Chapter 15

Self-Organised Research by Child Sexual Abuse Survivors: Developing a New Research Approach

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Abstract

The process of knowledge production is usually assigned to scientists who use specific methods to extract knowledge from someone else's experience. Usually this includes collecting, aggregating and interpreting data from an uninvolved point of view; that is, from the outside. This procedure is supposed to guarantee objectivity and generalisation. Many child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors reject such an approach that turns them into objects again. This presents a problem for research because it limits the number and contribution of potential participants and can lead to bias. In self-help groups of CSA survivors, an enormous amount of experiential knowledge accumulates, and sometimes this is transferred into more than only individually valid knowledge. Based on this experience and aiming for more agency of CSA Survivors, a group of adult survivors and researchers developed a new approach to research. It focuses on the development of self-organised research, which enables survivors of sexualised violence to practice research without losing agency. They are indispensable and elementary parts in all phases of the process. This chapter shows one way of formalising this process so quality criteria can be developed and applied. Following the presented approach, evaluation of the presented methods is the appropriate next step because self-help groups give reason to estimate significant outcomes. These outcomes not only enable self-help groups of CSA survivors to incorporate new methods but also include the chance to empower adults, children or youth who have been victims of sexualised violence.

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Introduction

Self-Help and the 'Survivor-Controlled Approach'

Sexualised violence in childhood (also termed child sexual abuse, or CSA) leaves a long wake of consequences for those with such exposure. Many affected people deal with lower self-esteem and are very sensitive to being ignored, overlooked or treated as a mere observation object. Self-help groups of adult survivors play an important role in coping with these consequences and are an effective means of self-empowerment.

Such self-help groups for survivors of sexualised violence in childhood have been established in Berlin since the 1980s. Initially, they were women's groups, and men's groups followed later (Autorengruppe Tauwetter, 1998; Birresborn & Sandrock, 1993; Hentschel et al., 1992; Sack & Tauwetter, 1996).

These groups were mostly organised by two Berlin-based counselling centres for survivors of sexualised violence, Wildwasser for women and Tauwetter for men, which were founded by CSA survivors. In 2004, they developed the 'survivor-controlled approach' (Wildwasser et al., 2004), a programmatic foundation for their work with and as CSA survivors. At the centre of this approach is the idea that regaining agency is the essential core of recovering from CSA (Arbeitsgruppe bkA, 2006).

The term *survivor-controlled approach* is a deliberate reference to survivor-controlled research, which came to Germany from the English-speaking world (Russo, 2012).

Survivor-Controlled Research or Participatory Research?

Survivor-controlled research began in Germany in 2002 with a research project on homelessness and psychiatry from the perspective of survivors (Russo & Fink, 2003). It was embedded in a critique of the biomedical understanding of mental health and the division of roles in mental health research (see Sweeney et al., 2009).

The critique of the distribution of roles in research and the reduction of research participants to an object of research has been repeatedly renewed (Schlingmann, 2015). At the same time, scholars noted that research on sexualised violence was truncated in many places by a reduction to trauma research (Schlingmann, 2016). It became clear that Morus Markard's (2007) criticism of experimental-statistical approaches also applied here:

> The problem of experimental-statistical approaches in the social sciences and psychology is that, in the full sense, the concept of experience only applies to those working scientifically, while the

> experience of those being studied is methodologically regulated to the point of being – in Adorno's words – "annulled" (1972, 69) – or, in Marx's words: the "testimony of the senses . . . is reduced to the sensuousness of geometry" (1953, 330). (p. 5)[1]

The need for participatory research on sexualised violence was emphasised first in the Bonn Ethics Declaration (Poelchau et al., 2015), which was developed in the framework of the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF, or the Federal Ministry for Education and Research) funding line on sexual violence against children and adolescents in educational contexts, and later more explicitly in the 'Memorandum on Participatory Research' (Bahls et al., 2018), which was also developed in this context.

