of the children, and they felt the need to act protectively, but they still experienced anger towards the child for not disclosing immediately, and also for the consequences of the disclosure, like family breakdown. Other mothers tried to keep the
family together, which left the children at risk for further victimization, which in some cases happened, and it was then that they separated the child from the perpetrator. This indicated that mothers did have difficulty having to choose between the daughter and her partner, which was also a source of anger and confusion for them.

3. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of mothers of father-daughter incest victims as they are based on a small sample.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. Recommendations for Psychology Practice

The findings of the present study have the implications for the helping professionals in the intervention programme for these women.

The mothers in this situation also need to be involved in the treatment programme, just like the victims and perpetrators do. This treatment programme needs to be designed in a way that they address the mothers’ issues as discussed above. They should aim to assist them to develop strong ego resources to be able to help their children through this difficult situation. They need to understand that incest was not entirely their faults, but they should be assisted to look at the circumstances that diminished their capacity to protect their children. Corcoran (1998, 2004) and Newberger (1992) suggest that the mothers’ intervention programme should be aimed at increasing their supportive attitude towards their children, addressing issues of anger, guilt and the like, and also to address the effects of secondary traumatization. The intervention programme should also include empowerment programme for them to develop their own emotional resources so as to work through their dependency needs, and through the losses and other changes brought about by the disclosure, and also to be able to help their children through the healing process, to fully support them and protect them from further victimization. These could
be achieved through individual therapy with the mothers, in which the issue of parenting,
like being overprotective and over-involved, could also be addressed, as Koch and Jarvis
(1987) indicate that mothers can learn more effective parenting skills.

Another treatment strategy that needs to be encouraged is the joint therapy for the mother
and her child so as to assist them to work through the issues in their relationship.
According to Hoorwitz (1983), mothers and daughters in this situation need to express
their feelings towards each other.

This study also revealed that some mothers feel unsupported or blamed by the helping
professionals. There are particular accounts of mothers who felt directly blamed, but
mostly this issue came up when some mothers indicated that the agencies focus on the
child victim and/or on the offender in cases where they run offenders’ treatment
programme. This was also supported by the researcher in her enquiry to different
agencies about the services they provide for these mothers. In central Gauteng and the
surrounding areas, there was only one institution that ran a support group for these
mothers. Some institutions that had previously run support groups for the mothers were
no longer running them. This needs to be closely looked at as it may be instilling the
belief of mother blaming by the professionals in this field.

The community still needs to be taught about the importance of speaking up about the
issues of child sexual abuse or any violence against women and children, especially in the
Black Community as this seems to be a critical issue for them. This was detected during
the recruiting phase, as most of the women who were not willing to participate were from
this community. Last but not least, it was evident from the mothers’ accounts of the
intervention of the legal system that there is dissatisfaction about the process of
investigations, the proceedings of court cases and also the conclusions of some cases.
This seemed to be another source of trauma and anger for mothers, for which they may
need therapy to work through their feelings.
4.2. Recommendations for Future Research

In view of the mothers’ feelings towards the legal system, the researcher would like to see more studies in future focusing on the role played by the legal system following the reporting of such cases. Also, the criteria followed when making a decision about the validity of the case would be a useful area of investigation.

It is also recommended that further research should look at the possibility of the offender re-committing the abuse after attending the offenders’ treatment programme. This research could be conducted in order to ascertain the effectiveness of such programmes. Furthermore, the researcher would like to see larger and more quantitative studies in this area to determine the generalisability of the findings.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that sexual abuse of the child by her father is a traumatic experience for both the child and the mother. The range of emotional and psychological difficulties that the mothers in this study and their children experienced demonstrated this. The study also pointed out that although mothers demonstrate supportive responses and protective actions towards their children, their support is partial because of the dilemmas they are faced with and also the ambivalence they experience towards their children as a result of divided loyalties between the spouse and the child; hence some children remain at risk for further victimization.

With regard to the relationship between the mother and her daughter, this was noted as one of the risk factors for the onset and maintenance of sexual abuse of the daughter by her father, and also as a determining factor in both the mother’s response to disclosure and the child’s post disclosure functioning. It was evident that this relationship is adversely affected by this experience as indicated by the negative feelings that mothers and children had towards each other. What was also evident was that even if this relationship was already poor prior to the disclosure, it worsens when the mother learns of her child’s abuse and the chances for it to be revived are minimized by this situation.
This study also indicated that as much as father-daughter incest has a negative impact on the mother-daughter relationship, factors such as the maternal response to disclosure, and the child’s and the mother’s responses to the sexual abuse itself, both affect and are affected by this relationship.