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# THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH ABOUT CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a complex social reality that cuts across the boundaries of several disciplines. Expert practitioners from any one of these disciplines have not been able to manage the complexity of CSA in terms of designing strategies that can reduce, let alone stop, this silent crime in the Caribbean and worldwide. One significant barrier to enquiry and finding solutions to this menace has been the monodisciplinary approach utilized by researchers and by specialized practitioners.

This article acknowledges the complexity of CSA and therefore asserts that finding out the facts about it in order to adequately respond at both the prevention and intervention levels necessitates transcending monodisciplinary knowledge towards a transdisciplinary epistemological research agenda. The knowledge yielded from such an agenda would contribute in a positive way to advocacy, decision making and action for the sustainable human development of Caribbean islands. This article advocates for a transdisciplinary approach to research in order to gain more epistemological clarity about CSA, so that through collaborative teamwork involving researchers in academia, policy makers, civil society and specialized practitioners, CSA can be eradicated in the Caribbean.

“The term discipline is adapted from the Latin word, *disciplina*, meaning a branch of instruction or education; a department of learning or knowledge” (Oxford English Dictionary, cited in Aram, 2004: 380). “The term disciplinary has been used since the early Middle Ages to signify a way of ordering knowledge for teaching and learning” (Aram, 2004: 380). A discipline is essentially a manner in which to differentiate one specialized area from another with clear distinct boundaries. In research, disciplines are left free on their own to frame social problems, make claims, theorize and create knowledge. But is a monodisciplinary approach the optimal one for investigating the complex social problems like CSA?

The phenomenon of CSA crosses multiple disciplines and fields of practice within the helping professions, because of its multiple layers of complexity. CSA is a sociological construct as it involves a relatively defenceless child who lives within a family unit, and an adult, both of whom are located within a community environment

with its own unique cultural norms and values. Furthermore, CSA is one form of child maltreatment that is a criminal offence and a violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 34 & 19). Therefore, CSA also has implications for the legal and justice systems charged with the responsibility to uphold the rule of law and justice for all. Moreover, CSA has severe mental, physical and social health consequences that can seriously affect the child across its lifespan (Eugene, 2012). Thus, it is reasonable to argue that CSA has major relevance to the disciplines of sociology, criminology, psychology, psychiatry, jurisprudence, medicine and public health.

More importantly, the psychosocial consequences of CSA can have a devastating impact on the child's capabilities and capacity to function in various domains of life, including identity formation, education, health, inter- and intrapersonal skills, family life, safety and human security. Other potentially negatively affected aspects of life include educational attainment and ability to take advantage of career and employment opportunities leading to a diminished ability to contribute to the economic growth of one's country (Eugene, 2012). This adds more dimensions to the complex set of disciplines and perspectives that impact and are impacted by CSA, including economics, human and social capital and education. Any attempt to find and access help for the child and its family to cope with the effects of CSA therefore requires the intervention of a team of different actors from the helping professions, such as counsellors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, teachers, human resources personnel, etc. Additionally, at the level of prevention and programs of advocacy for improved services, more targeted legislation, more effective policies, and more proactive community agency and awareness for social action and change, dealing with CSA becomes a multidisciplinary and multisectoral political endeavour. The prevention and treatment of CSA in the Caribbean presents challenges in the areas of coordination and collaboration amongst the various stakeholders. Agencies are usually entangled in a web of turf and power issues making collaborative action and adherence to an agenda shared by institutions from such diverse sectors as health, education, justice, and social services a daunting challenge. Thus, dealing with CSA also traverses boundaries related to politics, management, organization and governance.

Given the complexity of CSA as described above, effective intervention necessitates the bringing together of professionals from quite a number of disciplines to collaborate and engage in collective dialogue in order to find solutions to this complex problem. Arriving at such a holistic response, however, first requires a search for truth about CSA, and secondly, arrival at an agreed upon integrative conceptualization of the problem. Within the dominant paradigm of science, the search for truth is usually

carried out through a rigorous process utilizing various forms of research methodology. The purpose of such enquiry is for the creation of knowledge.