However, a short review of existing research on the topic of sexual violence showed a huge difference in the degree of participation. Wright et al. (2010) developed a model to assess the extent of participation in research and distinguished among forms of nonparticipation, preliminary stages of participation, participation and beyond participation. In their eyes, participation only occurred when the question of decision-making power was tackled. This position was backed by Brenssel and Lutz-Kluge (2020):

> The claim of participation can only be realized in the research context if it is backed up by an interest in taking responsibility, reflection on one's own positioning, a critical examination and the intention to change – also – structural power relations. (p. 12)[2]

Most research projects in the BMBF funding line achieved only the preliminary stages of participation at best; some declared interviewing survivors for data collection as a form of participation. Only a small group of researchers who had worked in the field before tried to implement participation in their research.

An assessment from participatory health research was confirmed:

> The central feature of the Participatory Health Research is the direct participation of those people in the research process, whose working or living conditions are the subject of the research. This

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[1] Quotes originally in German were translated into English, and the original German source is in the footnotes. *'Das Problem experimentell-statistisch verfahrender sozialwissenschaftlicher und psychologischer Ansätze besteht nun weiter darin, dass im Vollsinne der Erfahrungsbegriff nur für die wissenschaftlich Arbeitenden gilt, während die Erfahrung der Untersuchten methodisch reguliert bis – mit Adorno gesagt –* » *annulliert* « *(1972, 69) wird – oder mit Marx formuliert: das* » *Zeugnis der Sinne . . .zur Sinnlichkeit der Geometrie* « *verkürzt wird* (1953, 330)*'* (Markard, 2007, p. 5).

[2] *'Der Anspruch von Partizipation kann sich im Forschungskontext nur dann einlösen, wenn dahinter ein Interesse an Verantwortungsübernahme, Reflexion der eigenen Positionierung, eine kritische Auseinandersetzung und Absicht zur Veränderung von – auch – strukturellen Machtverhältnissen steht'* (Brenssel & Lutz-Kluge, 2020, p. 12).

> does not mean people as test subjects or study participants in a research project, but as research partners on an equal footing.
>
> All research partners jointly determine the core elements of the project, from the selection of the research focus to the selection of methods, data collection and interpretation of the results. Experience at home and abroad show that participation in this sense is rich in prerequisite-rich and therefore often difficult to realize.
>
> (Wright, 2021, p. 140)[3]

Disappointed by the slow implementation and yet encouraged by the development of the 'Bonn Ethics Declaration' and the 'Memorandum on Participatory Research', a group of CSA survivors developed the idea to no longer wait for a majority of researchers to take participation seriously but to take the initiative.

In 2018, the idea of going beyond participation and building an alliance between scientists and survivors for joint research was presented in a conference keynote by Schröer and Schlingmann at a meeting of the BMBF funding line. Schlingmann (2018) proposed to replace the pyramid-shaped stages of participation developed in public health research (Wright et al., 2010) by a two-winged model, which allows participation of survivors in academic research, participation of academics in survivor-controlled research and as a third type, joint research (see also Schlingmann, 2020a). These theoretical thoughts were the basis for the development of the survivor-controlled research subproject SELFORG as part of the joint research project REGROW. The other basis was an observation in the work of self-help groups.

Generalisation of Experiential Knowledge in Self-Help Groups

In institutions like Tauwetter and Wildwasser, long-term observations indicate that an enormous amount of experiential knowledge hides in these self-help groups, especially about violence and ways of dealing with it (Arbeitsgruppe bkA, 2006).[4] Both organisations were founded because of shared experience and observations concerning a deficit in support for CSA survivors. These

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[3] *'Zentrales Merkmal der PGF ist die direkte Beteiligung derMenschen am Forschungsprozess, deren Arbeits-oder Lebensverhältnisse Gegenstand der Forschung sind. Damit ist nicht gemeint, die Menschen als Proband*innen oder Studienteilenehmer*innen in eine Forschung einzubeziehen, sondern als Forschungspartner*innen auf Augenhöhe. Alle Forschungspartner*innen bestimmen gemeinsam die Kernelemente des Forschungsprojekts, von der Auswahl des Forschungsschwerpunkts bis hin zurMethodenauswahl, Datenerhebung und Interpretation der Ergebnisse. Erfahrungen aus dem In- und Ausland zeigen, dass Partizipation in diesem Sinne voraussetzungsreich und deshalb oft schwer zu realisieren ist'* (Wright, 2021, p. 140).

