Searching for Meaning in Misfortune: Making Sense of Incest

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A critical feature of many undesirable life events is that they often shatter the victim's perception of living in an orderly, meaningful world. Many authors have suggested that following such outcomes, the search for meaning is a common and adaptive process. This paper explores the validity of that claim by considering data from a recent study of 77 adult women who were victimized as children: survivors of father-daughter incest. In the process, several central questions regarding the search for meaning are addressed. How important is such a search years after a crisis? Over time, are people able to make sense of their aversive life experiences? What are the mechanisms by which individuals find meaning in their negative outcomes? Does finding meaning in one's victimization facilitate long-term adjustment to the event? Finally, what are the implications of an inability to find meaning in life's misfortunes?

The challenge posed to an individual's existing beliefs and world views may play a critical role in the trauma of a severe victimization. Experiencing an undesirable life event such as death of a loved one, sudden illness or disability, war or criminal assault, often shatters people's views that they live in an orderly, understandable and meaningful world (cf.

Benner, Roskies, & Lazarus, 1980; Cornwell, Nurcombe, & Stevens, 1977; Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Parkes, 1971). As a result, individuals frequently search for some meaning or try to make sense out of their negative experiences (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Cornwell et al., 1977; Glick et al., 1974; Shanfield, 1980; Taylor, in press).

This search for meaning has been considered to be an adaptive strategy in coping with an undesirable life event (cf. Benner et al., 1980; Moos & Tsu, 1977). Moreover, Frankl (1963) has maintained that the search for meaning is a primary human motivation (and see Lerner, 1980, for a related argument). Implicit in the view that this search is adaptive is the assumption that such a search will result in finding meaning; that is, that sense *can* be made of the negative outcome. In fact, in their review of the literature on coping with stressful life events, Silver and Wortman (1980) report that many people apparently come to view their aversive experience from a purposeful or meaningful perspective (see, e.g., Andreasen & Norris, 1972; Chodoff, Friedman, & Hamburg, 1964; Cornwell et al., 1977; Doka & Schwarz, 1978; Helmrath & Steinitz, 1978). However, past research has not tested this hypothesis directly.

Several authors have also suggested that finding meaning in life's misfortunes may be important in regaining or maintaining mental and physical health (cf. Antonovsky, 1979; Lifton, 1968). For example, in a stimulating and important paper, Bulman and Wortman (1977) described the importance of the search for meaning among individuals who recently had been paralyzed in a sudden traumatic accident. All but one of the 29 subjects in their sample had generated an answer to the question "why me?", and the authors speculated that the ability to place the accident in a broad, philosophical perspective influenced subjects' ability to cope effectively. Natterson and Knudson (1960) anecdotally reported that parents who calmly accepted the death of their child following a prolonged illness tended "to see the medical problem in its broader aspects, with the beginning of an expressed desire to help all children" (p. 463). In a sample of cancer patients, Weisman and Worden (1976) suggested that those individuals who were able to find something favorable in their illness were least distressed by their condition.

Despite these suggestions, little systematic research has addressed the topic of searching for meaning in undesirable life events. In fact, six years after Bulman and Wortman's (1977) insights, a number of issues regarding this search remain untested. Specifically, how important is the search for meaning years after a crisis? In looking back on important negative events, do individuals have a desire to understand their past (cf. Miller & Porter, 1980)? Over time, are people able to make sense of their aversive life experiences? What are the mechanisms by which in-

dividuals find meaning in their outcomes and what kinds of answers are generated by their search? Does finding meaning in one's victimization facilitate long-term adjustment to the event? What are the implications of an inability to find meaning in life's misfortunes?

This paper will explore the search for an ability to find meaning in detail by considering data collected in a recent study designed to shed light on these and other questions. We chose to examine the issue in a population of adult women who were victimized as children: survivors of father-daughter incest. This population is well-suited for this examination for a number of reasons. First, the negative experience occurred during childhood and terminated during adolescence for most of the subjects in our sample. This is a critical developmental stage during which individuals formulate their generalized views of the world (cf. Antonovsky, 1979), and girls are likely to develop their views of men, of authority figures, and of themselves in particular. The betrayal of trust and the abuse of the parental role which are inherent in incest are likely to offer devastating challenges to such formulations. Second, the incestuous encounters were frequent and of a prolonged nature for most subjects, and were accompanied by physical violence for several of them. Recurrent aversive events with a significant other that continue over an extended period of time may trigger repeated challenges to world views. Finally, the incestuous experiences had terminated an average of 20 years prior to our study, and afforded us the opportunity to investigate the role that the search for meaning plays in successful long-term adjustment to an aversive life event.

