

## “Research into Sexual Abuse – from Taboo to All-of-Society Task“ Catalogue of Demands

On the occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Hearing, taken place on June 18, 2015 at the  
Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften

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Sexual violence has long been considered a marginal issue, not only in society, but also in academia and research. It was only in the mid-1980s that Germany saw the first public discussions on abuse. In the wake of these discussions, the first self-help facilities and specialist counselling centres sprung up. Research, too, came to take ownership of the issue. Today we know that, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the societal dimension of sexual abuse almost matches that of non-communicable diseases. In this context, a German study into the costs of traumatising, the *Deutsche Traumafolgekostenstudie*<sup>1</sup>, found that sexual abuse and other childhood trauma account for consequential costs to the tune of about 11 bn euros per year.

Not least in view of the sheer scale of the issue, it seems imperative to mobilise appropriate resources in the field of research. Moreover, the long-term reduction, or indeed prevention, of sexual abuse is among the central all-of-society tasks - even in wealthy industrialised countries such as Germany. It must be backed up by intensive continuous research efforts to build the knowledge needed to accomplish this task on the ground. The independent investigation into and evaluation of (historical) sexual abuse are indispensable here, if only to make a substantial contribution to improving the protection of children and young persons now. This, again, cannot be

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<sup>1</sup> Habetha, S. et al. (2012), *Deutsche Traumafolgekostenstudie – Kein Kind mehr – keine Trauma(kosten) mehr?* Schmidt & Klaunig, Kiel. Habetha S et al. (2012) A prevalence-based approach to societal costs occurring in consequence of child abuse and neglect. Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health

done without more in-depth knowledge about the prevalence, kind, context, causes and consequences of sexual abuse. Academia must support this review process with concrete research projects. Both the research done for the benefit of the survivors and that involving survivors must satisfy the highest ethical standards at all times.

In the wake of the 2010 “abuse scandal”, the Federal Government had set up the Roundtable on “Child Sexual Abuse” (*Runder Tisch “Sexueller Kindesmissbrauch“ - RTKM*) which recommended, *inter alia*, the kick-starting of research into sexual abuse and all of its manifestations. As early as September 2010, therefore, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) decided to fund relevant research projects in the fields of health and education, making available approx. 35 m euros for this purpose in the first funding period. The BMBF’s ongoing funding lines have facilitated the establishment of research networks and laid important foundations on which to build a research landscape. Providing support and encouragement to young researchers is essential to ensure the scientific mainstreaming of this topic. Therefore, the BMBF has been sponsoring five junior professorships in this field. Currently, it has yet to be established to what extent the funding lines will be continued. The Federal Minister of Research, Ms Wanka, announced that the BMBF would persevere in its research endeavours after evaluating the existing funding lines. The task now is to tap further funding and research resources beyond the foregoing.

The Independent Commissioner for Questions Related to Child Sexual Abuse (*Unabhängiger Beauftragter für Fragen des sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs*) seeks to strengthen the long-term effectiveness of the ongoing successful initiatives and embed the topic deeper in the scientific mainstream. Therefore, he drafted this catalogue of demands together with the concept group “Research” in the Advisory Council that is part of his portfolio and with members of the survivor council. It was informed by the discussions and results of the hearing of 18 June 2015 on “Research into Sexual Abuse – from Taboo to All-of-Society Task“.

## **1. The enormous societal dimension of sexual abuse must reflect in a society’s research efforts.**

The topic of sexual abuse must be integrated into the scientific mainstream. Here, it is important to use a wide range of support tools and to engage different sciences and professions in mono-, and interdisciplinary efforts; international networking should be expanded, as well. By the same token, survivors and practitioners from the counselling and support systems must be actively engaged in drafting research, in the research process proper and when disseminating research outcomes<sup>2</sup>. For this to succeed, investigators must develop a language that all of these groups understand and that enables them to work cooperatively on the issues at hand. Consequently, future calls for proposals in this field should explicitly underscore that, moving forward, findings will have to be published in laypersons’ terms and that they will have to be published in both the German language and internationally.

To ensure that research into sexual abuse will be sustained and intensified over the long term, the career development of scientists looking to make it their research interest must be encouraged. This may be done, for instance, by setting up further junior professorships and endowed

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<sup>2</sup> Here, it must be borne in mind that both the investigators and the practitioners may be adult survivors of abuse. The distinction made here only refers to their different roles in the research process.

professorships, sponsoring gifted education and doctoral students, summer schools and summer academies for young scientists as well as specific calls for proposals and counselling on the use of existing funding tools. Considering the dimension of this major societal challenge, also large-scale funding programmes such as research training groups, research units or collaborative research centres are required and must be applied for.

