

**A CONFRONTATIVE INTERVIEW FOR VICTIMS OF
INTRAFAMILIAL SEXUAL ABUSE: AN
ALTERNATIVE TO AN APOLOGY THAT REVERSES
POWER DIFFERENTIALS IN A THERAPEUTIC WAY**

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1 Context Of The Work

Robyn and I work at The Bouverie Centre, Victoria's Family Institute. The Bouverie Centre was part of the mental health system of Victoria. However, in 1996, we became part of La Trobe University, Department of Health Sciences, School of Public Health. We provide a direct specialist clinical service as well as teaching and training in the area of family therapy. Robyn and I are part of "The Sexual Abuse" team at The Bouverie Centre. This team has been operating since 1990. We have been developing theory and practice in the area of intrafamilial sexual abuse since that time.

The therapeutic approach that our team has developed is essentially systems based with a strong feminist influence. The family member given priority is the victim(s). While family members are seen individually or particular dyads reinforced (for instance, mother - daughter bond), the connections between family members are strongly acknowledged and utilised in the therapeutic work. The therapeutic needs of each family member and the broader system issues are also addressed. The offender is offered individual therapy inviting him to take responsibility for his abusive actions and to develop empathy for the impact of his behaviour on his children. Individual family sessions are offered to the children and non-offending parent.

It is the view of the BFTC SAT that the therapeutic work with the sexual abuse offender can be enhanced if his family are concurrently working at the same agency. Similarly, the work with his family and victim is usually more effective if the offender is concurrently in therapy at the same agency. The central goal of therapy in the work of BFTC SAT is victim safety and healing. Unlike some approaches (for instance, Giarretto, 1978, 1979, 1989), a goal of family reconciliation is not paramount. Family reconciliation is only considered when it is judged that the sexual offender has truly made profound changes during long-term therapy and it is viewed as healing for the victim to have him return to the family.

2 What is a confrontative interview?

The technique of a confrontational interview was developed in response to the feminist critique of family therapy in the area of sexual abuse and from the experiences of our clinical work. The technique attempts to redress issues of power and control in the victim-perpetrator relationship. For families that have progressed well in therapy, the survivor is offered a chance to confront her abuser about the impact of his¹ abuse on her being and life. Rather than the perpetrator controlling the situation, he must sit and listen to the feelings of his victim in a context where the survivor holds the power, chooses the timing, and is safe to present her view. Consequently, it represents an innovative technique that has been developed from theoretical concepts and is practice based.

The confrontative interview is absolutely embedded in long-term therapy for all family members when there has been intrafamilial sexual abuse. These sessions were only held after detailed planning and preparation. They are not seen as a necessary step for all survivors to take in order to be able to heal and for all offenders in order to change. They are not about reconciliation although sometimes this is an outcome. Other times, the victim is very clear that she will never have any kind of relationship with the offender but that the chance to have her say is important.

¹ For clarity of writing throughout this research and when non-gendered options are too clumsy, the survivor of the sexual abuse shall be referred to as female and the sexual offender as male. Although it is recognised that this is not always the case, in this research these stereotypic gender classifications occurred.

The preparation involves extensive individual work with both the survivor and the offender. The survivor plans what she wants to say to the offender about her experience of the abuse and the impact that it has had upon her. She plans how she wants to say it and how she wants to present it to him. She decides whether she wants a response from him or not and when, in the proceedings, she wants him to respond.

The offender is prepared to accept hearing a very different account of the events to his own constructions. By this time he has had extensive work in uncovering his ‘cognitive distortions’. He needs support to learn how to listen to the very painful implications of his actions from the survivor that he usually also loves very much. He is coached in how to respond to the expected confrontation in a way that will be most helpful for his victim.

Practical issues need to be very clear. For instance, who is to arrive first and how to avoid the offender and victim sitting together in the waiting room. What will be the arrangements for leaving the Centre so that the survivor feels safe?