This study also explored family dynamics of the incestuous household, subjects' attributions of blame, perceptions of control, perceived social support and coping strategies, and the long term impact on sex role attitudes, sexual functioning, and mental, physical and social health. A more detailed report is forthcoming. Further information is available from the authors upon request.

The Study

In an attempt to improve upon the methodological limitations of past research on incest (see Avery-Clark, O'Neil, & Laws, 1981; Meiselman, 1978; Vander Mey & Neff, 1982; and Courtois, Note 1, for reviews and a discussion of these limitations), we sought to obtain a broad, unbiased sample of respondents for our study. To do so, we avoided methods employed by previous researchers in the area, such as recruiting subjects from psychiatric or correctional institutions, court or police records, clinical outpatient samples, self-help or therapy groups for incest survivors,

or through advertisements in personal columns in newspapers. Instead, we located potential respondents through widespread publicity of our study throughout Southern Ontario during a three week period in 1982. This publicity took the form of short newspaper stories and items in regular feature columns in major newspapers, public service announcements on radio and television stations, and posters placed in YMCA's, and other public centers. Women at least 18 years of age who had had an incest experience (self-defined) with a father or other male guardian were invited to telephone the researchers collect to request a copy of an anonymous, mail questionnaire. The response was rapid, and during the three week period almost 100 calls were received. Of those eligible women who received copies of the 29 page questionnaire, completed ones were returned by 77 of them (over an 80% rate of return).

Despite our best efforts to recruit respondents through a variety of unbiased sources, the extent to which our sample is representative of the population of adult survivors of father-daughter incest remains unknown. Because we relied on women coming forth to participate, however anonymously, those who most feared exposure were likely to refrain from doing so. It is also possible that women who have coped best with their experience (and who therefore might be less inclined to participate in such a study) or those who have coped worse (and are therefore incapacitated or otherwise unable or unwilling to volunteer) are not adequately represented. Despite these limitations, we maintain that this sample is unique in its representation of a broad spectrum of ages, income and education levels and is superior to those employed in past research on the topic of incest. Moreover, we feel its use is appropriate for exploring the broader issues of coping with victimization addressed in this paper.

The traditional legal definition as well as the popular view of incest is usually limited to sexual intercourse between blood relatives. While father-daughter incest is probably the most prevalent variant (Justice & Justice, 1979; Meiselman, 1978; Vander Mey & Neff, 1982; Courtois, Note 1), blood ties do not appear critical. Rather, the closeness of the authority figure in terms of being someone from whom the child would normally expect family-like care and protection seems most important (Meiselman, 1978; Vander Mey & Neff, 1982). In addition, sexual contact other than intercourse is also experienced and defined as incest by the victim (Herman & Hirschman, 1981b; Courtois, Note 1). In fact, sexual acts other than intercourse appear to be more common (Finkelhor, 1980; Note 2). For research purposes, we have thus defined incest as explicit sexual contact between a female child and father or other adult male serving a father role (see Finkelhor, 1980; Herman & Hirschman, 1981b; Meiselman, 1978; Courtois, Note 1; and Finkelhor, Note 2, for similar research definitions).

Eighty-five percent of the women in our sample reported incestuous encounters with natural fathers, stepfathers, and foster fathers; 15% had encounters with other male guardians such as uncles or grandfathers. The most common type of sexual contact was genital fondling of the subject by the offender, experienced by over 90% of the respondents. Other forms of sexual contact included fondling of the respondents' breasts, genital fondling of the offender, and oral and anal sex. Although intercourse was attempted in almost 60% of the cases, intercourse actually occurred in only 32% of the sample. Twenty-five percent of the sample reported that physical violence accompanied sexual contact at least sometimes, and 50% reported having been physically forced to participate. Sixty-two percent of the offenders misrepresented what they were doing to the subjects, such as describing the behavior as a game or telling the child it was something all fathers did.

The incest was frequent and of long duration in many cases: almost 50% of the women reported that encounters occurred once a week or more and almost 50% reported that incidents continued five years or more. The average age of onset of the incest experience was age eight, and it terminated on average at age 13. Respondents in our study were between the ages of 18 to 72 years old at the time of completion of our question-naire. The average length of time since the incest had terminated was 20 years, ranging from three to 65 years ago.

