The secret of intra-familial sexual abuse of girls: Who keeps it and how?

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Purpose: Disclosure of intra-familial sexual abuse of girls is a complex and multidimensional issue, which challenges everyone involved, including the survivors, their families, their community and the professionals working in the field. Dilemmas concerning how to locate the survivors and help them tell their story, and how to choose the most appropriate interventions, test the expertise of both professionals and policymakers. This study focuses on how women survivors of child sexual abuse by a male perpetrator perceive family members who have taken part in keeping it secret and the family members’ multiple ways of doing so.

Method: A thematic, qualitative approach drew data from 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Jewish Israeli women sexually abused as children by a male perpetrator.

Results: Several secret keepers, as well as their unique ways of keeping the secret were revealed. The keepers identified by the interviewees were the perpetrator (father, brother or brother in law), the mother, the family as a whole and the community or society. Means for keeping the secret included presenting a normative public façade of the perpetrator and family; presenting the perpetrator as psychologically unstable and even fragile, with multiple personas; reframing the abuse as normative or understandable; acting like the phoenix rising unscathed from the ashes; and making a monument of the abuser. These are explained and discussed in the context of the wider concepts of secrecy in society.

Conclusions: Complex and dynamic mechanisms for maintaining secrecy and the social structures undergirding them must be addressed in order to help women survivors of sexual abuse and prevent further cases. Discussing these tactics may also help ease the blame and shame so common among children as well as adult survivors.