

## **När närhet spårar ur - Göteborgs-Posten Kultur April 30, 1996**

Human attitudes in moral and sexual matters swing between extremes. If we are to explain incest hysteria and witch-hunting, it is not enough to note the complexity of the phenomenon. We need to be able to describe the functional relationship between seemingly unrelated events. In the 1950s and 1960s, many homes had Caldermobiles. The weight of an arm in such a mobile moves in the opposite direction to the counterweight, but not in relation to other weights in the system. A weight moving upwards in relation to its counterweight moves downwards in relation to another weight on another arm. Nevertheless, the movements are related to each other, somewhere there is a common starting point. When we try to explain phenomena, we often become simplistic in our descriptions of cause and effect. For example, we say that crime increases when welfare decreases or that sexual abuse increases when crude pornography is spread.

Lilian Öhrström says in her book *Sex, lies and therapy* that she wants to show what strong overconfidence in unproven truths can do. In her review of the book, Karin Widegård writes in GP on April 17 that the author has succeeded in not avoiding the complexity of the problem, but only partially. She also says that the book does not contain what is needed to help those who have been subjected to abuse. I agree with Karin Widegård, with emphasis on partially. The lack is to be regretted because adequate help requires a deeper understanding. Unfortunately, in the current debate on incest, moral and legal questions about guilt and various therapeutic approaches seem to be more important than the suffering person and the abused child. It is questioned whether incest memories that emerge during therapy are genuine or fabricated, or whether children always tell the truth about their incest experiences, but the important question of why some people allow themselves to be influenced by suggestion, of why children sometimes lie about incest, of why adults can imagine that they have been subjected to incest, has not yet been satisfactorily answered. Referring to mass hysteria or blaming prophets of doom, as Lilian Öhrström does, is to reason in circles. It is certain that the brain has the ability to store memories and feelings that we are unaware of. The most famous evidence of this was discovered by chance during a surgical procedure on the brain. When electrical wires touched certain points in the brain, the patient experienced images, smells and movements from the past. There are methods of awakening memories, hypnosis being one of them.

Much of what emerges as memories under hypnosis can be a mixture of reality and fantasy, an experience of something desired or feared. In the early days of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud thought he had found the root of the neurosis when his patients testified about incest under hypnosis. However, in most cases the patient's condition did not improve after this realization and he abandoned his incest theory. However, Freud's first assumption was not entirely wrong. In my experience, incestuous attractions in adult life are always due to inappropriate, abusive and intrusive attitudes towards the child and emotional disconnection in the family. However, the damage done to children who have been subjected to incest is as often due to society's moral condemnation, insensitive police questioning and ignorant psychological contact as it is to the actual sexual violation. Therapy is an often stormy journey back in time to the child you once were. A good therapist is the pilot who brings the patient to port without running aground. An ignorant therapist can create disasters. When an unhappy person

seeking help is surrounded by other people with the same therapeutic or religious beliefs, a priest, a therapist or a shaman can easily induce a kind of psychosis. A skilled therapist must not become the prophet or the sympathetic and completely understanding parent that the neurotic longs for. The therapist must be empathetic, but remain neutral in that he neither prohibits nor supports the patient's fantasies and feelings. Emotional release and insight into repressed feelings is important in all therapy, but for therapy to have a lasting effect, the patient's defenses must be revealed. Without defenses, the patient is naked and vulnerable and tends to withdraw even further inward. The therapist should be able to prevent this and encourage the patient to face the fear with open eyes and without giving up contact with the world. At the same time, the therapist must be aware of the patient's need to find someone to vent their disappointment and anger.

Memories of incest can often have the unconscious purpose of releasing and legitimizing the hatred the patient feels towards their disconnected parents. If these memories are mere fantasies, they can have tragic consequences for formally innocent parents. I have before me a copy of an interview with a little girl whose mother has accused her father of incest. The fact is that the mother believed that she herself had been a victim of incest, she felt bad and hated the girl's father. In the interview, the girl initially refuses to talk about her father. The interviewer and the mother insist, and after the mother has left the room, the girl says that her father stroked her vagina and that she sometimes had to play with her father's penis. When asked if it hurt when her father touched her, she responded enthusiastically: "No, it feels great." The court chose to sentence the father and forbid him to spend time with his daughter. The sentence was considered to be in the best interests of the child. In this case, it is questionable whether the court made an already complicated situation worse by separating the father and the girl, as the girl was very fond of her father. After the judgment, the father's life collapsed and he took early retirement. The girl, now a teenager, has repressed the incident. The father later admitted that the girl and he sometimes bathed together and that he washed her lovingly and that the girl wanted to play with his sex in the bathtub.

Of course, this was stupid of him. He shouldn't have done that, as sexually oriented contact between parents and children can degenerate into neurotic attachments. He should have explained to the girl that fathers only play like that with adult women and that she can play like that with other children. We are horrified at how children have been mutilated in other countries and in other times, but we are blind to our own cruelty. Most of us have been hurt and we continue to mutilate our children, not with knives but with our absence and lack of contact. Good loving contact between family members creates barriers to incestuous inclinations. Incest fantasies in children and an adult's attraction to sex with children are always rooted in the parents' emotional and physical lack of contact and the forbidden attitude of adults towards children's sexual play. What is good loving contact? It is difficult to describe in technical terms, because it is an emotional experience in the body and mind. When my youngest child, a girl, was born, I found an effective way to get her to sleep at night. I wrapped her naked under my shirt and we went outside to listen to the rustling of the leaves and watch the twinkling stars. It never took long for her to fall asleep. I could tell by her increased weight and warmth. She melted into my body and we became one. The experience for both of us was sensual but without sexual elements. When I think about or look at my woman, I often experience the same thing, with the difference that the feeling of fusion can spill

over into the sexual realm. Being deprived of sustained contact as a child is painful for the child and provokes anger. Children with repressed anger can let go of the fear of consequences when an authority figure offers them safety to criticize the parent. Similarly, an adult can submit to a father of the nation, a leader of a dictatorship. This is how one must understand when young children accuse adults of untrue sexual abuse. The lack of contact can be hidden under a charming social surface and many therapists who are not sufficiently connected themselves are deceived by their patients. Curing the widespread lack of contact in our society is more important for the future than creating eternal growth in a utopian welfare state. Bruno Adler, psychologist, licensed psychotherapist, specialist in psychosomatic diseases.