Over 80% of the sample had sought professional assistance for emotional problems, with almost half of the women maintaining that such help was sought specifically because of their incest experiences. Reports of attempted suicide were also extremely high, with 46% of the sample reporting having attempted suicide at least once. However, from outward indicators the respondents in our sample appeared to be functioning reasonably well in the community. Over 50% were currently married, and almost 70% were parents. Education levels of respondents ranged from completing grammar school to receiving advanced degrees, with 85% completing high school. Less than 25% of the sample had an annual household income under $10,000, and over 25% had a household income of over $30,000 per year. Only 3% reported being unemployed, and the remainder included homemakers, students, unskilled workers (e.g., wait-resses, factory workers, salespersons), clerical workers, and professionals (e.g., nurses, teachers, social workers, managers and accountants).

Because successful adjustment to an aversive life event can be mea-sured in many different domains, and such measures need not be posi-tively correlated (see Silver & Wortman, 1980), effective coping was operationalized in multiple ways in this investigation. Psychological distress was assessed using a 90-item self-report symptom checklist, the SCL-90

(Derogatis, Rickels, & Rock, 1976), which provides a global index of the severity of current distress. Social functioning was assessed using the Social Adjustment Scale (SAS Self-Report) (Weissman & Bothwell, 1976), a 42-item scale measuring performance in a variety of social roles. Self-esteem was measured through the use of the ten item Rosenberg (1965) scale. The final measure of coping effectiveness was a self-assessment of the degree to which respondents had resolved their feelings about the incest, had dealt with it, and were able to accept it. In this sample, social and psychological functioning, as well as self-esteem, were all significantly and positively correlated with one another (r's ranging from .58 to .66, all p's < .001), and all were positively correlated with self-reported resolution (r's ranging from .30 to .51, all p's < .01). (All analyses to be reported employ two-tailed tests of significance.)

The search for meaning was operationalized with two closed response questions. Using a 5-point scale ranging from "never" to "always," respondents found themselves wondering "why me?", were asked how often they and how often they found themselves "searching for some reason, meaning, or way to make sense out of their incest experience." The items appeared midway in the questionnaire, after the standardized scales of adjustment, questions about the subject's family at the time of the incest, questions probing details of the incest experience, and assessments of attributions of blame. As expected, these two items were highly correlated ($r(73)$ = .56, p < .001), and were therefore combined into an index conceptualized as measuring the frequency with which subjects engaged in a search for meaning.

The Search for Meaning

Even though their encounters had terminated an average of 20 years previously, over 80% of the respondents still reported searching at least sometimes for some reason, meaning or way to make sense of their incest experience. Fewer than 10% of the women reported that they were not presently doing so. Almost 80% of our sample agreed that making sense of the incest was still important to them. Although outward indicators might suggest recovery from their experience, for most women the search for understanding continued:

> Why did this happen, just why?

> Why didn't I say no? Why didn't my mother do more about it? Why did my father do what he did? Would it have still happened if I had said no? Or if my sister had said yes?

Although the search for meaning was quite common for most of the subjects in our sample, we attempted to identify whether some factors specific to the incest experience stimulated a more active search than others. Analyses of the relationships between the frequency of the search for meaning and the "severity" of the outcome, such as the frequency of the incestuous encounters, whether the sex had been accompanied by physical violence, and whether the contact progressed to intercourse, failed to reveal any significant effects. While age of onset of the incest also appeared to be unimportant, the older the woman was at the termination of her experience, the more likely she was to search for meaning at the time of our study ($r(69) = .24, p < .05$). Similarly, the longer the encounters continued during childhood, the more frequent the search as an adult (Spearman $r(71) = .22, p \leq .06$), although this result only approached significance.

While the search for meaning apparently continued for a long period of time, we were interested in determining whether time had any beneficial effect. In fact, the frequency of the search for meaning decreased as the number of years since the incest had terminated increased ($r(69) = -.43$, $p < .001$). But almost 75% of the women whose experiences had terminated more than 20 years previously still reported searching to find some meaning in the incest at least sometimes. In addition, time did not decrease the importance of finding meaning for our sample, nor, as we will see below, did it assist the women in finding meaning in their victimization.

Attempting to achieve a resolution of one's traumatic experiences (i.e., searching for meaning) may fill thought processes with repeated ruminations of the "unfinished business" (cf. Horowitz, 1976, 1979; Janis, 1971; Parkes, 1972a; Singer, 1978). In fact, many psychoanalytic theorists, beginning with Freud (1920), have seen the motivation for repeated reviewing of an experience to be a need to gain mastery over the negative life event (see Horowitz, 1976, and Janis, 1971, for a discussion of this literature). In order to explore this process in more detail, respondents were queried about the frequency with which they experienced ruminations about their incestuous encounters (i.e., how often memories, thoughts or mental pictures of the incest experience popped into their minds) and the extent to which such ruminations were intrusive and disrupted other activities. For many, the images and memories of their past were quite vivid. For example:

> I am 72 years of age and I can still "see" as if it just happened, my mother scolding me that day. . .