Similar to the agenda-setting customary in research to map out future scenarios, the establishment of one or more Federal institutes dedicated to this issue or aspects of it, such as trauma research, can send a strong signal. As central bodies, these institutes, as well as research academies, have the potential to intensify the necessary international scientific cooperation, communication as well as the networking and pooling of resources in Germany. At the same time, research efforts launched by the *Max-Planck-Gesellschaft*, the Helmholtz and/or Leibniz Association would advertise that the issue has arrived in the scientific mainstream and its importance is being acknowledged even by world-class research institutes.

Since trauma from childhood sexual abuse can have lifelong implications, longitudinal research is needed that studies the personal burden and problems caused by abuse and other harmful childhood events over the life course. This is why research funding must cover extended periods of time that transcend common funding terms. By collecting routine data and regular surveys, a sustainable monitoring framework will be provided for following the issue over time and gauging the effectiveness of prevention and intervention schemes. Moving forward, this will enable policy-makers to invest in long-term effective measures.

## **2. Enhanced co-operation between academia and practice is necessary to better protect children and young people from abuse.**

Academia and practice are characterised by distinct structures that each include highly heterogeneous actors. Nevertheless, it is important to develop shared perspectives with the aim to cooperatively enhance the prevention of abuse and the support opportunities for those affected. Practice and academia can mutually inspire each other to advance their field further. “Stovepipe” research must be overcome as must be “blinkered research”. This can only succeed if practitioners from the most varied disciplines and orientations are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of application-based research projects. The engagement of actual practitioners and the communication of findings and insights to frontline staff must always be borne in mind when evaluating applied, practice-related research projects in this field. Moreover, the involvement of field institutions, such as specialised counselling centres, should be matched to the issue and the task being addressed by the research process, e.g. the identification of research goals. Conversely, however, the limits of participation must also be made transparent and substantiated.

Inter- and transdisciplinary research tends to be beset by communication difficulties. This is mainly due to the diversity of specialist lingos and logics. Consequently, academia and practice need to develop joint ethical standards for research and aim for an effective understanding regarding definitions and case reports. Going forward, this common understanding will have the potential to inform the daily research and practice routines of the various disciplines even beyond the concrete research project. Concepts must be drafted and resources provided to facilitate such a communication process. Representatives from the field should be compensated for the time invested in research participation.

Field institutions and field professionals should reach out to research actors with co-operation offers, thus making a practice of highlighting research gaps and topics. Appropriate formats must be found and disseminated to resolve the question of how to collect and classify items that are in

need of research. Moreover, it must be identified how the practice field can be supported in drafting research applications, how user groups and the public at large can get access to the findings obtained at the various stages of research and how these findings can be integrated into mainstream practice (dissemination). Here, too, interdisciplinarity and comprehensibility should be key considerations. However, the upscaling of dissemination efforts may not compromise the quality and degree of differentiation of the findings. The application and implementation of research findings also needs both political decisions to achieve structural changes and the provision of proper funding.

### **3. New standards for survivor engagement in research processes must be developed and set.**

The research process must be a partnership between all of the parties involved. The survivors frequently have a history of being the object of sexualised violence; their research participation may not be a rerun of being a mere object. Taking those affected seriously as research subjects means doing research together with them. Questions that call for research on humans must satisfy the highest ethical standards in terms of informed consent. Ultimately, participating offers the subjects an opportunity to act autonomously and work on personal development (empowerment). This requires for them to be involved early on in research planning, development and conduct. Actionable concepts must be developed for survivor participation even as the research concepts are drafted. In addition, the research methods to be applied should be as transparent and understandable for the persons involved in the research processes as the topic allows. This is the only way for the participants to gauge the stress involved and identify strategies to cope with it. Not least, novel methods should be developed and used for this purpose, too.

For each research process, the terms of engagement, the issues to be addressed and the part to be played by the children and young persons themselves, their carers, adult survivors or survivor representatives must be specifically established. In this context, the limits of participation are to be formulated clearly so as not to give rise to unrealistic expectations. This goes, for instance, for underage research participants and the required informed consent from their legal representatives or changes in the survey and evaluation methods. Survivors participating in research should be compensated for the time and stress it causes them. Moreover, they must be pointed towards additional assistance and support services, if necessary.

### **4. Research into sexual abuse to be used as a test case for matters of research ethics and the dissemination of results in layperson's terms.**

Binding standards for the participation by and ethical protection of sexual abuse survivors serve to ensure that research into sexual abuse is actually conducted for the benefit of those affected and perceived as such by them. This is the only way for research into sexual abuse to come up with novel insights and solution strategies that can help to enhance child protection or living con-

ditions overall. Consequently, it is important for practitioners, survivors and scientists to maintain an exchange on ethical matters and bear them in mind (cf. *Bonner Ethikerklärung*<sup>3</sup>).