After the confrontative interview has taken place, individual debriefing sessions are offered to both survivors and offenders. Further individual sessions are usually required afterwards.

3 Contrasting A Confrontative Session With An Apology Interview

While working with offenders, many programs work towards conducting an apology session where the offender faces up to his children and partner about the abuse. While seeing this as an important process, we began to question the timing of such a session. Our work with survivors of abuse has taught us that their pain and voice have been ‘silenced’ for most of their lives. They have consistently accommodated to the demands of their abusers, because of their greater power and in order to survive. When working with a number of families in the past four years, it has become evident that for the survivors of the abuse, the process of finding their voice and naming their experience has been significant. As they have become more empowered a small number of them have chosen to directly meet with their abusers. The aim of these sessions was not for the fathers/stepfathers/uncles to apologise, but to enable the voices of these young women to be heard by the abusers.

4 The Research

The inspiration for research in the area of the confrontational session arose following feedback from offenders. Unexpectedly offenders who had experienced the confrontation identified that this had been an important process for their therapy and was a highly valued encounter. It was decided to investigate this with a small qualitative study. It was also decided to understand the experience of this confrontation for the survivors of the abuse.

5 Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study - based upon the theoretical underpinnings and technique of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Four offenders who had been in long term counselling at The Bouverie Centre, were selected for inclusion in this study on the basis of theoretical sampling. Three of them had experienced a confrontative interview while the fourth participant was included as a negative case. Two of the three offenders who had experienced the confrontation selected for inclusion in this study were deeply connected and attached to the children that they had abused. The third offender selected (who also experienced the confrontation), was detached and not emotionally

connected to his victims. Four survivors of sexual abuse from the three offenders who had experienced the confrontational interview were also selected. Data was collected from 1) an audiotaped and transcribed in-depth interview with each informant lasting one to one and one half hours in length, 2) researcher journals, and 3) an audiotaped interview with the therapist of the offenders. Reliability and validity was attended to by the use of these multiple methods of data collection (triangulation), the documentation of the procedures and decision making and the use of peer checkers in the data analysis.

6 Results (Perpetrators)

The results that pertain to the confrontative interview experience of offenders can be summarised as follows:

- 1) The experience of being confronted by their victim was a watershed experience for two out of the three participants (those that were emotionally attached to their victims) and the beginning of the more intensive aspects of their therapy. Furthermore a confrontation from his victims was nominated by the participant who had not yet experienced it as an important process that he believed was crucial for both his victims and himself.
- 2) For two out of three participants, the experience of the confrontative interview allowed a facing up to the extent of the abuse (previous to this, while they had publically acknowledged it, they did not allow themselves to fully absorb the knowledge).
- 3) For two out of the three participants, an awareness of victim empathy was developed that went far beyond what they had previously felt.
- 4) For these two participants the confrontative interview and the process of hearing and empathising with their victim connected them with their own victimisation experiences (one offender disclosed his own sexual victimisation following the confrontation and the other participant disclosed in the research interview his own victimisation and how the confrontation enabled him to acknowledge this).
- 5) An awareness of the seriousness of the situation was a common finding for the three men who experienced the confrontation. Prior to the confrontation they had each held onto a belief that a reconciliation with their victim would occur and that life would return to normal. The reality of the situation hit each of the participants hard in the confrontation. They became aware that this was not going to be the case.
- 6) The difference between the one participant who did not benefit from the confrontative interview and the other two informants who did, provides the following information:
 - a) A confrontative interview seems to be most successful when there exists a strong connection and caring relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.
 - b) That there may be an optimal time in therapy for the perpetrator to be most available to benefit from this strategy. (However the timing is directed by the victim's readiness and this is considered an important aspect of the process).

- c) There may be particular characteristics of the perpetrator that enable them to benefit or not from this approach, perhaps related to their defensive strategies involved in denying or minimising the abuse or perhaps related to their deviant sexual arousal.
 - d) The confrontative interview must be viewed in the context of long-term therapy and does not stand alone as an intervention.
- 7) Reversal of power differentials that occurred in the confrontative interview seemed to frame the interchange and create a unique environment that facilitated a quantum leap in the development of various attributes (particularly the ability to ‘face up’ to the abuse).

