

## ADMITTERS AND DENIERS AMONG ADOLESCENT SEX OFFENDERS AND THEIR FAMILIES: A Preliminary Study

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*In a comparison of five adolescent male sexual offenders who denied the charges prior to treatment and five who admitted to them, substantial differences emerged between the groups in terms of family organization. In addition, parental nurturance and adolescent self-esteem were found to be positively correlated, as were lack of clarity and consistency in communication by parents and mixed messages to the children about deviant and nondeviant sexuality.*

This study derives from a pilot project conducted at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic (PCGC) during a 30-month period from November 1981 to July 1984. Over a hundred adolescent sex offenders, referred primarily through the juvenile justice system, were seen in family, group, and individual treatment.

In approximately one-half of the cases, the adolescents denied the charges at the point of referral to PCGC. The form of denial varied: the incident never happened, it was a wrongful accusation, the victim was not a credible person (e.g., the victim was so seriously disturbed that he or she could not be believed).

Their families invariably supported the adolescents in the denial. This contrasts with other cases involving delinquent behavior, such as drug abuse, stealing, and truancy, in which the families do not deny the problems. The denial seemed to be closely associated with the sexual nature of the offense.

About one-third of those adolescents who

initially denied the allegations admitted to some part of the charges later on in treatment. However, clinical observation indicated that denial or admission at the point of referral is closely related to family dynamics. It was also noted that the adolescent offenders tended to be found in one of two extremes of family organization: enmeshed or disengaged. The concept of family organization as a continuum of interaction ranging from enmeshment to disengagement was described by Minuchin and colleagues (1967).

In a study of adolescent substance abuse and suicide attempts, Rosman (1980) found that, in enmeshed family systems, homeostasis was maintained through denial. In disengaged family systems, extreme behavior by the symptomatic member tended to force family involvement. Similar characteristics were observed in many of the adolescent sex offenders and their families at PCGC; this raised the possibility of a relationship between denial of the sexual charges and an enmeshed family system, and between ad-

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mission of the charges and a disengaged system.

The relationship between the extent of parental nurturance and adolescent self-esteem was also of interest. It has been noted (Marohn, 1979) that some delinquents act out violently when overstimulated not by angry or hostile feelings, but by strong affectional longings and emotions, implying an unmet need in the child for parental affection and emotional support. The adolescents in our pilot project appeared to have a poor self-image, and their families had reported a frequent lack of continuity in the caretaking history of the child, indicating inconsistent or inadequate nurturance, and in many instances outright abandonment.

Finally, clinical findings suggested that lack of information or distorted information about sexuality might be associated with the adolescent sex offender's behavior. Families generally seem reticent to deal with sexual issues and their reticence is compounded by the attitude of professionals in the family therapy field. It has been pointed out (Maddock, 1983) that family therapists have traditionally kept sexual issues separate from their work with families. Sex has been considered a special area within the family field.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Based on the clinical observations of the pilot project, a small study was undertaken, consisting of ten male adolescents aged 12 to 18 (seven of them between the ages of 13 and 15) and their families. The offenders were new referrals, chosen sequentially as they were referred to the program until equal numbers of those who admitted the charges (the admitters) and those who denied them (the deniers) were obtained. Admission and denial were based on the court records and the statements of the families at the point of referral, prior to treatment.

Eight of the adolescents were Afro-American, two were Caucasian. Their fam-

ilies fell fairly equally in Classes II (medium business, minor professional, technicians) through V (unskilled laborers, welfare recipients) of the Hollingshead Four-Factor Index of Social Class (Hollingshead, 1975). Five of the boys lived with their natural mother, two with both natural parents, one with a parent and stepparent, one with an adoptive mother, and one with other relatives. Except for slightly less residential stability in the former, the families of the admitters and the deniers were demographically similar.

Of the 11 victims (two, both males, were the victims of one offender), seven were between two and five years old, and four between six and seven; seven were girls and four were boys. Nine of them were neighbors or otherwise acquainted with the offender, one was a sibling, and the last was also a relative.

### Measures

The adolescents and their families were assessed through the use of self-report measures, observations of the families as they performed specific interactional tasks, and structured interviews.

The self-report measures included Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES II) (Olson, Portner, & Bell, 1982), Child and Parent Concepts of Each Other (CPCEO) (Schaefer, 1965; Schaefer, Edgerton, & Finkelstein, 1976) and the Offer Self Image Questionnaire for Adolescents (OSIQ) (Offer, Ostrov, & Howard, 1981).