The term epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge. Epistemology studies how we might come to know about various phenomena, resulting in a theory of knowledge. Some philosophers have for centuries argued that there is no truth and its existence is still being debated. Skeptics who doubt everything might ask us how certain we can be about our knowledge of CSA. For others, CSA may be considered to be an illusion, for there are societies where engaging children in sexual activities is perceived as a rite of passage. In the Caribbean, however, CSA is regarded as one of the worst forms of child maltreatment, it is considered to be an immoral, a criminal offence, a violation of human rights and a complex psychosocial problem. I can personally attest to this on the basis of my years of experience as social worker, a clinician and an educator in the Caribbean. As such, I have become familiar with the long term and severe psychosocial consequences of CSA, and I argue that there is a dire need for truth to be told about it.

This social problem is an old one, and as such a great number of research studies are already available. Despite all of this research, however, CSA continues to prevail in all Caribbean societies at alarming rates (Eugene, 2012: 397-398). Given the scope of the problem in the Caribbean and the considerable amount of available research literature, could it be that we still only know a very small part of what there is to know about CSA? Could this be a call to re-examine the mainly monodisciplinary approaches that have been used up until the present for researching CSA?

In view of the complexity of CSA and the important roles of the various disciplines, a monodisciplinary approach to searching for truth in small scale societies such as those of the Caribbean would fail to yield a holistic picture of the problem. This would likely lead to a tunnel vision approach to the problem and result in inappropriate responses at all levels. Steinmetz (2007) argues that monodisciplinary approaches tend to treat knowledge as if it were a territorial colonial dependency (p. 56). Given the limited resources available in the Caribbean region, any monodisciplinary research on complex problems such as CSA is wasteful. Moreover, a monodisciplinary approach to such research perpetuates the status quo of compartmentalization of all disciplines and practitioners, thus leaving the child behind, unprotected and submerged in a quagmire of power, turf, and professional jealousy.

In an attempt to distinguish the differences amongst the terms (mono)disciplinary, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary, Nissani (cited in Austin, Park & Goble, 2008) provides a metaphor of mixing fruits. An individual piece of fruit served alone

resembles a (mono)disciplinary endeavour. A number of different fruits served together in a fruit salad resembles a multidisciplinary endeavour. Blended together as a smoothie, these different fruits resemble an interdisciplinary endeavour. Austin, Park & Goble (2008) extended this metaphor and observe that when the smoothie is used as the basis for a new dessert it then resembles a transdisciplinary endeavour. This analogy provides a lucid illustration of the approaches available in searching for truth and how a blending of all disciplines can result in better outcomes.

Adopting a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach in the search for truth about CSA would mean all the disciples of biology, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, social work, counseling, public health, law, human rights, sociology, ecology, economics, ethics, political science, management, organization and governance coming together to conduct research, while maintaining their individuality and distinct borders. Such an undertaking might be fraught with limitations such as in the inability to use a common language and research methodology. In multidisciplinary research for example, researchers representing different fields contribute methods and ideas from their respective disciplines toward the analysis of a particular research question (Mitrany & Stokols, 2005: 438). Under such circumstances, the findings of the research may still appear to be singular or linear in perspective as they may not embrace the whole. Transdisciplinary goes a step further to not only work collaboratively on a complex common problem, but also to create a shared conceptual model of the problem that integrates and transcends each of their separate disciplinary perspectives (Mitrany & Stokols: 438).