In conclusion, this exploratory study strongly indicate that a confrontative interview with his victim can be a worthwhile component of a therapeutic approach for a perpetrator of intrafamilial sexual abuse. The confrontative interview, with its reversal of power and control differentials, possibly deserves to be considered in future practice and research.

7 Results (Young Women)

The research upon which this presentation is based was made possible by the participation of four young women who had chosen to meet with the men who had repeatedly sexually assaulted them when they were children. Each of the young women initially exhibited typically serious and disturbing symptomatology. They had struggled with suicidal thoughts and severe depression. All four has self-mutilated at some point, two in a recurring pattern, usually by cutting. All four has been involved in risk taking behaviour, three by running away, two by shoplifting and other petty crimes, and one developed a pattern of substance abuse. All four experienced disruption in their academic life, three repeating years at secondary school and one at university. Each of the participants reported intrusive thoughts, flashbacks and disturbing recurring nightmares. All four participants reported auditory and visual hallucinations which were quite terrifying and each of them reported a heightened sense of fear and difficulty in trusting others. One wet the bed until she was fifteen and for sometime developed a disturbed eating pattern, causing a cessation of menstruation for almost a year. Each of the participants reported a sense of feeling inferior and at times unworthy of life; this self-loathing was expressed in a self punishing way as each participant had internalised to varying degrees a sense of shame and responsibility for the abuse.

Impact of Therapy at The Bouverie Centre

Each of the participants reported very favourably regarding the impact of therapy in general at The Bouverie Centre. The young women gave examples of positive changes which had occurred individually and also in their families. The young women described a decrease or cessation of symptomatology and a greater ability to ‘get on with their lives’, in a freer, more helpful way.

The Impact Of The Confrontative Interview

The process of publicly naming the abuse experience and the impact on one’s life, to the very abuser who once held so much power is a courageous act of strength and defiant dignity. Each of the participants reported a number of times that the process had been an empowering one which enabled them to experience a greater sense of their own strength and competence. The

experiential nature of the intervention is a critical point. As Karen stated so eloquently in regard to her shift from victim to survivor:

'I couldn't turn back, because I'd experienced feeling responsible; I've experienced feeling in control.'

Each of the young women described the event as a watershed experience in their recovery. Cate likened the enormity of it to the initial disclosure she made to her mother. The experience of finding her voice and being heard by the abuser and responding to him in an adult way was akin to 'reclaiming myself' according to Cate. Karen expressed a similar notion as she described the process having a positive impact on how she perceived herself. Ita felt she experienced what recovery felt like 'reaching the top of the mountain' and Amy described feeling stronger and like she had 'triumphed'.

Another way of viewing the confrontative interview is as a symbolic rite of passage into adult strength and competence and mastery over the past.

All four participants described much greater clarity regarding the issue of responsibility following the confrontative interview. Hearing and seeing the perpetrator admit his guilt was a powerful experience, as was hearing themselves place responsibility firmly on his shoulders. Cate and Karen were very clear that having put their anger where it belonged, they were less troubled by flashbacks and desires to self mutilate. They described the experience as giving them greater ability to intervene in these thoughts.

The non-verbal cues from the offenders held powerful meaning for the young women. Each of them referred to his facial expression, tears, 'the look of anger in his eyes' etc. Sexual abuse is an embodied experience. The confrontation was also a direct and embodied experience, where the power differential was reversed. It could be argued that the powerful impact of the session makes sense given the interactional dynamic and the public redistribution of responsibility. The young women reported the value of externalising their pain and anger and the ritual of both placing responsibility where it belonged with the perpetrator and embracing their non-victim status. Whilst declaring the damage and despair their abusers had caused, the flavour of the confrontation was very much dignified statement that despite these enormous traumas they has not been destroyed, they has triumphed. Herman (1992) and Dolan (1991) both articulate the importance of young women relinquishing their identity as victims and reclaiming a more empowered self.