Similarly, from a 47 year old woman who described the encounters that occurred over 40 years earlier:

> I can see flowers on the wallpaper, the warm sunlight through the window, the curls around the edges of wallpaper and linoleum. I'm on my back on the bed. . .

Results confirmed the prediction that the more active the search for meaning, the more respondents reported recurrent (r(73) = .49, $p <$ .001), intrusive (r(72) = .36, $p < .01$) and disruptive (r(72) = .33, $p <$ .01) ruminations about the incest experience. While the direction of causality is unclear, we suggest that there is likely to be an interplay between ruminations about the incest and a search for meaning in it. Mentally reviewing disturbing memories of the past may be the mechanism by which our respondents attempted to make sense of their experience (cf. Glick et al., 1974). However, intrusive ruminations may also prompt a need to understand the experience and its persistent effects (e.g., "Why am I remembering this? Why play this movie again?"). Memories, thoughts and mental pictures of the incest are likely to be triggered by salient cues in the woman's everyday experience (e.g., "Usually I remember in response to some contemporary occurrence which reminds me of the past."). Such reminders might include recent contact with their fathers, interactions with their immediate families, or current sexual activity. In fact, more than 80% of our sample reported that engaging in sex brought back some memories of the incest experience (see also Herman & Hirschman, 1981b).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the extent to which respondents were still searching for meaning in their experience years after its termination was related to their level of psychosocial adjustment. The more active the search, the more current psychological distress reported by respondents (r(73) = .48, $p < .001$), the greater the current impairment in social functioning (r(73) = .25, $p < .05$), the lower the self-esteem (r(68) = .28, $p < .02$), and the lower the self-reported resolution of the experience (r(72) = $-.41$, $p < .001$). Comparable results have also been reported shortly after a victimization. In a recent study of individuals who were physically disabled in a sudden, traumatic accident (Silver, Note 3), the search for meaning was associated with an increase in self reported anger, depression and anxiety three weeks post injury (Silver & Wortman, Note 4). While it was unclear in that study whether such a process would be adaptive in the long run, the results from the present investigation suggest negative consequences when the search for meaning continues for an extended period of time.

Why might such a focus on the search for meaning lead to increased psychological distress and result in impaired social functioning? Like ruminations, it is probable that there is a constant interplay between the search for meaning and emotional response (cf. Folkman, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1979; Lazarus, Kanner, & Folkman, 1980). That is, it is likely that the process of searching for meaning, with its accompanying painful memories, produces distress (cf. Singer, 1978); similarly, increased distress is likely to trigger such a search. Because those who search for meaning

are ruminating about the past, perhaps they are also less able to focus coping efforts on the present and the future. In trying to understand their past, they may in effect get "stuck" in the past both voluntarily and through involuntary intrusions of ongoing thought processes. As one incest victim in our sample wrote:

> It is useful to have the past in mind, but not always. It can help stimulate thought but can also keep one from really listening and learning in the present.

Making Sense of Incest

Were the women in our sample able to find meaning in their victimization? Interestingly, yes and no. Over 50% of the subjects who were actively searching for meaning an average of 20 years after the incest had terminated reported that they were unable to make *any* sense of it. For example:

> I always ask myself why, over and over, but there is no answer.

> I can't make sense of it — but I can't make sense of a tornado either. They occur, they are devastating, they go away. Do they serve a useful purpose? No.

> There is no sense to be made. This should not have happened to me or any child.

Moreover, it was not simply true that the longer these women searched, the more likely they were to find meaning. In fact, time did not assist our subjects in making sense of their experiences. We failed to find any significant difference in the number of years since the incest had terminated among those who were successful in their search for meaning and those who were not. We also failed to find any differences between the two groups in terms of age at onset, age at termination, duration or frequency of the incest encounters, whether violence had accompanied the sex, or whether the incest had continued to intercourse (all p's > .1). In addition, having received professional assistance for emotional problems or because of the incest specifically, or having attended a self-help group for incest survivors was no more likely among those women who had been able to make sense of their experience than among those who had not (all p's > .1).