[4] Self-help groups referred to in this article are not 12-step groups but closed self-help groups with open communication.

conclusions are an integral part of self-help groups. The follow-up question was what kind of conclusions, or speaking more broadly, what kind of generalisation was legitimate and why.

Generalisation in self-help groups can have different functions. It can serve the creation of a sense of community or help the individual gain knowledge that leads to an expansion of agency. Of primary relevance for research are those generalisations that serve to gain knowledge. Many paths to these gains in knowledge correspond to methods of knowledge production that are dominant in public discourse and also large parts of academic discourse: The individual experience is summed up, contradictory experience is sorted out as an exception, common experience is searched for – by analogy to the formation of mean values or the highest common denominator and considered valid if applicable to the average or majority of a group. A variance interval of varying width can be used, but there will always be a group of outliers of varying size that falls outside the majority.

This quantitative generalisation method negates the standpoint of the subject and reduces survivors to data suppliers – even when they accumulate and interpret the data.

> Subjects exist in the plural, but not in the average. Individual cases can be put in relation to each other, but not "offset" against each other. It is the individual specifications that are of interest, not the levelling of the average. The individual, subjective cases are not deviations, but the idea of deviation itself deviates from the idea of subjectivity. Accordingly, possibilities for generalization do not lie in central tendencies, but in the elaboration of socially mediated and socially intervening possibilities for action. (Markard, 2000, section 8 subjectivity validity and generalization)[5]

However, qualitative research methods, whether hermeneutic or content analytic, also include interpretation of the collected (interview) data by researchers. Once again, survivors become research objects. This objectification contradicts the generalised interests of survivors: Sexualised violence reduces people to an object or thing, and self-determination and regaining subject status are core elements and goals for working through the experience. The question, therefore, is

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[5] '*Subjekte existieren zwar im Plural, aber nicht im Durchschnitt. Einzelfälle können zueinander ins Verhältnis gesetzt, aber nicht gegeneinander » verrechnet « werden. Es sind die individuellen Spezifikationen, die interessieren, nicht die Nivellierungen des Durchschnitts. Die einzelnen, subjektiven Fälle sind keine Abweichungen, sondern der Gedanke der Abweichung weicht selber ab vom Gedanken der Subjektivität. Verallgemeinerungsmöglichkeiten liegen demnach nicht in zentralen Tendenzen, sondern in der Herausarbeitung gesellschaftlich vermittelter und gesellschaftlich eingreifender Handlungsmöglichkeiten*' (Markard, 2000, Kapitel 8 Subjektivität, Geltung, Verallgemeinerung).

whether and how such a regaining of subject status could take place in the production of more generally valid knowledge (methods of generalisation in the context of research on sexualised violence and their impact on survivors are discussed in Schlingmann, 2020b).

View of Critical Psychology on Self-Help Groups: A Means of Learning and a Research Process

Critical Psychology is a form of psychology that claims explicitly to conduct research from the standpoint of the subject. It emerged from the critique by Holzkamp of 'mainstream psychology' in his book *Foundations of Psychology* (Osterkamp & Schraube, 2013).

Critical Psychology posits that people do not act in a causally conditioned way, but instead are led by reasons.

> Here 'reason' does not mean 'rational' or 'conscious', as can be illustrated by the example of litmus paper: Litmus paper certainly does not turn red or blue consciously, but probably not unconsciously either, but under certain conditions, it changes the question conditionally. This means: unconscious only makes sense in the discourse of reasons.
>
> (Markard, 2007, p. 5)[6]

Reasons for action are by no means always conscious, but they are in principle capable of consciousness. From the subject's standpoint, the individual perceives the circumstances and their meanings and explicates the premises for reasons of action in relationship to their life interests. Generalised statements based on such a 'reason discourse' always have a certain scope of validity that has to be described. Thus, no general and universally valid causal relationships are constructed, but rather the circumstances in which actions appear meaningful and functional to one or more individuals are described (Holzkamp, 2013a).

