

## **Sexual Abuse: Case Studies**

Sexual abuse and its inherent potential for trauma are often encountered in family systems work. This article is about some of my experiences in finding my way through constellations where sexual abuse was involved. In the following three examples I distinguish between different levels of abuse: sexual abuse as a personally traumatic event, as in Constellation 1; sexual abuse that also has social consequences, as in Constellation 2; sexual abuse has an impact on the collective, as in Constellation 3. These distinctions are important because they indicate the level of contextual intervention where the most effective resources can be found.

### **Constellation 1: Personally Traumatic Event**

During a three-day constellation workshop, a thirty-four year-old woman set up a family system. The constellation concluded with her sitting on the floor as a child, looking upward toward her parents and yielding to their superior authority.

During the lunch break, she found a nearby playground and spent some time sitting on a swing. Quite suddenly, as she was swinging she felt the blood drain from her face as if she was going into shock. Her breathing accelerated and beads of cold sweat broke out on her forehead. With difficulty, she managed to find her way to the restaurant, where the other participants were gathered. She disclosed her story to them.

When she was eighteen she went on holiday to France with her first boyfriend.

They had abstained from intercourse because they wanted to „save this for the future“. On the last day of their journey they were attacked by three French men who put knives to their throats. All three men raped her. Afterwards, the attackers ran away.

Returning to the workshop, the woman set up the incident as a constellation. The atmosphere was tense, as if no one dared to take a really deep breath. There was a profound silence as she placed the three perpetrators in a row and herself at some distance opposite them. She positioned her boy friend with his back turned away from the scene.

The woman's representative was struck with horror and was completely unable to express herself. My first intervention was to encourage her to address her rapists directly and to vent her almost inexpressible rage. This helped her to feel more in touch with herself and also to return to them the full responsibility for the attack. She told them that they would need to bear all the consequences and confronted them with the full weight of their atrocity. Then, quite suddenly, it became clear that she felt herself standing on an invisible but very real border line between life and death and that it would take very little to move in either direction. This invisible boundary provided the turning point for her to turn away from a fixation on the trauma, back into the resilient flow of life.

The woman turned slowly on this dividing line, away from the realm of threat and death where the perpetrators were standing. She continued ninety degrees to the right, to a place where she could see both the perpetrators in the realm of death and in the realm of life, and how close these two realms

were. As the facilitator, I asked her what she thought she had just done. She looked at me with a blank face. I asked: „*Do you know what you are?*“ Still she had no answer. „*You are a lifesaver! By yielding to what overcame you, you saved two people's lives - your life and your boyfriend's.*“ Immediately, the following words slipped out of her: „*Then, I am not as dirty as I always assumed.*“ As this was happening her boy friend, who was now positioned in front of her, relaxed into a broad smile and nodded his head in agreement with her. In the spirit of Bert Hellinger he told her: „*Flowers blossom, each year...anew.*“ Very slowly, the process of replacing an inner disbelief with an increasing joy had begun.

### **Constellation 2: Socially Traumatic Event**

A woman in her mid-sixties came for advice. She told me that her adult son had sexually molested her daughter's son. The boy's parents had discovered that the uncle had engaged in oral sex with his six-year old nephew. The whole family was in a state of turmoil. The boy's father wanted to file a lawsuit against his brother-in-law and to seek an injunction against him that would prevent him from continuing in his profession as an infant-school teacher. The boy's mother was no longer speaking to her mother who had made several failed attempts at mediation. The woman felt herself to be in a complete state of despair in midst of her shattered family.

As the constellation was set up the six-year-old stood at a considerable distance directly opposite his uncle. The boy's representative smiled in a friendly way toward his „perpetrator,“ and reported a mixture of feelings, including

solemn pride, gratefulness and joy, as if he had taken part in some premature initiation. He felt that his soul had been touched and that words could not express the depth of his experience. It was clear that the boy and his uncle were fully at ease with each another and comfortable with the shared secret.

On the other hand, the boy found it very hard to bear the uproar and accusations within the family. The bitter quarrels were exacting a heavy toll on him and he was left with feelings of confusion, uncertainty and guilt. His grandmother was now able to witness and understand how the child was being injured by the contentious behaviour of his adult family.

