

GENETIC SEXUAL ATTRACTION  
Leslie Pate Mackinnon, L.C.S.W.

[www.lesliepatemackinnonlcsw.com](http://www.lesliepatemackinnonlcsw.com)

This article describes and defines a phenomenon that is termed genetic sexual attraction. The incidence of genetic sexual attraction was first reported following an uptick in the number of reunions between adopted individuals and their blood relatives. The earliest reports of adopted individuals searching began to emerge in the 1950's. The organic and natural curiosity for adoptees to search, began to show up in the literature and search groups began to form across the country. In the 1970's searching picked up pace dramatically. This timing coincided with the return of adult adoptees who were placed from the *Baby Scoop Era*. relaxation of adoption laws which gave adoptees easier access to the records. Today, DNA has provided both the interest and the ease of adoption searches. It's almost the norm to search and fewer people are passing up on the opportunity to connect.

This in turn led to an increase in reunions which is a meeting between adopted individuals and their biological relatives. With the increase, reports of Genetic Sexual Attraction, or GSA, as it is commonly referred to, began to randomly emerge in both the U.S. and around the world. Most individuals experiencing the intense emotions of reunion, describe a strong feeling of 'genetic attraction'. This genetic attraction is defined as a fascination with the newly found relative, as well as with the many similarities that they see mirrored in one another. Often those in the early stages of a reunion spend inordinate amounts of time in contact with the other person. Many report an unfounded fear of a sudden and total cut off of the relationship.

However, the people at risk for the added component of a genetic sexual attraction vs. a genetic attraction, are adoptees, donor-conceived people, children separated from one parent due to abandonment, divorce, or incarceration. When it does occur, it can seriously impact other relationships, including marriage, children and close friendships. Some people report a crisis of faith. The attractions can occur between mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, the same sex parent and child, and perhaps, most frequently, between siblings. Please be aware that no one chooses to have feelings of attraction with the family member they are meeting with for the first time. One of the keys to diagnosing this with clients going through it, lies in an intensity, that becomes almost obsessive. Those caught in the grip of GSA feel a biological & psychological pull to bond as they originally would have. However, as reuniting adults, they are not provided the safeguards that in normal circumstances, take years to develop.

In most societies known throughout history, incest is avoided and seen as a social taboo. The offspring that result from a union between close relatives are at a greater risk of hereditary disease and infertility. Both the victims of incest, and the offspring resulting from incest, are at significant risk for psychiatric problems. Because of the societal disgust associated with the topic of incest, GSA remains enveloped by misconception. It is also, largely **under-reported** by sufferers. The stigma attached to anyone who admits to experiencing GSA, let alone those who may have already engaged in sexual relations with a parent or sibling, is severe. Occasionally, a sensationalized story will pop up in the tabloids. This may be news of siblings marrying, or a sexual relationship between parent & child. Without any background explanation, the public reacts with horror.

Beyond the social taboo of incest, a theory was presented in the late 1800's by a Finnish anthropologist. Edward Westermarck offered the premise that humans have a built in emotional response limiting incestuous behavior. He stated that people avoid mating with individuals with whom they've been closely

associated in childhood. The 'Westermarck effect', as it was termed, was effectively proven by research occurring many years later.

Studies of children raised together in the kibbutzes in Israel revealed that almost no marriages occurred between these groups as they reached adulthood. A fifty-year study done in Taiwan, revealed a high failure rate of the, once common, arranged marriages. It had previously been the custom for the family of a young male child, to adopt the 'bride-to-be' at a very early age. She was raised in the same household as her intended husband. Not only was there tremendous resistance to these arranged marriages, by both parties, the divorce rate was high in the marriages that did occur.

These studies demonstrate that children raised together in the earliest months of life, develop a form of reverse sexual imprinting. This imprinting appears to suppress the sexual desire between siblings. According to Westermarck, these individuals raised together, find the prospect of sexual attraction to one another distasteful.

Close relatives, because of similar genetic make-up, are often genetically predisposed toward the same interests and have highly compatible personalities. This makes relatives who meet later in life, more likely to find each other attractive, than would two random people meeting for the first time. We know that people are biologically hardwired to attract others with similar characteristics, smell and distinct attributes. When falling in love, we often interpret those feelings of "sameness" as a sign that we were meant for each other. The experience of genetic sexual attraction is described as an intense grip of emotion, associated with an inability to separate from the other person. Often there is an almost primal sense of having belonged together all one's life

The actual meeting /reunion is frequently followed by recognition of oneself in the other. This concept called "mirroring", is the shock of familiarity and self-recognition for the first time in a separate individual. Many people entering into 'reunion' have no concept of the impact or need that adoption has created in their lives and therefore are totally unprepared for the response and intensity that reunion can bring. Reunion allows the flow of feelings that have been repressed for decades.