What, then, enabled some women to find meaning as a result of their search while others were unable to do so? While we cannot answer this question definitively, our data do suggest that having an opportunity to ventilate one's feelings about the victimization (cf. Dunkel-Schetter & Wortman, 1982; Silver & Wortman, 1980) may be important. Women in our study were asked whether or not they presently had "at least one person that you can confide in about the incest experience." Those women

who did not have a confidant were significantly less likely to report having made sense of their incest experience than those women who had such a person ($\chi^2 = 6.25$, $p \leq .01$). In fact, four respondents who participated in our study had *never* before revealed their incest experience to anyone; none of them had been able to make sense of it. Only one of the women who presently had no one in whom to confide reported having found any meaning; the other nine women were searching without success. (Also see Pennebaker & Hoover, Note 5, for an insightful discussion of the detrimental health consequences that follow from a failure to confide about childhood sexual traumas.) While making sense of one's experience may be especially difficult when one has no one with whom to confide, it must be recognized that the presence of a confidant does not guarantee that meaning will be found. Forty-three percent of those who presently had someone to talk to had still been unable to make sense of their experience.

How did those women who were able to make sense of the incest do so? For many, the search seemed to take the form of a need to understand the dynamics which allowed the incest to occur. Therefore, in finding meaning, most respondents tried to make the experience understandable by examining the character, motives or behavior of their fathers, or by considering the situation in their homes at the time. In fact, 56% of the women who made sense of the incest did so by noting that it was an explainable consequence of other circumstances in the household, such as death of their mother or discontinued sexual relations between their parents. Many made sense by interpreting or sympathizing with their father's needs, such as his desire for love or for sexual satisfaction. It is difficult to assess the validity of these explanations, but the literature on incest is informative in this regard. Meiselman (1978) and Herman and Hirschman (1981a; 1981b) report a high incidence of sexual estrangement between mothers and fathers in incestuous households (see also Westermeyer, 1978), and note a frequent absence, or physical or mental illness, of the mother.

Over 30% of the respondents who made sense of their experience reported that their father must have been mentally ill or have had a serious characterological disorder. (The literature regarding the prevalence of mental illness or a characterological disorder among incest perpetrators is inconclusive; see Meiselman, 1978, for a review.) Just over 20% of the respondents reported making sense of the incest by considering positive outcomes that had arisen from the experience:

> I learned over the years that nothing as bad as what I had been through was going to happen again. Now I know there is virtually nothing I cannot overcome.

Approximately 15% of the respondents attempted to link the incest experience to social attitudes or prevailing social conditions.

In the only previous investigation to explore the specific types of meaning explanations offered by victims of an undesirable life event, Bulman and Wortman (1977) identified six major categories (such as "God had a reason" or "predetermination") in which they could place the answers their subjects generated to the question "why me?". In general, these answers seemed to consider the broader, philosophical context of the subject's disabling accident. In contrast, few women in our investigation provided philosophical explanations such as those offered by the respondents in Bulman and Wortman's study. Instead, many of our answers were attributional (cf. Taylor, in press) as opposed to philosophical in nature. Although the reasons for this difference are not clear, there are a few methodological and theoretical possibilities. The act of writing, which tends to encourage more clearly thought out or logical formulations, may have inhibited respondents from tentative hypothesizing or philosophizing. Asking subjects how they "make sense" of their experience may generate different types of explanations than asking them their answers to the question "why me?". It is also possible that since the negative event occurred during childhood, the answers as to "why?" may have been formulated during subjects' youth; broad, philosophical explanations may have been less available at that time. Finally, a number of categories of explanations offered by the subjects in Bulman and Wortman's (1977) study, such as chance, seeing the event as predetermined, or as a matter of probability, seem to explain a sudden, unexpected and uncontrollable life event. However, the incest experience was a chronic one for most of the subjects in our sample. It is unclear whether such philosopical explanations are readily applicable to repeated, long-term, negative life events.

Nonetheless, we found no evidence to suggest that the specific type of answer our respondents generated from their search for meaning was important in terms of coping effectiveness. Rather, as we shall consider in more detail below, what appeared to be critical was whether the women were able to make *any* sense of their incest experience at all (cf. Silver, Note 3; Silver & Wortman, Note 4).

The Value in Finding Meaning

The mixture of women who could and could not make sense of their incest experience provided us with a unique opportunity to explore systematically the possible beneficial effects of finding meaning. Data analyses did confirm the previously untested suggestion that the ability

to find some meaning in one's victimization facilitates effective coping. In fact, those women who were able to make some sense out of their experience reported less psychological distress (F(1,68) = 8.94, p < .005), better social adjustment (F(1,68) = 10.76, p < .005), higher levels of self-esteem (F(1,63) = 20.56, p < .0001), and greater resolution of the experience (F(1,67) = 45.04, p < .0001) than those women who were not able to find any meaning but were still searching. (Three subjects were unable to make any sense of their experience but reported that they were not searching for meaning. Since finding meaning is apparently not an issue for these subjects, they have been excluded from these analyses, as well as those to follow.)