### **Constellation 3: Collective Trauma**

A therapist and her client came together to a constellation workshop. The client was concerned about her relationship with her father and her dependence upon alcohol. As the constellation was set up, it became clear that her grandmother, her father's mother, had been raped during the last days of World War II. The representative of the rapist reported that he felt like a Russian soldier and he spoke openly of his feelings. He felt, with great intensity, all of the atrocities, violations, damage and suffering that had been perpetrated, not only onto the Russian people, but also upon the country of Russia. Something deep within his soul felt humiliated beyond expression. The soldier felt an almost sacred duty to his country, culture and historical past, and to his fellow Russians, to restore his dignity and pride. This sense of duty was so strong that he could not resist the urge to violate a German woman. The representative of the German women suddenly felt his tremendous humiliation.

She also felt his compelling need for revenge, which he truly believed was necessary in order to restore a sense of peace and balance within his soul.

The representative of the German woman also realised the enormous degree of suffering and wrongdoing perpetrated by Germany through its attack on Russia. She realised that she had a collective part in all of this horror, and was then ready to meet the Russian soldier. She said to him: *„If this is the price that I have to pay for all that has happened, then I am ready for it to happen“*. This recognition of a collective guilt immediately altered the overall dynamic. The Russian soldier's attitude underwent a profound shift. He experienced great relief and was able to see that the German woman also had her sense of powerful dignity. While this did not prevent the rape itself, there was a radical change in the quality of the encounter. Two equal forces had met each other, and although the woman yielded to brutal violence, the accompanying feelings were quite different. The woman had earned the soldier's respect. He held her in high esteem as he felt her consent to what was essentially an absurd situation. After the encounter, they looked at each other as if they had just participated in a sacred act in the service of a higher purpose.

The client also revealed that her grandmother had been pregnant at the end of the war. With courage she had accepted her fate and given birth to the child and raised him by herself. One could feel the power and dignity that came as a result of this quality of acceptance.

The boy was the father of the woman who had set up the constellation. At the end of the work I suggested to the client that whenever she drank, she should drink to the health of her Russian grandfather.

## **Conclusions and Guidelines**

According to Steve de Shazer people vary in their description of a problem, but not in the description of the solution. Here I will focus only on those aspects that relate to the overcoming, rather than the continuation, of trauma.

First of all, I think it is important that the facilitator remains clear and collected during encounters with emotionally charged information. In constellation work, we emphasise the need to stay centered. Since strong emotions can become infectious, this ability to stay grounded is important to allow us to fully sense at a deep level, the client's information and experience. It is especially important not to generalise or rush to conclusions by too readily assuming that we know what is right or wrong, or to rely on solutions found in previous constellations. It is essential to evaluate every situation anew within its given context and in accordance with the client's particular concern.

Secondly, finding a way for the client to shift their attitude may bring about a resolution of the traumatic after-effects of abusive encounters. The healing can begin when feelings of victimization, powerlessness and immobilization can evolve into feelings of empowerment, increased choice and self-regulation. The shift from passive endurance to active co-creation in relation to the abusive situation offers an important

resource in the service of trauma resolution.

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Thirdly, shattered feelings of powerlessness, self-deprecation and isolation can be changed if the context of the incident is vastly expanded. In this way, relative to larger forces, the deed itself can shrink to a smaller size. Then, the client has the opportunity to know a greater reality that is larger than the pain.

Published in Systemic Solution Bulletin 2001/2. London

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Fourthly, as Bert Hellinger has demonstrated over and over again, there is a bond between perpetrator and victim and this must always be taken into account in seeking resolutions. Lasting solutions can only be achieved by taking into account a much greater whole. As Hellinger reminds us that, far beyond our narrow perspective of life, *„...fate takes its course, humility heals, and surrender brings peace“*.

*„With old memories, old emotions well up, and with the pain one feels one's love. It's like returning home, knowing what endures beyond revenge and right or wrong, trusting destiny to take its course, humility to heal, and gentleness of spirit to bring peace.“ (Hellinger et al, p.171)*

This is true of all constellation work, and poignantly so in the case of sexual abuse.

### **References**

Hellinger, B., Weber, G., Beaumont, H. (1998) *Love's Hidden Symmetry*. Zeig, Tucker & Co, Phoenix

Names and details in this article have been changed to respect confidentiality.