Feelings of attraction, give way to guilt and shame. While incidences of GSA were once thought to be rare, the reported cases have increased amongst therapists in the adoption community. We also find more extensive reports of GSA on-line and today there are even closed, on-line, support groups for the sufferers. It is theorized that the normal bonding mechanisms which would occur between parent and child, or between siblings, was disrupted due to the adoption. The romantic love & erotic arousal that is reported by those in the throes of GSA, is theorized to be delayed after-effects of the missed bonding that routinely (albeit unconsciously) occurs between a parent and infant, or between siblings not separated by adoption. Because the interrupted bonding had gone dormant, the desire to bond and secure the original connection can resurface with intensity at the time of reunion. Remember that attachment & bonding at this developmental stage is unconscious and primal!!! When 2 adults reunite in adulthood a desire to heal the bond and the absence of the Westermarck Effect puts them at risk for GSA. It is believed that the Westermarck effect prevents GSA in families who grew up with one another.

Here is a partial list of GSA symptoms. You will notice they are very similar to the process of falling in love.

Heightened awareness of the other person

Obsessive desire to be with the other person

Daydreams and fantasies about the other person

Desire for lots of touch, talking and sharing innermost thoughts

Distractible

Isolation from other relationships

Key symptom is the heightened intensity of feelings which do not match the norm of the situation.

The significance in third party reproduction has even greater implications. Because many people in the future will be meeting 'without' knowledge of their genetic connection, the situation is described as a time bomb waiting to go off. The lack of any serious scientific research is especially disturbing in view of the growing number of reunions between adoptees and their birth parents, and the prospect of many future reunions between children born via gamete (3<sup>rd</sup> party) donation.

A recent dramatic example which aired on prime-time television was the 1998 reunion between Gary Klahr and Micka Zeman. Thirteen children were born to the same couple in Connecticut in the 1940-50's. Twelve full-blooded siblings were placed for adoption, without knowledge of one another. They each were adopted by different families within a 15 mile radius. When they reunited, Gary and Micka were shocked to realize that they had been romantically and sexually involved in the late 1970's. Gary's life-long best friend turned out to be his brother. Finally, Gary's personal trainer and good friend turned out to be another brother.

Dr. Maurice Greenberg, a psychiatrist and advisor to the Post Adoption Centre in London, has done the only academic study of GSA to date. While initially voicing skepticism, he is described as having done a 'u-turn' during the course of his study. His results are summarized in one statement as "people who experience GSA are having a largely normal response to a very unusual situation". What is astonishing is that GSAs are virtually ignored in academic circles and there is a complete lack of scientific research. Why GSA occurs only in some reunions, whether certain people are more predisposed to GSA than others, or whether it manifests itself differently between parents and children or siblings, are all simply unknown.

I often see it estimated that GSA affect 50% of reunions. That number seems shockingly high and does not represent my own practice, which is perhaps 5-10%. However, you must factor in those that are not reporting. Sometimes I can see it or hear it in the mannerisms of my clients and I bring it up. They are greatly relieved to hear. The most common response is "thank heavens I'm not some kind of a perv." In terms of adoption, any and all forms of secrecy ought to be eradicated. Closed adoptions should not be done, for many reasons. It behooves us to consider a limit on the number of progeny by any one donor. It also underscores the damaging possibilities set in motion by secrecy and non-disclosure to the offspring. People conceived through donor gametes must be informed of their status. Prevention requires getting out ahead of this so that people can know and have contact with biological relatives throughout their lives. This provides the chance to bond and grow up at a normal developmental rate.

People entering reunion 'MUST' be educated about GSA. Adoption agencies, attorneys, clergy, therapists, along with those outside this field, must be educated. All clients attempting to trace a relative must be educated. And counsellors must be trained to recognize the warning signs and to help adoptees and their families cope with the damage. Society and those in the adoption community have been in the dark for far too long, often with catastrophic outcomes.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bossert, Bill, Paper of *Genetic Sexual Attraction*, Oregon Adoptive Rights Association.

Gonyo, Barbara, *The Forbidden Love*,

Greenberg, M.D., Maurice, *Making Sense of Psychiatric Cases*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Kutner, Jenny, *GSA Is Normal and Very Real*, [www.salon.com/2015/02/17/genetic\\_sexual\\_attraction](http://www.salon.com/2015/02/17/genetic_sexual_attraction)

Marcotte, Amanda, *Debunking GSA*, [www.Salon.com/2016/08/16/genetic\\_sexual\\_attraction](http://www.Salon.com/2016/08/16/genetic_sexual_attraction)

On-line Support Group [www.geneticsexualattraction.com/index.php](http://www.geneticsexualattraction.com/index.php)

Radke, Haley, ***Adoptees On Podcast***, Genetic Sexual Attraction, Season 4, Episode 5

Sullens, Carly & DeNeen, Julie, *GSA: The Hidden Risk in Adoption Reunions*, gr.afin@uab.cat