The research findings suggest that the process of therapy needs to be respectful of the victim's position and to privilege the victim's sense of timing. It takes time for survivors of abuse to make sense of their experience and to begin to come to grips with the impact of the trauma on their lives and indeed their very being. An ill-timed, perpetrator-led apology or 'face-up' session is yet another insulting and potentially damaging process for the survivor, where yet again she is asked to put his demands first and to deny the complexity of her own experience.

As well as preparing for the confrontative interview in terms of who would be present, each participant commented on the importance of collaborating with therapists in terms of planning the process of the session. Cate commented that she needed to be at a point of trusting the therapists and setting 'enough' so that she felt 'safe enough' to confront her father.

Each of the four participants commented on the importance of having time to rehearse the likely scenarios of a confrontation and using therapy time for role-playing and jointly setting the ground rules. They also appreciated having a significant amount of time between deciding to confront and the actual session occurring. Meeting with the offender's therapist was useful in terms of developing trust in him and also discussing what the offender was saying in his therapy. Karen found it useful to receive a letter from her step-father prior to the event while Cate was non-committal about the usefulness of this, given she did not trust her father. Amy and Ita received nothing in written form from their uncle. However, they reported that they did not feel disadvantaged as they were much more trusting of his therapist's verbal feedback. Karen and Cate both reported the value of having prepared a written statement and all the participants commented on the value of having advanced preparation in regard to options regarding the physical environment, e.g. use of screen, seating arrangements, and use of the telephone, timing of the interview and debriefing afterwards.

The themes of establishing control and safety was overwhelmingly strong and consistent across the four participants. The symbolic meaning each young woman attached to the importance of preparation focussed on their intuitive awareness of the need to be safe and in control. By preparing the physical setting, their personal responses, the ground rules and expectations of therapists, the young women were more able to assess their personal readiness to confront the abuser. Despite their fear and anxiety, each approached the session with courage and a sense of confidence in their own competence and a manageable level of risk. Each young woman described an awareness of needing to be far enough advanced in their own recovery before feeling ready to confront their abuser. Karen was particularly eloquent in her description of needing to be in touch with her strengths, as Cate who only felt ready after completing Year 12, something she had achieved for herself which gave her an external reminder of her competence and strength. Draucker (1992) also stresses the importance of preparation before a confrontation interview based on her clinical experience with survivors. Dolan (1991) also reports the usefulness of role-playing in survivors preparing for a confrontative interview.

The establishment of safety and control were paramount for the confrontative interview to be therapeutic for the young women. The role of the therapists appears to be crucial in this regard. By establishing clear ground rules with the perpetrators, prior to and during the confrontation interview, expectations were clear: that the young woman's voice must be listened to with respect and not interrupted; that the meeting was for her benefit and that if she felt at all uncomfortable or unsafe or if the therapists deemed his behaviour to be inappropriate, then the session would be terminated; that the perpetrator could be interrupted and challenged at any time if the young woman or the therapists experienced him as avoiding responsibility or acting in a manipulative fashion. When the therapists *actively* enforced these ground rules the young women experienced an enhanced sense of safety. Similarly when the young women received information and support prior to the confrontative process they felt an enhanced sense of empowerment. Again when therapists provided genuine choices regarding how the interview could be structured in very specific concrete ways, the young women reported a greater sense of control. The evidence from this research suggests that a major reason for the successful outcome of the confrontative interview symbolically reversed the power differential of the abuse experience.

An innovative part of the process was the use of the one way screen. Three of the young women sat behind the interview room and watched their perpetrator being interviewed by his therapist, before making the final decision to meet face to face with him. This enabled the

young women to have the opportunity to cancel right up until the last moment, placing them in a position of control. 'Seeing for themselves' behind the one way screen enabled Karen, Amy and Ita to judge for themselves the safety of the situation. Karen and Cate both commented on the importance of debriefing immediately after the session as this helped them to integrate what had just occurred and to keep them safe.

