



Unspeakable: Father-Daughter Incest in American History

Lynn Sacco

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This history of father-daughter incest in the United States explains how cultural mores and political needs distorted attitudes toward and medical knowledge of patriarchal sexual abuse at a time when the nation was committed to the familial power of white fathers and the idealized white family.

For much of the nineteenth century, father-daughter incest was understood to take place among all classes, and legal and extralegal attempts to deal with it tended to be swift and severe. But public understanding changed markedly during the Progressive Era, when accusations of incest began to be directed exclusively toward immigrants, blacks, and the lower socioeconomic classes. Focusing on early twentieth-century reform movements and that era's epidemic of child gonorrhea, Lynn Sacco argues that middle- and upper-class white males, too, molested female children in their households, even as official records of their acts declined dramatically.

Sacco draws on a wealth of sources, including professional journals, medical and court records, and private and public accounts, to explain how racial politics and professional self-interest among doctors, social workers, and professionals in allied fields drove claims and evidence of incest among middle- and upper-class white families into the shadows. The new feminism of the 1970s, she finds, brought allegations of father-daughter incest back into the light, creating new societal tensions.

Against several different historical backdrops?public accusations of incest against "genteel" men in the nineteenth century, the epidemic of gonorrhea among young girls in the early twentieth century, and adult women's incest narratives in the mid-to late twentieth century?Sacco demonstrates that attitude shifts about patriarchal sexual abuse were influenced by a variety of individuals and groups seeking to protect their own interests.

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