The welfare of all of the individuals participating in research should be ensured. The scientists must disclose possible conflicts of interest, be open to criticism of the research undertaken and, finally, be aware of the political dimension of their research. In addition to the survivors, however, also the scientists should have the opportunity to benefit from external supervision arrangements. These can help them cope with possible stressful experiences related to their research. Supervision can make people feel more at ease. It can raise the cooperation between scientists and survivors and/or practitioners to a professional level. This allows those involved to identify strategies for managing specific challenges, such as research-induced retraumatisation or the rules of confidentiality in research to be observed by the professionals subject to it. Scientists doing research into sexual abuse have a wider responsibility beyond the individuals participating in the immediate research process. When co-operating with abuse survivors, the scientists must act as competent contact persons. If necessary, they should also be able to point or refer them to appropriate outside help (cf. *Bonner Ethikerklärung*<sup>4</sup>). This involves establishing cooperation arrangements with relevant practice facilities.

The investigation of sexual abuse must properly address the multifactorial etiology of various stress manifestations. By the same token, the common combinations of violence and discrimination in our society must be considered, as must be sociocultural aspects, gender and intergenerational relations as well as different coping strategies.

It is of central importance that the survivors and the practitioners involved in the research process be provided with easy-to-understand information. In this field, particularly, the systematic communication and dissemination of findings should already be common practice when drafting the requirements for the call for proposals and later on in the context of project design, conduct and publication of outcomes. Since only the publication of findings in high-impact, English-language journals tends to be recognised as scientifically relevant in various disciplines, the calls for proposals should additionally demand and encourage the easily understandable and accessible communication of findings in practice-oriented German journals. If consistently observed, this topic might serve as a test case for learning about the dissemination of research findings.

**5. Research into sexual abuse must play a major role in basic, post-basic and continuous training and vice versa.**

The “lifelong” qualification of professional biographies through basic, post-basic and continuous training is the central tenet of professionalism. This goes for the professionals in the field, teachers in basic, post-basic and continuous training and scientists alike. Sexual abuse is an issue that must be mainstreamed in diverse qualification modules to properly reflect its enormous societal dimension. Moreover, research must essentially contribute to ensuring that, within the framework of the type of qualification being pursued, state-of-the-art basic knowledge, specific advanced knowledge and knowledge about courses of action are available on this issue.

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<sup>3</sup> Poelchau, H.-W. et al. (2015), *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung*, 153–160.

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Research findings must be actively communicated to and at various qualification-awarding bodies such as universities, tertiary education institutions and technical colleges and/or universities of applied sciences as well as further and continuous training facilities. Research must start a dialogue with the teachers and students at the various qualification-awarding bodies and qualification formats. Within the qualification-research-practice triangle, it should contribute to facilitating successful prevention, intervention and review through the work of the professionals. To support these endeavours, the incorporation of research findings in basic, post-basic and continuous training curricula and programmes must be recognised as a major criterion of research promotion, just as specific didactic teaching, learning and continuous training research must be promoted.

**Related discussion: The aim and purpose of basic, post-basic and continuous training from the perspective of investigators and practitioners**

Being knowledgeable about sexual abuse is important across the board for all groups of professionals who work with children and young persons. These are mainly professionals from the most varied disciplines engaged in child and youth services and in the outpatient and inpatient health care settings as well as teachers and other professionals in the school system. Moreover, however, also “survivor-facing” members of the administration, police and judiciary are a target group of post-basic and continuous training programmes.

For qualification efforts to be sustainable, it takes nationally binding curricula and defined segments of training and studies must be set aside for them, both when embarking on a profession and in eventual specialty training. For each of these stages, the amount of knowledge about sexual abuse and core competencies regarding prevention and intervention must be defined, adjusted to match target groups and kept at the state of the art. While a case can be made for embedding it into the child protection context, the specifics of sexual abuse must be appropriately covered. Merely optional basic, post-basic and continuous training programmes cannot properly address the societal dimension of sexual abuse and its implications. Therefore, care must be taken to make them mandatory.

Professionals teaching in basic, post-basic and continuous training programmes must be specifically qualified to cover sexual abuse using appropriate didactic methods to avoid exposing students to stressful or “triggering” contents. If necessary, they should act competently and make referrals to support and assistance services. Since both teachers and students may include survivors of sexual abuse, the language and teaching methods should avoid casting them as “other”.

**Focus: Establishing the review and evaluation of sexual abuse as a research interest**

The German *Bundestag*, in its decision of 2 July 2015, welcomed the project to set up an Independent Review Commission at the office of the Independent Commissioner for Questions Related to Child Sexual Abuse that will work for an initial term from 2016 until late March 2019. The Independent Child Sexual Abuse Review Commission is expected to help making politics and society more aware of the dimension of sexual violence against children and young persons. The Commission is supposed to look into the prevalence, types, causes and implications of sexual abuse and investigate the failings and structural grievances of the past. The Commission’s work will focus on hearing survivors throughout Germany.

