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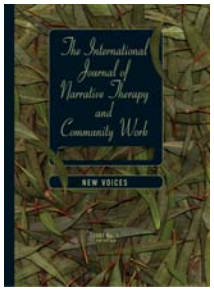

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'Standing together on a riverbank': Group conversations about sexual abuse in Zimbabwe

Sipelile Kaseke

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This brief article outlines a community response to sexual abuse in a rural community near Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Local community workers developed a culturally-appropriate methodology for exploring young people's responses to sexual assault in ways that did not rely on individual disclosure or public shaming, and, instead, contributed to a collective voice which would question, resist, and protest against sexual abuse. This methodology employed the technique of a 'personified' externalisation; one of the community volunteers 'played' the role of Sexual Abuse, allowing children to ask about its various purposes, histories, and effects – and ways of limiting its effects in the community.

Keywords: sexual abuse, externalising conversations, collective disclosure, collective narrative practice, culturally-appropriate community work, Zimbabwe

INTRODUCTION

Our team has been working with different communities in Zimbabwe for some time on a range of social, cultural, and health issues. Part of our work involves running camps for children, where we talk about many of the concerns they were facing. However, in some more remote areas, it is just too costly – and too disruptive of the local community – to take children away to a camp. In these cases, we take the children's camp to the village. This allows the community to be more involved, they can see the children running around and playing games, and can see exactly what kind of psychosocial support work we are doing with them.

Many of these communities are facing extreme challenges, like poverty, lack access to education, and high levels of HIV infections, so we are familiar with having to deal with issues of trauma, psychological distress (or psychosocial problems) in ways that are not re-traumatising. To this end, we have found narrative ideas – especially externalising problems – very helpful, and we hoped we could use them in talking about the issue of sexual abuse.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sexual abuse is a very culturally sensitive issue in Zimbabwe. It is not common for people in Zimbabwe to talk about sex generally, let alone sexual abuse. Furthermore, many children and young people do not know a lot about sexual intercourse, reproduction, and other aspects of the physiology of sex. So, even if children knew about sexual abuse happening, they would have some linguistic, cultural, and community challenges to be able to speak about it.

We were reluctant to just walk into a community and raise these issues. We also had some concerns about how to talk about this with children in ways that would not rely on individual disclosure (see Denborough, 2008). However, at the same time, we were aware that the potential for sexual abuse can exist within any community. And, having seen how externalising conversations had helped in other contexts, we wondered if this approach might be useful in raising the delicate issue of sexual abuse.

ASKING QUESTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Inspired by the work of Yvonne Sliep and the CARE Counsellors of Malawi (1998), we had one of the community volunteers 'play' the role of Sexual Abuse, to allow the problem not only to be externalised, but also personified.

So the community volunteers introduced us, and they said to the group, 'We have a visitor today'. Another of the volunteers came in and dressed up in a funny way, and said, 'Hullo, my name is Sexual Abuse', and he asked if the children and young people had any questions for him. The children asked questions in their own words, such as 'Who are you?', 'Where do you come from?', 'What are you doing here?', 'What do you want here?', and so on.

Sexual Abuse said that while he might not visit every household, he lurks in their village targeting their children, and that he has plans for their broader community. This exposé allowed the young people to talk back to Sexual Abuse, to voice their concerns about what sexual abuse was doing to their communities, their fears, and some of the plans they had for limiting the presence and the effects of sexual abuse. We tried to keep the process fun and not too formal – it was important to get the balance right between the seriousness of the issue, but not to scare the children or young people so they didn't want to engage in the process. In this respect, the opportunity for them to speak with a collective voice was very important – while questions might have come from individuals, it was obvious that each of the young people spoke for the others as well – and for their broader community.

During the course of the conversation, the children got quite involved and emotional. They loudly protested that Sexual Abuse did not have a home in their community – in the end, they all waved their hands at it dismissively, almost like 'shooing' it away like an annoying fly or mosquito! This showed an incredible solidarity among the children, and gave the adults something to take notice of: 'If our children feel so strongly about this, and are showing that they will do something, then we also have to do something; it can be a simple as taking turns to walk our children to school'.

'STANDING TOGETHER ON A RIVERBANK'

When we had previously tried to raise the topic of sexual abuse in communities, we did not get very far. People would just go quiet, or they would say things like, 'It's not a problem here, you know, maybe in the next community over, there…'. It was like it was something unthinkable, and couldn't be discussed.

But externalising the problem in this way was like standing together on a riverbank. It allowed the people to stand by the side of the river and just look at their community in a different way. People don't like being associated with their problems, but to remove it from them in this way meant that they could say, 'This is out here now, but it's not us'. That's what really made this work. There was almost a sigh of relief – that 'This is out in the open; it's no longer a secret, and is something we can begin to address together'.

The funny thing is that after that, the community actually *asked* for training on the prevention of sexual abuse, and they said that, because they don't know where to go, and the police are sometimes unable to help, they wanted some approaches they can use to prevent abuse of their children. We suggested the possibility of children's clubs, which could have a protective function by providing a safe space for children to play.

GREATER SECURITY AND PROTECTION FOR CHILDREN

One of the most noticeable things for me was that as the conversation went on, and the children were speaking with stronger voices, they were very forthcoming in what they had to say to Sexual Abuse. I felt a collective strong voice against abuse. As I mentioned earlier, this process did not rely on individual disclosure, but if there were children in that group who had experienced sexual abuse – and I'm guessing there might have been – then my sense is that they would have felt a greater sense of protection and security.

By being able to speak out *about* sexual abuse, and *to* a personified Sexual Abuse, some members of the community would now be more likely to challenge abuse if it occurs. And, I'm sure, children who experience abuse from now on will have more options of people in the community they can turn to. In this way, I think they must have felt protected and also felt more secure – which is quite a different place to be in than before the community embarked on this journey.

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