

## Sexual Abuse or Not?

### Abstract

This article presents three cases from a Family Constellation perspective, showing some of the hidden and more unusual dynamics of sexual abuse and how sexual abuse energy may operate in families.

Family Constellations is particularly well placed in being able to uncover the dynamics of sexual abuse delicately and in a non-judgemental way that can be both relieving and healing for the people involved. Bert Hellinger made profound new insights into the taboo and intricacies of the dynamics of sexual abuse and many other issues through his teachings, workshops, videos and writings from 1999 onwards, which have significantly opened up perspectives on this issue to many levels of awareness.

There has been a lot of information documented, written and researched about the issue of sexual abuse, however Family Constellation experiences have added great insight into the intricate dynamics and trends from which sexual abuse may arise. Sexual abuse is an energy that appears to be passed down generations in the same way as many other patterns. However, as Hellinger himself has said on numerous occasions, it seems to be the betrayal, secrecy, shame, guilt and the lack of those responsible, owning up to their actions, that leads to problems for the individuals involved and a continuation of the patterns flowing down through the family tree.

As a Family Constellations facilitator I have found the phenomenological approach that forms the foundation of Constellation work invaluable, in proposing that the facilitator be able to listen to the client's perceptions and beliefs in presenting their issue, but also adopting the capacity to be open to other possibilities. Operating phenomenologically we may accept that the client is simply giving their perception of their situation, which is often a limited one. From the phenomenological perspective, accepting that we each make our own meaning from our experiences, it is possible to be open to other perceptions or a bigger picture, that may have the effect of allowing a movement in the soul to occur for the client and/or the system.

I have given some case studies from my work with clients that shows that sexual abuse energy may be felt in unusual ways, that I believe would have been difficult to pick up in any other manner than following the field of a constellation.

All names have been changed to protect identities in the following case studies.

Throughout the case study I will put an R for representative before each of the names to show that I am referring to a representative. Eg Kate for Kate and R Kate for her representative.

Case Study 1 Example of mother's possible abuse coming out in her child's experience.

A woman in her thirties called Jane wanted to look at the issue of sexual abuse that she felt had happened to her in her formative years. She felt that this issue was underpinning her lack of trust in men that she had which she believed had led to her being unable to sustain a love relationship. She said that she couldn't actually remember an abuse incident, but felt that her uncle, (her father's brother) was probably responsible.

I asked her to pick a representative for herself and her uncle and place them in the holding circle. She placed them facing each other.

X R Uncle    X R Jane  
→                      ←

After a few minutes R-Jane reported feeling very nervous, looking around and backing away from R-uncle, while he in return looked at her quite calmly, smiling and with some curiosity as her anxiety rose. Both were told to follow their impulses. The R-uncle moved a little and continued to observe her from a distance and R-Jane turned to the right and appeared to be staring at something intensely in the distance. I asked the client to put someone in the place where she was looking. An older woman was chosen and placed.

The R-Jane looked intensely at the woman and the woman appeared to be distracted, nervous and agitated and was looking from side to side.

I asked the client if she had any idea who the woman could be and she said, "I think it's my mother".

↓ X R Mother

X R Uncle      X R Jane  
→                      ←

Both representatives, Jane and the woman nodded in agreement. The R-woman (mother) found that she couldn't look at her daughter, although her daughter was very much focused on her mother. Over the next few minutes the R-mother became increasingly agitated and reported that her throat and chest had become very tight and her daughter reported similar sensations. I asked the mother to express how she was feeling to her daughter in an attempt to release some of her discomfort, with little effect.

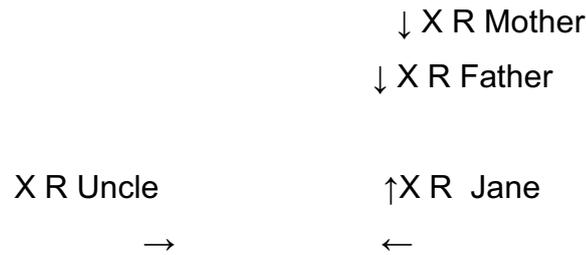
Then I asked her to say,

"there is a secret that I have not shared with anyone," to her daughter.

