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Letter to the Editor

Re: Cultural norms versus state law in treating incest: a suggested model for Arab families, by K. Abu Baker and M. Dwairy

To the Editor

As someone who has been working for 15 years to improve the cultural competency of sexual abuse interventions (Fontes, 1995), I am delighted to see efforts to approach sexual abuse in culturally competent ways. However, I find worrisome the model suggested by Baker and Dwairy (2003). Their model suggests a naïve belief that sexual offenders can easily stop offending. I am afraid the model they recommend leaves victims at risk. The model seems to rely on the following assumptions:

1. That when an incest case is revealed, there is only one victim. However, we know that many incest perpetrators have multiple victims within and outside the family. The article gives no indication that family members and others within the offender's reach are interviewed to assess the extent of victimization.
2. That when a victim is discovered, he or she will have only one perpetrator. In fact, we know that revictimization is common. In research that I have conducted among Latinos in the US and Chile, some women have described that once news of their victimization spread, they were targeted for sexual victimization by other family members and even clergy (Fontes, 1993, 2001). It was as if once the protective aura of virginity had been challenged, these girls were fair game. I am concerned that without official oversight, the same sort of vulnerability could be present for victims who are treated in the less formal manner described in the article. In the vignette, therapy was terminated after 2 months—a shockingly short time. I am not clear than any system is in place to protect this child—or other children in the family—from further victimization.

I also find it curious that although the research cited suggests a higher rate of incest perpetrated against boys in this population (Dwairy, 1997), the authors refer almost exclusively to female victims. I would be interested in hearing their perspective on appropriate interventions when boys are victims.

The authors write repeatedly about the need for the victim to “regain trust in the family structure” and the need to “prevent a deepening of the rift between the couple.” Why should an incest victim regain trust in a family structure that has failed to protect her, and is it not appropriate for a woman to maintain some distance from a husband who has sexually abused her child? The model prioritizes the preservation of the family over the safety of the victim and future victims. Yes, without a doubt Salwa's story of the cut-off from her family is sad.

But it would not be a happier story had she stayed at home and continued to be victimized over a period of years, as had her siblings and neighborhood children and perhaps, eventually, her own children.

This model may protect families from the damage we know disclosures can cause, but I fear that it may fail to bring about real change or protect children from the damage that we know incest can cause. The model prioritizes a family's reputation over children's safety. I have no doubt that the current system of prosecution has problems, and I eagerly await a more effective solution.

There is much of value in the model. I especially like the way the extended family members are asked to assure the mother's safety. I hope the authors find a way to rework the model, keeping in mind the high levels of continued risk.

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