Unexpectedly, although over 90% of the women who made some sense of their victimization reported being at least somewhat satisfied with the answer they had generated, all but two have continued to search for meaning. That is, although finding meaning in their experience apparently reduced the need to search for it when compared to those women who had failed to do so (F(1,68) = 8.00, p < .01), it did not eliminate the need to search entirely. Eighty percent of those who reported having made some sense of their incest experience maintained that they are still searching for some reason, meaning or way to make sense of the incest at least sometimes.

Moreover, although those women who were able to make some sense of their victimization are coping more effectively than those women who are searching to no avail, those who have made sense are still coping significantly worse than population norms available for the standardized adjustment scales employed. Specifically, women who have made sense of the incest report significantly more frequent and intense psychopathological symptoms on the SCL-90 than a population of nonpatient "normals" (t(34) = 7.00, p < .001) (see Derogatis, 1977), and report significantly poorer social functioning on the SAS-SR than a population of women from the community (t (34) = 6.50, p < .0001 (see Weissman, Prusoff, Thompson, Harding, and Myers, 1978).

Similarly, although finding meaning in one's victimization is associated with fewer recurrent (F(1,68) = 19.03, p < .0001), intrusive (F(1,67) = 28.34, p < .0001), disruptive (F(1,67) = 14.29, p < .001) and upsetting (F(1,65) = 23.18, p < .0001) ruminations about the incest experience than searching for meaning unsuccessfully, the ruminations do not appear to stop. Sixty-five percent of those respondents who have been able to make some sense of the incest report that memories, thoughts and mental pictures of their experience continue to pop into their minds at least some-

times. As noted earlier, continuing ruminations may be triggered by salient environmental cues. Their presence may also stimulate a desire to further understand the current ramifications of one's past experience, even if *some* meaning has already been found.

Such findings cast an interesting perspective on finding meaning in life's undesirable events. Making sense of one's experience ought not to be viewed as necessarily closing the issue. In the present study, the search for meaning continued, albeit less often, for most women who reported making sense of the incest and being reasonably satisfied with their answers. Nonetheless, finding meaning does provide some degree of psychological comfort. It appears to permit the victim to coexist with the memory of a severe and painful life event as it reduces the frequency of the search for an even more satisfactory answer, the frequency and intensity of ruminations, and the degree of psychological distress. But the impact of the experience is certainly not forgotten (Silver & Wortman, 1980). As one woman writes:

> It affects me now 10 years later. . . It's just like a scar you get on your body. But only it's on the insides (it's there forever).

The Importance of Finding Meaning

What is the prognosis when efforts at making sense of one's experience are unsuccessful? We have already noted that even those subjects who were able to find meaning continued to search and report recurrent ruminations about the incest. Yet, when compared to the women who had made sense of their experience, those who were unsuccessful reported significantly more recurrent, disruptive, intrusive and painful ruminations, significantly greater levels of psychological distress, and significantly lower levels of social functioning, self-esteem and self-reported resolution of the experience.

In addition, those women who had not been able to make sense of their experience but continued to search for meaning were significantly more distressed as measured by the SCL-90 than nonpatient norms ($t(34) = 8.95, p < .001$), and were no less distressed than a population of heterogeneous psychiatric outpatients (Derogatis, 1977), ($t(34) = 1.29, p > .1$). Those women who were unsuccessful in their search also had poorer levels of social functioning, as measured by the SAS-SR, than a community sample ($t(34) = 7.98, p < .001$) and a group of psychiatric outpatients diagnosed as schizophrenic (Weissman et al., 1978) ($t(34) = 2.86$,

$p < .01$). Clearly, when the search for meaning reaches no conclusion, continued attempts appear to provide little comfort and, indeed, may be maladaptive.

