

# **INCEST, WORK AND WOMEN**

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Since 1978, **Dr. LeslieBeth Berger** has been a psychotherapist, specializing in women, trauma and career development. In addition to maintaining a private practice, she has worked for and consulted at various university counseling centers, community mental health centers and corporations. She received her postgraduate training at Georgetown University in Marriage and Family Systems under the direction of Dr. Murray Bowen. She has lectured widely on the subject of women and career development, appearing on television and in various magazines. Dr. Berger is a member of the International Society for Traumatic Stress.

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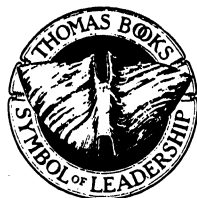
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*Understanding the Consequences  
of Incest on Women's Careers,  
Work and Dreams*

*By*

**LeslieBeth Berger, M.S.W., Ed.D.**



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*For all the women  
who were brave enough  
to tell me their stories.*



## **PREFACE**

The idea of this book began over ten years ago in response to the heartfelt requests of women incest survivors who asked me to help them and others understand the consequences of incest on work and career development. After interviewing one hundred incest survivors and one hundred nonsexually abused women, I offer this study of the aftermath of incest on survivors' struggles with on-the-job problems and long-term career planning.

This book is not a statistical and comparative study of the two groups of women. Rather, I present it as a qualitative analysis of the stories that the incest survivors told me about their careers, dreams, fears and work difficulties. The chapters grew naturally from what these women confided and from what I think researchers, clinicians and incest survivors need to know about the power of incest over work and career development.

Topics include the formation of a victimized and traumatized self, the influence of the family, six major work trends, on-the-job difficulties and incest survivors' myths and fears about work, careers and success. Whenever possible I have relied on the words, ideas and spirit of the participants.

LESLIEBETH BERGER, M.S.W., ED.D.





## INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult today to discuss incest without inviting accusations of “abuse excuse” and “false memory syndrome.” Unfortunately, since incest has lost its media appeal as a hot topic, the decline in interest has left many incest survivors feeling forgotten, stranded and misunderstood. Yet, thanks to the media’s initial attention to incest, most of us are now familiar with the concepts of recovered memories, dissociative (multiple) personality and the feelings of inner damage and shame that many incest survivors carry with them.

What has been overlooked is the impact of incest on a person’s work and career. Over ten years ago, when I first became concerned about the affects of trauma on career development, I could find scant references to the topic. For most of my life I have been intrigued by women’s career development and people’s responses to trauma. These two topics at first remained unrelated, and throughout most of my profession as a therapist I was accustomed to having two distinct interests. Little did I know how much that would change in the beginning of the 1980s when I was conducting career workshops at a university counseling center.

The workshop was not going well. I didn’t seem to be connecting. Something was wrong, but I didn’t know what. At the end of the workshop the women handed in their evaluations. They weren’t good.

One of the women mentioned at the bottom of her form that she, along with nine other women (there were about eighteen women in the workshop total), were members of an incest survivors’ group. They were all having career difficulties and felt that my workshop did not even begin to address their needs.

I contacted the woman, apologized for my gaps in learning, offered to refund money and headed for the library. I did not find one single article on the career difficulties of incest survivors. Today we have Linda Sanford’s uplifting book *Strong at the Broken Places: Overcoming the*

*Trauma of Childhood Abuse* (1990) and the articles of David Lisak and Laura Luster (1994) about the career histories of men who have been sexually and physically abused. I wish these resources had been available to me at the time of my workshop. Yet, despite the lack of references, I felt I had stumbled upon an important phenomenon. I devoted the next several years to enhancing my knowledge and interviewing many incest survivors.

But why should the topic of incest and career development remain such an unexplored area even today? Perhaps the professional avoidance of incest began with Sigmund Freud's rejection in 1897 of the role of incest in the lives of his female patients. Although in his 1896 paper, "The Aetiology of Hysteria," Freud initially identified incest as the source of anxiety in many of his patients, the following year he recanted his own observations. This disavowal of the prevalence of incest delayed professional attention for almost one hundred years.