I asked her to repeat this twice more and the R-mother reported a slight reduction in the anxiety and was now able to maintain eye contact with her daughter. They both looked over at the uncle showing only a vague interest and returned their gaze to each other.

Both of them still felt very anxious and the sensation in the throat and chest was still present, especially in the mother.

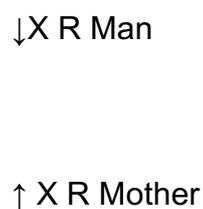
I realized that at least one other person or element was missing and wondered if her father may be important here. I asked the client to put a representative for her father in the constellation. A man was put up with his back to his wife, and facing R-Jane.



R-Jane found that she had a lot of anger towards her father, which she expressed through several sentences. Her anger appeared to be mainly due to his perceived weakness and lack of sophistication. She was judging him quite harshly. After some Order was restored here, with some physical movements and expression, R-Jane was feeling more accepting of her R-father and he said he was feeling sad and also warm towards her. R-Jane voluntarily moved closer to her father and rested her head on his shoulder for a few moments.



I then put R-Jane's father behind her as a support and Jane said she felt stronger, although she still felt nervous as she looked at the R-mother who was still very anxious and was clenching her fists and reported that she didn't know who or what she was anxious and angry about. It seemed very likely that someone in the mother's past needed to be included here. I turned her round and placed a man behind her with no information about who this might be.





The R-uncle backed away as Jane started to cry with relief as she looked at her mother.

Her mother said, "Leave it with me."

The constellation ended when Jane allowed herself to be held by her parents.

Immediately after the constellation Jane said that she now felt her uncle had not sexually abused her. She reported that he was always joking with her and she often noticed him looking at her, but that was all. She said that it appeared that her mother had been sexually abused, but had not felt able to disclose it. Jane said she felt lighter and calmer and much relieved.

It appears that Jane had felt the energy of sexual abuse and had suspected someone in the family of abusing her, even though she had no memory or proof. This is potentially very dangerous territory for the client, the family and a facilitator, as there is no way we can know where a constellation like this may go, or if it may lead to an accusation of someone. How can we know if this is true or not? As a facilitator I had felt the dilemma of going ahead with this constellation and had chosen to proceed in the interests of seeing what might come out of it. However, in this case, it appeared that it was her mother that had been abused rather than Jane, which did seem to lift a burden from her and allow her R-mother to become more grounded and present with her daughter. From this constellation we can gain a glimpse into the phenomenon of "recovered" memory that has been brought to the attention of the psychotherapeutic worlds in recent years, particularly in regards to sexual abuse and incest, that such people as Hopper 2008 has documented. In reality we don't know if Jane was or was not sexually abused by her uncle, someone else or no one at all. We don't know who the man could be, a family member or not. We don't know if her mother, or someone of her family was the victim or possibly the perpetrator of sexual abuse, as we have no facts to substantiate this.

I believe it is very important for me legally and ethically, as a facilitator to refrain from interpreting or leading the client in an interpretation and allow them to arrive at their own perceptions. In my practice I generally would not encourage the client to search for evidence if she or he appeared to have

come to a place of more peace with the situation or a new possible perspective has arisen that appears to give strength. This in my opinion would interfere with the process of movements of the soul that may be in motion. For my part as a facilitator I don't need to know any further details, but trust that something is in process and that any further intervention is going further than my nonverbal contract with my client in exploring her issue.

The interesting phenomena of a smell coming out in a constellation is something that I have experienced several times in constellation work (both a foul smell and a beautiful aroma) and would love to explore more at some stage and wonder what other facilitators have to add in this regard. At this point that remains a mystery.

Case Study 2 An example of forbidden love between relatives being played out in their children.

Kate a forty year old mother and wife came to a workshop saying that she wanted to feel better about the sexual abuse she had received from her cousin who was six years older than her, that had occurred from when she was ten years old over a couple of years. The cousin was the son of her father's older brother.

