

# INCEST

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## INCEST

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Law

### 1. Core Definition and Cultural Variation

Incest is fundamentally defined as **sexual activity** between individuals who are bound by a closer degree of blood relationship than is permitted or tolerated by the prevailing culture, legal framework, or social norms. This definition highlights that the concept is inherently **culture-bound**, meaning the specific relationships deemed incestuous vary considerably across different societies and historical periods. What constitutes a prohibited degree of kinship--such as relationships between first cousins, or between uncles and nieces, or aunts and nephews--is subject to diverse societal regulations, ranging from strict prohibition to outright permission.

The fluidity of the definition is demonstrated by historical exceptions granted to privileged classes. For instance, in certain periods of history, such as during the Ptolemaic period in Egypt, marriage between brother and sister within the royal family was not only sanctioned but sometimes required to maintain the purity of the dynastic lineage. Despite these specific cultural variations regarding the precise boundaries of prohibited kin, the presence of an **incest taboo**--a formalized prohibition against some form of close-kin sexual relations--is regarded as a near-universal feature of human societies, indicating a deeply rooted necessity for such a prohibition.

### 2. Theoretical Explanations for the Incest Taboo

The near-universal presence of the incest taboo has spurred extensive theoretical debate regarding its origins and function. Historically, early theories often attributed these prohibitions to the inherent dangers of **inbreeding**, suggesting that the taboo evolved as a natural defense mechanism against the accumulation of latent hereditary defects within a family line. This biological explanation, however, has been largely discredited by modern scientific understanding. The genetic risk of inbreeding applies only when specific detrimental recessive genes are already present within the family pool, meaning it cannot fully account for the absolute and widespread social prohibition found across diverse cultures, many of which were unaware of genetic principles.

A more widely accepted sociological and anthropological explanation centers on the necessity of **social enlargement and cohesion**. Proponents of this view argue that allowing sexual relationships and marriage within the nuclear family unit would create intense rivalries and conflicts that would severely disrupt the internal stability and functioning of the family. Crucially, incest prohibitions force individuals to seek partners outside their immediate kin group (a practice known as exogamy). By necessitating outside relationships, the incest taboo compels the society to form broader alliances, strengthen ties with other groups, and facilitate the essential societal growth and

complex organization needed for survival and stability.

### 3. Psychoanalytic Perspective: The Incest Impulse and Barrier

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the very prevalence of the incest taboo suggests that the underlying **urge to form these prohibited relationships** must be widespread and potent within the human psyche. Sigmund Freud incorporated incestuous wishes as a central component of his theory of psychosexual development. He posited that every child naturally experiences unconscious incestuous impulses, primarily directed toward the parent of the opposite sex, forming the basis of the Oedipus Complex (or Electra Complex for girls).

Freud argued that these powerful impulses are eventually repressed or channeled as the child develops. During the latency period (typically middle childhood), an internal psychological defense known as the "**incest barrier**" is erected. This barrier serves to deflect emerging sexual interests away from the parental figures and siblings, redirecting the libido toward peers, non-familial activities, and ultimately, appropriate future mates. This psychoanalytic framework thus views the incest taboo not merely as an external social rule but as a necessity driven by an internal, developmental process essential for healthy psychological maturation.

### 4. Environmental and Socioeconomic Factors

While psychoanalytic theories emphasize internal developmental dynamics, recent investigations into the incidence of incestuous relationships tend to favor **environmental and situational explanations**. These studies suggest that the occurrence of incest is often linked to specific external conditions that lower ethical constraints and increase opportunities for sexual experimentation within the household. Incestuous relationships have been found to occur most frequently in environments characterized by severe **overcrowding**, low socioeconomic status, and generally lax family moral standards.

This view is supported by observations that the practice is often most common in the lower socioeconomic groups, where practical factors such as shared sleeping arrangements mean that siblings may frequently share the same room, and a father may live in unusually close physical proximity to adolescent daughters. Beyond crowding, other crucial factors frequently precipitate father-daughter incest, which is the most common form. These include highly **disturbed marital relationships** (creating emotional distance between spouses), the death or prolonged absence of the wife, and chronic substance abuse, particularly **alcoholism**, which lowers inhibitions and ethical controls. Furthermore, severe forms of incest may occur as a result of a significant lowering of ethical and emotional control due to underlying psychological disturbances, such as psychosis, senile deterioration, manic reaction, or paresis.

## 5. Incidence and Types of Incestuous Relationships

Obtaining accurate statistical figures regarding the true incidence of incest is notoriously difficult due to the secrecy, shame, and legal repercussions associated with the behavior. However, the overall incidence in most modern societies is generally believed to be relatively low. Data collected through legal and clinical channels reveals a distinct pattern in the types of incestuous relationships that do occur.

The most infrequent and rare form is **mother-son incest**, which typically occurs only in highly pathological situations, often involving psychosis in one or both parties. **Brother-sister sex play** during childhood is not uncommon, but the development of a sustained, full incestuous relationship between adult or adolescent siblings seldom occurs. By far the most common type of reported and prosecuted incest is **father-daughter incest**. This form appears to be considerably more frequent than any other type and accounts for the largest proportion of cases among men who have been convicted of sexual offenses involving family members.

## 6. Psychological Impact and Consequences

Incestuous experiences frequently result in severe and long-lasting **emotional disturbance** and trauma for the victim, particularly when the relationship begins during adolescence rather than earlier childhood. Young people who struggle with unconscious incestuous wishes or fantasies may develop intense internal conflicts, leading to generalized anxiety or neurotic symptoms.

For victims, especially girls forced into sexual relations with a father or older brother, the experience is profoundly traumatic, often resulting in severe, crippling **feelings of guilt** and sinfulness, a lasting sense of degradation, and an intense revulsion toward sex and intimacy in adulthood. In cases where girls may have tolerated or seemingly accepted the relationship, feelings of degradation and moral failure often emerge only after they have reached greater maturity and can fully comprehend the violation. Conversely, some individuals who have experienced incestuous relationships at home may adopt a seemingly opposite coping mechanism, manifesting in a permanent pattern of **promiscuous behavior**, using sex in a dysfunctional attempt to reclaim control or seek validation outside the traumatic family environment.

## 7. Further Reading

[Incest \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Incest Taboo \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Oedipus Complex \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychosexual Development \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Ptolemaic Dynasty \(Wikipedia\)](#)