The observation of family interaction was accomplished through the use of the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic Family Task (Family Task) (Rosman, 1978), a method of observing family members in interaction with one another as they answer and discuss a series of questions or perform a task together.

A constructed instrument based on the Revealed Difference Method (Strodtbeck, 1962) combined self-report and observational methods in measuring family com-

munication about sexuality. The parents (or parent substitutes) and adolescent offender each completed a multiple choice questionnaire pertaining to adolescent development and sexuality. The questionnaire included several items related to the commission or allegation of sexual offenses. Upon completion, the parents and the adolescent were asked to discuss the two items on which there was the greatest difference of opinion, and try to reach agreement.

The structured interviews with the parents and the adolescents were conducted separately to determine the consistency of the subject's caretaking situation in his growing up, and to explore victimization and offender-behavior history of the adolescent and the family. The information obtained in the interviews was examined clinically.

## RESULTS

The findings indicated a substantial difference in the profiles of the admitter and the denier groups, as shown in TABLE 1. The adolescents who denied the sexual allegations tended to be in an enmeshed family organization, while those who admitted to the charges were in a disengaged family

system. There were significant differences between the groups on the FACES measure ( $p = .03$ ) and the Family Task measure ( $p = .01$ ), reflecting more extreme scores for the admitters, whose disengagement was rigid.

The findings for the combined groups indicated significant positive correlations between the extent of parental nurturance and adolescent self-esteem (CPCEO,  $p = .05$ ; Parent-Child Affect section of Family Task,  $p = .01$ ). In comparing the self-esteem of admitters and deniers, it was found that the admitters' level was significantly lower (OSIQ,  $p = .035$ ). A significant positive correlation was also found between lack of clarity of communication and mixed messages about sexuality ( $p = .05$ ).

Analysis of the exploratory questions revealed a pattern of sexual abuse among families of offenders. However, contrary to the literature, in which it is reported that more than half of teenage offenders have themselves been victimized as children (Deisher, Wenet, Paparny, Clark, & Fehrenbach, 1981; Freeman-Longo & Wall, 1986; Groth & Lored, 1981; Knopp, 1985), in only one case did the subject report his own prior victimization. For our population, it ap-

Table 1  
PROFILE OF ADMITTERS AND DENIERS

ADMITTERS	DENIERS
Teen-age mother	Overwhelmed parent with little support
Abandoned, first by father	Mother dependent on children for emotional and physical support
Series of abandonments, including literal abandonment by mother	Has been the parentified child
Succession of foster homes or other placements	Poor performance in school overlooked by parents
Neglect/abuse, physical and sexual, in placements	Isolated from peers
Return to mother's home with no connectedness	Preference for the company of younger children
Parents underprotective	Parents overprotective
Child scapegoated, blamed for family problems	Child "nice," dependable, asked to baby-sit for relatives and neighbors
Low self-esteem compared with norms	Significantly higher self-esteem than admitters (within normal range)
Lack of intergenerational communication translates into lack of clarity and mixed messages about sexuality	Family communication, but avoidance of discussions about sexuality
Sexual offense an expression of anger; an attempt to shake up the system and obtain a share of attention, affection	Sexual acting out with young child result of inability to express appropriately with peers
Weak executive functioning; lack of firm rules	Weak executive functioning; lack of firm rules

peared to be too great a threat to the macho image of the adolescents to disclose such information. More recent analysis of the larger group of adolescent offenders in the pilot project at PCGC has also revealed a lower proportion (approximately 25%) of victimizers who had themselves been sexually victimized than is generally reported for this population.

### *Admitters*

Among the admitters, the abandonment was striking. The boys were abandoned, first by their fathers, then by their mothers for crucial periods. The less stable and nurturing background of the admitters is reflected in their significantly lower self-esteem scores, as described above.

There was very little communication in this group, with consequent lack of clarity, and mixed messages about deviant and non-deviant sexuality. Minuchin et al. (1967) noted that while some families waver at times between the two poles of disengagement and enmeshment, others are "frozen" into a predominant way of organizing their interactions. In this study, the admitters were frozen in a pattern of disengagement.

As can be seen in TABLE 1, both groups were weak in executive functioning. The reasons, however, were different. In the admitters group, the child was disconnected, pseudo-mature, and inappropriately autonomous.

### *Case 1*

Richard, age 14, was one of the boys in the admitters group. For most of his life he had lived with a variety of relatives. After a prolonged period of living with his stepfather in the south and visiting his mother during the summers, he returned to his mother's home to live with her, her paramour, and their four-year-old daughter. His six-year-old brother was also in the home. Three months later, Richard left because he "did not like the housing project" his mother lived in. He went to live with his maternal grandmother, with whom he had lived for various periods in the past. The following month, he was charged with raping his four-year-old half-sister. Richard admitted to the charges. He had raped her in his mother's bedroom during a visit to his mother's house. In the structured inter-

view, Richard stated he did it "because my mother treats her like a queen."