Kate picked and placed representatives for herself and her cousin Jed and placed them facing each other. R-Jed was looking at her calmly and R-Kate was looking away and finding it hard to look at him. As the minutes passed, R-Kate became both angry and tearful. I gave her some sentences to say to express her anger and sadness to R-Jed, however, he was finding it hard to accept or even to hear what was being said.

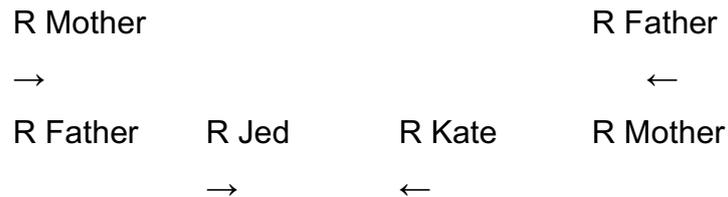
R Jed	R Kate
→	←

Eventually after some time, when R-Kate attempted to hand back the responsibility, shame and guilt she was feeling to him, R-Jed said that he couldn't accept it and didn't feel he had done anything wrong. R-Kate was becoming more distressed.

I stood away from the constellation observing and wandered if there was something else that had not yet come to light about the situation.

After a while it seemed that something else needed to be introduced, as Jed was finding it hard to take responsibility for his actions, if in fact they were his actions.

I asked Kate to set up their parents behind each of them, R-Kate and R-Jed.



It appeared that nothing much was changing over the next few minutes until I noticed that R-Jed's father and R-Kate's mother were looking at each other with apparent adoration and love.

The representatives of Jed's father and Kate's mother confirmed how they were feeling and that they were aware of no one else in the room other than the two of them.

I asked R-Jed to look at his R-father and say as he motioned to R-Kate and her R-mother,

"I did it for you."

Immediately he looked down and went red with what appeared to be embarrassment and then very easily expressed his shame and sadness at what he had done to Kate.

Kate had been deeply moved as she watched the constellation and said it made sense to her and didn't need to know any more.

She told me several months later that she now felt fine with her cousin and had recently had him in her kitchen for tea, alone with him for the first time since her childhood and felt safe and friendly towards him and no longer dreaded family gatherings.

R-Jed appeared to be fulfilling unconsciously, even innocently, to some extent the desire of his father towards his father's brother's wife. This appeared to be playing out through Jed and Kate, their children, out of a hidden loyalty

towards their parents forbidden attraction. Of course on one level, the responsibility of what the son did to his cousin was still very much his, in that he was older and his cousin was a child and there is no doubt that it was highly inappropriate and had deeply hurt his cousin until the time of the constellation. However, on another level, it interesting to note that this was happening in a field set up by their parents and that the cousins and particularly Jed felt innocent in the larger scheme of things, while he was entangled. There may be other details of the family history that we don't know that might help us to understand this more easily. However this is often the case in Constellation work that we don't know all of the facts, or very few facts but something moves for the client emotionally, intellectually and energetically to allow love to flow again, so it is enough.

Case Study 3 A woman's constellations showing both her own abuse and that of her country women.

Natasha is a single woman in her twenties who had done several constellations over a two year period with the hope of reducing her strong feelings of anger, anxiety and low self esteem. She reported that she had not had a romantic relationship yet and was very focused on her career at this point in her life.

It wasn't until her second constellation that Natasha revealed that she had been sexually abused in her homeland in Europe by local boys on several occasions when she was 8-9 years old.

Over the next four workshops she did various constellations over her sexual abuse, emigration, her family and her sense of self sabotage in terms of work and relationships. She perceived both of her parents as weak, father an alcoholic and mother compliant and manipulative. After the first constellation her parents split up. After the next few constellations her anxiety reduced significantly, but prior to her last constellation she was still experiencing very strong anger. However, her self esteem was much higher and she was doing very well in her career.