In addition, in the 1980s, when professionals and the general public accepted incest as a phenomenon worthy of attention, most of the focus was on diagnosis, treatment and the first-person accounts of survivors who told their painful stories on television. We learned about nightmares, depression, eating disorders and suicide attempts but nothing about the long-term affects on a woman's career.

In fact, only relatively recently has the working world of women even been considered a topic in its own right. Even though by now we're familiar with terms such as women's corporate glass ceilings, women's role strain and women's fear of success, we know practically nothing about the work and career struggles of female incest survivors.

Finally, because denial and forgetting are integral to incest and trauma in general, the survivors themselves did not know to ask how incest affected their work and careers.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book took over ten years of thinking, rethinking, discarding ideas and discovering new ones. In the process I worked as a psychotherapist, returned to graduate school and discussed my ideas endlessly with colleagues, especially Dr. Peter A. Wish. His support and feedback have been immeasurable. I would also like to thank my professors at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, Dr. Patricia Griffin, Dr. John Hewitt, Dr. Maurianne Adams and Dr. Hannah Kliger for their ideas and guidance. I am grateful to Karen Carpenter of the Women’s Resource Center of Manatee County, Joanna Garriott, Jewish Family Service of Sarasota and Manatee Counties, Women’s Resource Center of Sarasota, Radcliffe Career Services and many others for allowing me to conduct my interviews. I am especially indebted to the *Bradenton Herald’s* journalist Kim Atamian for making my research public. Most of all, I am thankful for the women who wanted to tell their story, aid in the research and, in their words, “get the topic of incest out there” so that others can understand.

*In order to protect the privacy and identities of the participants in my study I have changed the names, occupations and other identifying information of all the women. However, I have tried to maintain the spirit of their triumphs and struggles and have used their ideas and their words whenever possible.*

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# **INCEST, WORK AND WOMEN**





## **Chapter 1**

# **A WORLD APART: DIFFERENCES IN SELF- AND LIFE-VIEW BETWEEN INCEST SURVIVORS AND NONABUSED WOMEN**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**f someone asked me which woman, Walt Disney's Cinderella or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, would have a better chance at having a successful and satisfying career, hands down I would say Cinderella. Not because she married Prince Charming, but because, even though Cinderella was emotionally abused by her stepmother and stepsisters (not to mention her father for going along with it to begin with), Cinderella demonstrated an ability to perform household chores, to create a world of her own with the mice and rabbits and other animals, to withstand an impoverished emotional environment without collapsing and to act independently by sneaking out to the ball. She also had the benefit of the Blue Fairy, someone whose nurture and care made Cinderella believe that the world just might possess others who would treat her lovingly.

So, if Prince Charming's assets should decline, Cinderella would be a good choice of mate since she could sustain work, tolerate setbacks, befriend others and exhibit some spunk and belief that the world harbored positive things for her. I know this version is somewhat a different take on the current negative view of Cinderella as a woman who bases her life on finding the right man, but I saw different qualities in her.

On the other hand, despite *Lolita's* beauty, *Lolita* would have a terrible time of building a career or being on her own. Of course, I am

helped in this conclusion by knowing the future that Nabokov carves out for Lolita, but, nevertheless, the fate of his character is predictable, given Lolita's history.

After Professor Humbert Humbert rapes Lolita, her life as a victim is sealed. From that moment on, Humbert keeps Lolita in an emotional prison. He threatens to send the minor child away to reform school if she doesn't cooperate. This cooperation, of course, includes providing sexual favors, not having a more appropriate social life of her own and not telling anyone about the two of them.

The proof of the damage is Lolita's poor performance at the private school where Humbert sends her. Here Lolita is removed from the daily threat of Humbert's advances, living amongst people she could possibly tell about the abuse, and yet Lolita does nothing but get poor grades. The anguish of Lolita's world is too much for her to bear, and she becomes seriously depressed and ill. Eventually, she runs away with another unsuitable person and then finally marries a man who is limited financially, intellectually and emotionally.

Several years later, when Humbert finally tracks her down, we are disturbed but probably not surprised to find Lolita terribly plain, terribly ordinary, and terribly burdened with raising a young family and living a marginal existence. Life has taught Lolita that men rule and that once a victim, always a victim.