Richard's entire life seemed marked by a lack of connectedness and nurturance. When asked, in the structured interview, "Who took care of you, mainly?" Richard answered, "Grandmother." When asked who made the rules ("Who told you what time to come in, what time to go to bed . . .?") Richard said, "My stepfather." When asked, "Who did you go to when you were hungry, got hurt, had a fight. . .?" Richard's answer was, "No one."

The sexual assault was an expression of Richard's anger about being disregarded, an act of revenge on both his mother and his sister. At the same time it reflected a longing to change the existing pattern of relationships so as to obtain a share of attention and affection. This was in fact accomplished. Following his adjudication, Richard continued to live with his grandmother, but his mother participated in the treatment at PCGC, which continued for the next year and a half.

### *Deniers*

The adolescents in the denier's group often came from homes where the mothers were overwhelmed and relied on their children for physical and emotional support. The weak executive functioning here results from the diffuse boundaries and lack of differentiation of roles. One child in particular, the eventual perpetrator, becomes parentified. This child usually does not do well in school but that is overlooked, as are other problems. The family communicates but they avoid discussions of sexuality.

This adolescent does not develop a peer group; he is a loner. He is dependable, however, and is often relied upon to baby-sit for neighbors and relatives, a classic setup for a boy of this type. He has sexual feelings but does not act appropriately on them with friends his own age. In a baby-sitting situation with a young child, where he is comfortable and confident, he does act on them. Although enticement or bribery is often sufficient, he may threaten the child in order to obtain compliance.

### *Case 2*

Fifteen-year-old Tony was the only child in a one-parent, low-income family. He was charged with raping his mother's five-year-old goddaughter, for whom he baby-sat frequently. Medical evidence corroborated

the child's complaint that Tony had molested her. According to the victim, Tony threatened to "mess me up" if she told anyone, and to keep her from ever seeing his mother. Tony was adjudicated delinquent although he denied the charges. In the structured interview, Tony confided that he had performed rectal intercourse on the child three times in a period of two years. He did not want his mother to know because "she would never forgive me."

Tony admitted to the rape later in treatment, but he maintained his denial throughout the research protocol with his family. At one point, he and his family were asked to discuss and resolve their different responses to the question: "Why might a boy deny that he had sexual contact with a much younger child?" Tony's mother thought a boy might deny "to keep from dealing with what he did to the younger child." Tony's uncle answered, "to keep other people from looking down on him." Tony said, "to keep his parents from getting upset." The three were to decide on the best answer. In the discussion, it seemed that the mother was touched by the boy's response. She was aware that Tony often tried to keep her from getting upset. He needn't worry, she said, they can always find a solution. The family did not decide on the best answer.

## DISCUSSION

The association of admitters with disengaged family systems and deniers with enmeshed ones offers direction for dealing with specific problems that might not otherwise be apparent in the initial stages of contact. Despite the leverage of court commitment, families of sex-offenders are difficult to engage. Greater knowledge of the family system at the outset helps the clinician in the difficult process of joining with the families and ensuring their ongoing involvement. Understanding of the family organization may provide a tool for developing a plan of treatment appropriate to it. In the disengaged family, the primary need is for integration of the adolescent into the system; in the enmeshed family, the goal is the differentiation of family members and greater development of the adolescent's autonomy.

The effect on the organizational style of the family after the adolescent admits to the sexual assault charges does not appear to be great. The family with typically enmeshed organization does not change when the ad-

olescent who at first denied the charge admits to it later in treatment. The families themselves frequently maintain denial, insisting that the boy has been pressured into admission by the psychotherapy peer group (Stevenson, Castillo, & Sefarbi, 1989), or they will accept the admission only with great difficulty. For the boys who admit to the offense at the outset, the family histories indicate that the interactive pattern had frozen into disengagement prior to the disclosure of the sex-offending behavior. A more comprehensive, longitudinal study, however, in which a more complete history might be taken, could help to clarify the different levels and effects of abandonment as well as the various functions served by denial.

Other questions relate to the areas of nurturance and self-esteem. While the nurturance in the denier's group is significantly greater than in the admitter's, the degree and quality of nurturance need to be measured against the requirements and responses of normal families. This preliminary study also indicates the need for further exploration of differences and similarities between adolescent sex offenders and other delinquent populations.

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