The results of this study seem exceptionally positive. A significant reduction in flashbacks, nightmares, self-mutilating behaviour, social alienation and an increase in performance in academic studies, social connection with others, and enhanced self esteem and well being reported by the four participants appear to be very encouraging results.

The findings suggest that for these young women the confrontative interview provided a forum where their post-traumatic symptomatology decreased, following them reclaiming power and control in their lives.

However, as each participant noted, the confrontative interview was not a stand alone 'quick fix' solution to their difficulties following years of sexual abuse. Rather it was an important ritual that was part of an ongoing therapeutic process. As the young women commented, it gave them strength to face the next step in their recovery, and each of them continued to access therapy at The Bouverie Centre.

In the months following the confrontative interview, three out of the four young women have made sworn statements to the police and criminal charges have been laid.

This was not an expected direct outcome of the confrontative interview process in the minds of the therapists, however the young women certainly made the connections themselves in the in-depth interview.

Amy's comments regarding the awareness she gained in the confrontative interview of the abuse being a crime, are particularly telling. Not only was she more able to access her strength and dignity as a survivor, but she was more clearly able to view herself as an innocent victim of a crime.

*'Just the clarification that the abuse is just wrong in you know, **all** the time and that it is a **crime**. That it is a crime and being you know like a victim; just having you family there is so important.'*

It appeared the process of the session enabled the young women to develop a 'both – and' perspective; both victim and survivor.

Limitations of the Research

This study explored the experiences of four young women who confronted their perpetrators. Whilst I believe the findings to be of importance and a worthy contribution to practice wisdom in the area, the small sample size is inherently limiting. Saturation point was not reached, as the study did not account for all possible differences.

8 CAUTIONS AND CLINICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Confrontative interviews should be approached cautiously and with utmost care for the physically and emotional safety of the survivor.
- 2) The process of a confrontative interview is best conducted within the context of an ongoing, established therapeutic relationship.
- 3) The process of the confrontative interview should only be considered where the survivor and her therapist have access to current and detailed information about the progress of the offender in his therapy, and judge his current behaviour to be respectful towards the survivor. This is particularly so if the abuse involved in sadism and physical abuse.
- 4) The survivor's sense of safety and empowerment in the confrontative interview is heightened by having previously met her offender's therapist and forming a trusting rapport with him/her. The survivor needs to know that the therapist will respond in a co-ordinated and active way, to ensure that her safety is of primary importance and that her voice will be heard by the offender in a respectful and uninterrupted manner.
- 5) Preparation is of critical importance as is privileging the survivor's sense of timing and personal readiness. Specific ideas regarding preparation are detailed in the text of this thesis.
- 6) Debriefing and close follow-up after the confrontative interview is also of critical importance. Ideally the survivor should have the opportunity soon after, to integrate the impact of the confrontative interview with her supportive family and significant others. This can provide a forum where her courage and any positive changes can be acknowledged and celebrated. It may also encourage the expression of grief and painful issues resulting from the confrontative interview.
- 7) The survivor should have control over the process and actively collaborate with therapists in formulating the ground rules for the confrontative interview.
- 8) Use of the one-way screen can be of benefit and increase the survivor's sense of making an informed decision to meet with her offender.
- 9) A confrontative interview is not considered to be an integral or necessary part of therapy in order for survivors of abuse to fully recover. Rather, it can be a constructive and powerful intervention when required.
- 10) A successful confrontative interview is dependant upon the co-ordination and synchronicity of four major systems; the client system, the offender system, the therapist's system, and the broader agency system. If the client is in residential care, and/or if child protection or other legal systems are involved, then close attention must be paid to the issues of the broader systems. In short, this process is a complex one and should not be entered into lightly.