Three subjects who reported being unable to make any sense of their experience did not report searching to find any meaning in it. Perhaps they were not searching because they judged such meaning as unobtainable or because they felt that finding such meaning was unimportant. (Indeed, all three of these respondents agreed that making sense of their experience was not important.) Unfortunately, we have no information as to whether these women had *ever* engaged in the search for meaning; their incest experiences had terminated between 10 and 65 years ago. Furthermore, their number is too small to draw any definitive conclusions. Yet portions of other samples of victims of undesirable life events have also appeared to be unconcerned with the issue of meaning. Less than 50% of the physically disabled subjects who were interviewed three weeks after their disabling accident had asked themselves the question "why me?", and only 55% had done so by two months post injury (Silver, Note 3; Silver & Wortman, Note 4). In a longitudinal study of rape, 29% of the victims reported never having asked the question "why me?" by one year post assault (Abbey, Note 6). Similarly, almost 25% of advanced stage breast cancer patients who had received their diagnosis one month to fourteen years prior to being interviewed reported having never asked themselves this question (Gotay, Note 7).

At this point it is unclear why some individuals appear to be unconcerned with the issue of meaning despite the severity of their victimization. While the need to search and find meaning in one's misfortune has traditionally been viewed as following logically from the trauma of a severe victimization, this is clearly not always the case. Identifying why some individuals are compelled to find meaning in their negative experiences, while others have little need to do so, is a question for future research.

Difficulties in Finding Meaning

For many, making sense of incest appeared impossible, even years later. What features of a victimizing experience are likely to make meaning difficult to find? In this section we consider several possibilities. As we shall see, these features are not unique to incest, and suggest that other life outcomes are likely to pose similar problems.

As noted earlier, experiencing an undesirable life event frequently threatens people's views of living in an understandable, orderly world. When such an event occurs during childhood, the resulting effects may

be devastating. At that time, views of the world are likely to take the form of tentative hypotheses, easily challenged by new data. The aversive experience must therefore be integrated into the child's perceptions of personal invulnerability (cf. Grinker & Spiegel, 1945) and his or her expectations of living in a safe, predictable, controllable world. The ways in which a child integrates this material may be different from those of an adult, and these solutions may lead to difficulties when the child grows older. As Morrison (1979) writes, "Since early childhood stress experiences are more likely to have been interpreted in a global manner, the overall impact of early events tends to persist as a vague, yet pervasive memory which resists attempts at integration into present [adult] construct systems" (p. 136). Aversive childhood events may also color the child's perception, processing, and interpretation of subsequent life experiences (cf. Meichenbaum & Gilmore, in press). In particular, negative outcomes such as incest or other family abuse are likely to hamper sexual and interpersonal development. In fact, Barahal, Waterman, and Martin (1981) have found that abused children demonstrate lack of competence in a number of social cognitive areas including perceiving little personal control over social events and having inaccurate perceptions of social roles. The aversive experience thus continues to have a subtle negative impact, preventing the individual from being able to truly "complete" the event (cf. Horowitz, 1976).

In general, understanding may also be elusive when an aversive experience is perceived to be particularly unfair (Bulman & Wortman, 1977; Silver & Wortman, 1980). However, fairness does not appear to be simply tied to the severity of the outcome. Finding meaning was no more likely in the present study when the incestuous experiences were objectively less severe (i.e., occurred one time vs. weekly; continued months or years). Similarly, the ability to find meaning in the physically disabled sample described earlier (Silver, Note 3; Silver & Wortman, Note 4) was not related to objective severity of outcome (i.e., being temporarily disabled vs. permanently paralyzed; becoming paraplegic vs. quadriplegic). Instead, perceptions of fairness are likely to be linked to attributions of blame. That is, being victimized by someone else's careless or purposefully harmful behavior (e.g., rape, death of a loved one through murder) is likely to pose a more severe threat to one's assumptions about living in a just (cf. Lerner, 1980), orderly, meaningful world.

Chronic victimizations which occur at the hands of someone over whom the victim is powerless may thus be especially difficult ones in which to find any meaning. As such, incest may be comparable, on a theoretical level, to the interminable existence of life in the concentration camps during World War II. Benner et al. (1980) write that the concentra-

tion camp experience produced fundamental changes in the survivors' belief systems. They maintain that the camp experience was "directly contradictory to many specific beliefs concerning trust, justice, and reciprocal relationships" (p. 245), and that life in the camps "permanently altered the individual's evaluation of his or her relationship with the world . . . the person has learned that he or she is living in a potentially hostile environment with inadequate resources for mastery" (p. 243). When such victimizing experiences occur during childhood, they may seem even more unjust and unfair (cf. Silver & Wortman, 1980). (As one incest respondent reported, "I believe that injustice is a part of life.")

Finally, finding meaning in life's misfortunes may be difficult when one is the victim of socially unacceptable behavior. The social stigma that surrounds such outcomes as incest and rape, or even death of a loved one through suicide, may inhibit a free discussion of its impact on survivors. Confiding and/or ventilating feelings in an attempt to sort through one's experience may be difficult. Seeking meaning in isolation may be especially challenging.