I asked Natasha to set up a representative for herself and Anger. Natasha picked a woman for herself and a man for Anger and set them up facing each

other. The R-Natasha looked at Anger for quite a long time and seemed unable to say anything. R-Anger looked back aloof, defiant and cold. After a while a woman in the holding circle signalled to me that she was feeling very angry and anxious and not sure of what to make of it, at this point I asked her to wait a little to see how she was feeling for a few minutes. The anxiety and anger continued to rise for the participant woman in the circle, as the R-Natasha stood looking at R-Anger with apparently little feeling, other than being stuck. The woman signalled to me again that she now had a terrible headache and thought she might leave the room. I invited her to stand up and take her place in the constellation to see if she was part of what was going on here. She looked at the representative for Anger and began to express her fury voluntarily over a relatively long period. The anger had a force and velocity behind it that could not be quelled easily. In her outpourings such things as,

“How dare you pillage and rape us, use us and abuse us! You have no right !”..... and so on poured out.

After a while it was noticed that she appeared to be speaking for a collective of women, possibly the women of her nation, a country that had experienced many invasions and injustices in war and many invasions. The representative for Natasha was standing back a little and allowing the woman to confront and vent her anger at the R- Anger. R-Anger was looking at the woman with his full attention now and was able to receive her words with what appeared to be a level of understanding and acceptance.

The client sitting in the holding circle was nodding smiling and crying and saying,

“yes that’s my rage, it’s not just for me, but also for all the women who came before me.”

It was interesting to note that the woman who was drawn in with rage, also came from a nation where women had experienced many invasions and grave injustices in Asia.

After some healing sentences and some movements in the constellation, the woman who had expressed rage calmed down and Natasha took her place in the constellation looking glowing and calm.

A week after the workshop Natasha contacted me to report that she was feeling much calmer now and was really excited to see how her life would unfold now.

Natasha had many systemic issues, which appeared to have required coming to the surface over a length of time. She was carrying a deep loyalty to her family, her national history and the plight of women in her country and possibly to the plight of women in general. Each constellation that Natasha took part in, unfolded delicately to allow only what her soul or the family or national soul was ready to deal with at each stage. This constellation gave a glimpse of how we as human beings operate on many dimensions simultaneously, the personal, family, national and gender perspectives that form who we all are as human beings with very complex allegiances and alliances.

In the cases that I have outlined here there are some interesting points.

These constellations highlight the importance of working phenomenologically (with not knowing) and with an attempt at being open to what might emerge, with no expectations or fear. I would suggest that if an issue is fearful to you then it is probably not wise to facilitate it. The client I believe can sense if the facilitator can hold the space of their issue or not and a facilitator can only go to the depths with a client that they have been prepared to go to for themselves in their own processing and experience. This does not always mean that the facilitator has had to experience similar issues to their clients necessarily, but that they have dared to experience and explore themselves and their own depths, shadows and systemic entanglements and are continuing to do so. In those few moments of listening and making a decision about what to do, the facilitator needs to be able to contact their own soul, experience and intuition to check if its alright to proceed. However we too are

continually growing and changing and experience times when we are not so clear, grounded or collected, so acknowledging where we are is an important first step in making that initial judgement of whether to proceed or not. In that we need to be mindful of our ego perhaps not wanting to acknowledge our limitations for this moment, which is why the facilitation of Family Constellations requires so much maturity and awareness in the facilitator. We are all the same in our humanity, but possibly at different points in our journey, that is all.

The notion of, “each person doing the best they can with what they have,” is a very healing idea as a basic philosophy for Family Constellations that is inclusive, accepting and empathic for all concerned, facilitators, clients, perpetrators and victims alike, as we are operating from within our own fields of entanglement, often involuntarily.

However, the process of Family Constellations allows the entanglements of taboo subjects such as sexual abuse, to be revealed, secrets to be exposed and such things as shame, guilt, anger and sadness to be released or resolved at some level, via representatives in service of the client and their family system.

Perpetrators and victims may acknowledge themselves in the bigger picture of their family fields, while on another level help in establishing clearer boundaries in accepting responsibility for their own actions and also not carrying guilt, shame or inappropriate responsibility for others. Sexual abuse is a relatively frequent dynamic in family systems and in this article I have demonstrated just three less direct ways that this energy may be experienced and yet still have a profound effect on those people involved. I feel sure there will be many other examples that facilitators may be able to share on this subject.

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