The standards to be set by the Commission to ensure the protection of survivors at hearings, the handling of data generated in this context as well as data privacy issues have the potential to break new ground, also in other areas of research involving those affected.

The Commission's findings and recommendations will inform new research questions and thus stimulate the exploration of new areas. Therefore, the review and evaluation of sexual abuse should be supported by scientists drawing on a wide array of existing support schemes. Research sponsors should consider this demand for scientific findings that might be addressed in the context of the Commission's mandate when developing large-scale funding programmes to support the Commission's work, such as graduate colleges, research groups or collaborative research centres.

## Glossary

### **Child and youth sexual abuse**

So far, various definitions of child and youth sexual abuse have been used in science and practice. Specifically, these focus on different situations, contexts and groups of abusers. Moreover, definitions also vary on how broad or narrow the sexual acts are defined.

A common definition by Bange and Deegener defines child sexual abuse as any sexual act performed on or in front of girls and boys against their will or to which they cannot give informed consent due to immature physical, psychological, cognitive or verbal capacities. The abuser uses his or her position of power and authority to gratify his or her own needs at the child's expense.<sup>5</sup>

For criminal law purposes, children under age 14 years are invariably assumed to be unable to give legal consent to sexual acts. This means that any such activity will be liable to prosecution as sexual abuse, even if the child were consenting.

In psychosocial science and practice, the term "sexual or sexualised violence against children and youth" is commonly used instead of "sexual abuse" to emphasise that it is not about sexuality but about violence. The term "sexualised violence" indicates that sex is used to exert violence. Taking this further, several definitions of sexual abuse focus on the element of sexual violence committed against children and young persons at the hands of reference persons or carers, thereby contrasting it with, e.g. peer violence.

### **Collaborative Research Centre (*Sonderforschungsbereich*)**

The collaborative research centres of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) allow scientists to work together across the boundaries of their individual disciplines, institutes, departments and faculties within the framework of an interdisciplinary research programme of scientific excellence. They are research institutions established at universities for a term of up to 12 years.

### **Dissemination**

Dissemination refers to all activities used to spread findings and research outcomes widely, both in specialist media and in media for the general public.

### **Empowerment**

Empowerment refers to measures and interventions that strengthen the individual's agency and point the way out of the socially stigmatised role of victim.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Interdisciplinarity is the use of approaches, ways of thinking or methods proper to various disciplines. Such an interdisciplinary approach comprises several independent fields of science that investigate a scientific question using their specific methods.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bange und Deegener (1996), additional definitions and references as well as further reading in the expert opinion "*Häufigkeitsangaben zum sexuellen Missbrauch – Internationale Einordnung, Bewertung der Kenntnislage in Deutschland, Beschreibung des Entwicklungsbedarfs*" prepared on behalf of the UBSKM by Jud, Rassenhofer, Witt, Münzer, Fegert (2016).

### **Junior and Endowed Professorship**

Junior professorship is the official title of a teaching post at a German tertiary education facility. This teaching post was introduced in 2002 to enable junior scientists with outstanding doctorate qualifications to pursue research and teaching directly at universities etc. without the traditionally required habilitation to qualify them for tenured professorship.

Endowed professorship means that the professorship is not or not fully paid from a university's budget but is funded fully or in part by third-party funds. Endowed professorships tend to be time-limited.

### **Multifactorial etiology**

Multifactorial etiology means that a condition (e.g. an illness) has arisen due to the action of many causes.

### **Research Training Groups (*Graduiertenkolleg*)**

Research training groups are generic groups of doctoral students that are formed for the purpose of joint research and study mentored by university teachers.

### **Research Units (*Forscherguppe*)**

"Research unit" refers to a scientific funding programme of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* that sponsors small groups of scientists who work together on a question in a narrowly defined field that they would not be able to resolve individually.

### **Scaling-up**

"Wall-to-wall" implementation and rollout of measures and services for various target groups while not compromising on quality and differentiated nature of outcomes.

### **Scientific Mainstream**

Scientific mainstream is a blanket term for all of the prevailing research topics that garner mass interest.

### **Summer Schools**

Summer schools provide professional or private further training, content-based and international exchange. They award no qualification certificate but, in some cases, students can have course credits counted towards their studies.

### **Survey**

A survey is a more or less systematic search for scientifically relevant data in a specific area.

### **Transdisciplinarity**

Transdisciplinarity is a principle of integrative research. It connotes a methodological approach that combines scientific knowledge and practical knowledge.