Conclusions and Implications

What conclusions and implications can we draw from the data and arguments we have presented in the foregoing pages? To summarize, our study of incest victims suggests that to the extent that the search for meaning results in finding meaning in an undesirable life event, it is likely to be an adaptive process. We maintain that the ruminations and cognitive rehearsal that accompany such a search serve an adaptive function in that they are likely to be the means by which individuals gain mastery over and make sense of their experience. However, finding meaning does not appear to terminate the search or the ruminations. Moreover, when after an extended period the search fails to bring understanding, the continuing process of searching and repeatedly ruminating appears to be maladaptive.

Our analysis of the search for meaning bears some resemblance to the clinical notion of "working through" a trauma (cf. Freud, 1914). In fact, prevailing clinical attitudes suggest that working through negative life experiences is an adaptive, albeit necessary, process toward achieving mental health (see Horowitz, 1976, or Janis, 1971, for a discussion of this issue). Yet when repeatedly reviewing the experience only serves to intensify pain without aiding in understanding, some clinicians have suggested that this exercise is unlikely to be adaptive. In general, these suggestions have been made regarding survivors of the concentration camp experience (see Koranyi, 1969; Ostwald & Bittner, 1968; Straker,

1971). About such individuals, Horowitz (1976) notes: "For some the damage appears irreversible . . . the treatment can become only a reliving but not a dispelling of nightmares" (p. 121). Our analysis suggests that this may also apply more generally to other life experiences in which meaning is not easily found. In these cases, the individual may need to accept that one's experience is, in effect, unexplainable (cf. Straker, 1971). In moving beyond attempts at understanding the past, the survivor of a negative life event can focus on the opportunities for pleasure in the present (cf. Ostwald & Bittner, 1968), and growth in the future.

The ability to block or interrupt thoughts of a negative event may be crucial in living with events that have, in fact, no resolution. Interestingly, a few authors have noted in passing the extent to which victims of undesirable life events are relieved of pain by making conscious attempts to block thoughts of their negative outcomes (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Cornwell et al., 1977; Kaltreider, Wallace, & Horowitz, 1979; Parkes, 1972b; and see Carey's, 1974, use of the ability to consciously control painful thoughts as one factor in his definition of adjustment to terminal illness). As one subject in the present study wrote specifically about her ability to do so:

> My strongest asset through all of my experiences was my ability to 'block out' whatever I didn't want to remember. If I didn't talk about them, or even think about them, I was able to survive.

What if an individual does not have such an ability? Over the past several years, clinicians have been teaching clients how to interrupt or modify unwanted, obsessional, and/or intrusive thoughts through use of techniques such as thought stopping, habituation training (Rachman, 1976; Rachman & Hodgson, 1980), reappraisal or cognitive restructuring (see, e.g., Meichenbaum & Carmeron, 1983). It is possible that these techniques can be employed to block out repeated ruminations and questions generated by the search for meaning when such a process has proven unsuccessful.

Future Directions

Our analysis has suggested that there may be some victimizing experiences that are particularly difficult ones in which to find any meaning. Moreover, at this point we have little evidence to suggest what factors facilitate making sense of life's victimizations. As we noted earlier, the absence of anyone in whom to confide seems to hamper the ability to find meaning, although the presence of a confidant does not ensure that individuals will be able to make sense of their experiences. Silver &

Wortman (1980) reviewed literature suggesting that outsiders' well-intentioned attempts to impart meaning to victims of undesirable life events do not appear to have a beneficial effect. Instead, they maintained that a more effective strategy would be to provide victims with the opportunity to ventilate their feelings in order to generate a meaningful explanation on their own. But when such attempts at finding meaning fail, what suggestions can we give the individual victim of misfortune?

We must admit that it is currently difficult to suggest what the therapeutic implications are for the individual case. Obviously, if one has tried unsuccessfully to make sense of a negative experience for 20 years, continuing to engage in the search for meaning is unlikely to prove beneficial. But in the less obvious case, how is the individual to decide that no answer is forthcoming, and the search should be abandoned?

At this stage, our analysis appears to have raised as many questions as it has answered. Within a particular victimizing experience, what enables some individuals to avoid the search for meaning entirely? For those victims of misfortune for whom finding meaning is important, how can we best assist them in making sense of their aversive outcomes? Finally, when should the victim of a negative experience be advised to block the past and move on? These are complex questions and at the present time we can offer no solutions. Clearly, future theory and research has much to address when considering the issue of searching for meaning in undesirable life events.

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