It is my view, that the various disciplines engaged in responding to CSA need to acknowledge its complex reality and adopt a transdisciplinary research agenda and epistemic trajectory. Transdisciplinarity is defined as “as a new form of learning and problem solving involving cooperation among different parts of society and academia in order to meet complex challenges of society” (Haberli et al. as cited in Aram, 2004). The literature is replete with assertions that transdisciplinarity is useful for supporting multiple groups in society in dealing with real life complex problems such as CSA. “Transdisciplinarity provides an essential context for understanding some of the most important, complex, and difficult issues we face, whether in environmental protection, maintaining our health care systems, drafting new laws, formulating public policy, accommodating religious and cultural pluralism, or dealing humanely and respectfully with an ageing population. It responds to the need to cross boundaries in order to embrace the ideas of all disciplines that may be relevant to these questions” (Somerville & Rapport, 2002).

“A transdisciplinary approach transcends concepts, terminology and methods and evolves to create a higher level framework and a fundamental epistemological shift” (Giri; Max-Neef as cited in Austin, Park & Goble, 2008: 557). This shift requires bridge building among disciplinary approaches to create a platform for all the disciplines to contribute their particular knowledge and methods from their respective fields. In our attempts to deal with CSA, such a cooperative process could give rise to broader and more multidimensional perspectives and a thus a better understanding of the phenomenon. We must recognize however, that while such cooperative approaches provide opportunities for a necessary and positive epistemological shift, they are not devoid of challenges.

A transdisciplinary approach has the advantage of facilitating a collective dialogue process across knowledge resulting in holistic and contextualized frameworks (Clark & Dickson; Kates et al. as cited in Apgar, 2009: 4). These frameworks then make it possible to overcome traditional conceptual models that do not embrace complexity and interrelatedness as well as to overcome the limitations of one discipline working towards a comprehensive whole (Clark & Dickson as cited in Apgar: 4). More importantly, for those whose goal it is to deal effectively with CSA, transdisciplinarity makes it easier to link research, management, decision making and problem solving. Furthermore, in this globalized world, dealing with complex societal problems requires knowledge across all aspects of society and disciplines, communities, civil society and governments (Clark & Dickson as cited in Apgar: 5).

Notwithstanding the advantages of transdisciplinary research, one drawback is the difficulty team members may encounter in relinquishing ownership of specialized knowledge and professional jargon for a holistic conceptual framework (Austin, Park & Goble, 2008). Collaboration within a transdisciplinary research paradigm can generate conflicts, because the type of teamwork required necessitates high levels of trust, mutual respect, patience, and facilitation and communication skills in order to nurture collective dialogical processes aimed at a fundamental epistemological shift in knowledge production (Austin, Park & Goble, 2008). Furthermore, this process of collaboration or ‘epistemology for learning through’ (Nicolaidis & Yorks, 2008) may result in competing ethical perspectives and dilemmas and the need to design transdisciplinary ethical guidelines for research.

In the call for transdisciplinarity in the search for truth about CSA, we must be aware that “the fact that the social sciences were not the product of Caribbean realities, or those of any other subjugated region, but part of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Europe has profound epistemological and conceptual implications” (Sankatsing, 2001). These words of caution appear to be of significance in the study of CSA, because it is highly contextualized and driven by the cultural norms and values of

society. Sankatsing further argues that the solution to this dilemma is an extra disciplinary approach, which stands outside of the traditional system of disciplines, but without discarding in advance any of its achievements or its methodological tools which have been accumulated over the course of time. In this regard, in my search for truth about CSA and its prevalence and impact on human development in the Caribbean, even a transdisciplinary approach may appear to be inadequate.

One principal point made in this article is that CSA crosses the boundaries of multiple disciplines and that none of them on its own can facilitate the process of knowledge production required to eradicate this silent social problem. I have come to the conclusion like Moser et al. (1998), that “knowledge is a valuable commodity, we should aim to acquire it and acquire reasonable means to acquire it” (p. 24). On the one hand, one is tempted to adopt a transdisciplinary approach as it embraces the complexity of the phenomenon to be studied. On the other hand, one is inclined to heed the call of Sankatsing (2001) about the epistemological and conceptual implications of such approaches to the Caribbean. However, one may also appreciate the radical position of Feyerabend (1975) that “all methods have their limitations and the only rule that survives is anything goes” (p. 296).

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