The lessons I'm trying to convey in these two stories are that you don't have to have a perfect life or perfect family in order to succeed and that sexual abuse is a force not easily overcome. Yes, people do triumph over sexual abuse, but, of course, I am making a broad point by drawing upon Nabokov's literary warnings about irresponsible adults.

Fairy tales are filled with grim accounts of what happens to children from inadequate families. I don't know what kind of careers Hansel and Gretel or Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* might have accomplished, but I would guess that they all would have done well. Hansel and Gretel showed spunk and independence, and Belle had a father who valued and believed in her.

The life and career histories of real people who have been sexually and emotionally abused are a little spottier. Virginia Woolf's uncle sexually abused her, and she grew up to be a talented but emotionally tortured author who killed herself by walking into the sea.

On the other hand, although we don't know for sure whether

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was sexually abused by her father, his hold on her is highly distressing. His emotional fusion was hardly healthy, and this factor, combined with his refusal to permit suitors, makes me rather suspect of the father-daughter relationship. Regardless, Elizabeth was able to lead a full personal and career life once she and Robert Browning eloped. In part, what enabled her success was her multifaceted determination. She made a life for herself through her writing in spite of and because of her cloistered family circumstances. And when Robert Browning presented an opportunity to escape, she took it.

So, perfect pasts are not necessary for happy futures. A history of abuse of any kind is not the death knell to productive and contented lives. Yet, the 100 incest survivors in my study attest to the damage that sexual abuse brings.

Only recently have the after-effects of abuse become known, but little mention has been made of the impact of incest on work and career. Just how many women are potentially work-affected by the devastation of incest? According to United States Census Bureau reports in 1994, at any given time almost 50 percent of the workforce is comprised of women. That's 15.4 million women. Of these women, approximately 16 percent have been sexually abused before the age of eighteen by a family member. Bear in mind that this 16 percent, a ratio of one out of every six women, is a conservative prevalence rate. Consequently, over two million working women struggle with the long-term affects of incest. The American public is terrorized by statistics that within a woman's lifetime her chances of getting breast cancer are one out of eight or nine. But at least one out of every six women must overcome daily the impact of incest.

When I consulted with the Massachusetts Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, I learned that over a third of the women with career difficulties identified themselves as incest survivors. In a recent conversation I had with a Human Resource Administrator of a large corporation, she indicated that between 30 percent and 40 percent of the women employees referred for counseling were incest survivors. My study confirmed that incest survivors were far more likely than nonabused people to have serious difficulties with work and career. But hardly anyone is talking about them.

The stories of the incest survivors in my study remind me of the plight of Cassandra, whom the Greek gods cursed by not allowing

anyone to believe in her prophecies. Similarly, amongst those survivors who linked their work problems to their incest, they said no one else saw the connection. Many of the survivors said they felt like Ingrid Bergman's character Paula in the movie *Gaslight*, tormented by her abusive husband and led to believe that she was imagining the flickering lights and sounds in the attic. The survivors said they had been terribly "gaslighted," left to believe that their work difficulties were all "in their heads."

We now know their problems are real. But before I examine these struggles, first let me define my terms.

## **TERMS**

### **Incest, Caregivers and Survivors**

I have defined incest as an act performed by an adult caregiver on a dependant youth that involves oral, tactile, genital, anal or other erogenous contact.

The definition of caregiver can include stepparents, governesses, au pairs, custodial others or caregiver-siblings whom the incest survivor perceives as a primary caregiver. The incidence of incest can be once or many times over the years. I use the term survivors to refer to all the women in my study who experienced incest. I am using the words sexually abused interchangeably with incest or incested.

### **Work, Career and Success**

Usually, we think of work as a paying job that may be time limited. Unlike career, work is not necessarily subject to hierarchal goal attainment of increasing status, money or responsibility. Yet, a person often sees a career as something she is, since career usually involves a process of identity status whereby an individual includes as a self-label the name of the job title.

In contrast, people often regard a job as something they do. For example, a librarian says she is a librarian, whereas someone who works at the grocery store as a bagger may say she bags groceries. The word occupation typically describes a lifelong pathway (life-course)