Self-help groups have the task of enabling participants to improve their agency. They are 'people exploring issues in depth to gain a better understanding of their situation' (Abma et al., 2019, p. 142). What happens in such groups may thus be described as 'expansive' learning (Holzkamp, 2013b, p. 124). By recognising internal reasons for action, it becomes possible to see through personal limitations and reduced interpretations and thus expand one's agency. In this process of 'transcending the immediate' (Holzkamp, 2013a, p. 43), one discovers which actions seem to make sense in which situation and why.

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[6] '*"Begründet" bedeutet hier nicht 'rational' oder 'bewusst', wie sich am Beispiel von Lackmus-Papier veranschaulichen lässt: Lackmus-Papier färbt sich gewiss nicht bewusst rot oder blau, wohl aber auch nicht unbewusst, sondern unter bestimmten Bedingungen, es wechselt die Frage bedingt. Das bedeutet: Unbewusstes macht nur im Begründungsdiskurs Sinn'* (Markard, 2007, p. 5).

An explanation of the subject's reasons for action becomes possible in an ideal situation in a self-help group, considering the social situation and position. But because self-help groups are rarely able to reflect their way of generalisation, this is by no means inevitable and more or less a random by-product. Most participants are not aware of these processes, and it is all too tempting to adopt interpretations offered by society. As a possibility, however, it is inherent in all self-help groups.

Holzkamp (1994) described the coincidence of interpretation or theorising and subjective experience as a possible quality of the 'survivor' discourse of victims of sexualised violence:

> [It is] a constellation … in which the subject of experience potentially coincides with the subject of interpretation, so that the women (thus in the survivor discourse) are able to become subjects of their own discourse. (p. 155)[7]
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> Women [are] potentially transformed from objects of interpretation by experts (psychologists, psychiatrists, other "professionals") to subjects of theorisation of their own experience of violence. (p. 152)[8]
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> The generalizations to be gained in this way are thus not frequency generalizations, but – as we put it – "structural generalizations," the gaining of which we have characterised as a subject-science procedure of "self-application" or "self-subsumption." (p. 152)[9]

SELFORG

In 2017, a group of CSA survivors around Tauwetter discussed the idea of applying to the BMBF funding line with a research project. They wanted to achieve two things: The first was to find out whether and how it would be possible to transform the more or less unsystematic generalisation in self-help groups into a research approach for CSA survivors with the help of the ideas of Critical Psychology. The second was to study the multiple ways of processing sexualised

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[7] *'Eine Konstellation, … in welcher das Subjekt der Erfahrung mit dem Subjekt der Interpretation potentiell zusammenfällt, so daß die Frauen (so im Survivor-Diskurs) zu Subjekten ihres eigenen Diskurses zu werden vermögen'* (Holzkamp, 1994, p. 155).

[8] *'Frauen [werden] von Objekten der Interpretation von Experten (Psychologen, Psychiatern, sonstigen » Fachleuten «) potentiell zu Subjekten der Theoretisierung ihrer eigenen Gewalterfahrungen'* (Holzkamp, 1994, p. 152).

[9] *'Die so zu gewinnenden Verallgemeinerungen sind also keine Häufigkeits-Verallgemeinerungen, sondern – wie wir uns ausdrücken – » strukturelle Verallgemeinerungen «, deren Gewinnung wir als subjektwissenschaftliches Verfahren der » Selbstanwendung « oder » Selbstsubsumtion « charakterisiert haben'* (Holzkamp, 1994, p.c152).

violence beyond the clinical settings. These ways – described as self-organised recovery processes – play an important role for quite many CSA survivors.

Through their initiative, the research network REGROW was founded for a joint funding application. The network featured academic research subprojects with varying degrees of participation and a survivor-controlled research subproject,[10] which was titled 'Impact of Self-Organized Ways and Processes for Recovering from Child Sexual Abuse (SELFORG)'.

Unfortunately, the application was rejected. Though the innovative approach and stakeholder participation were explicitly praised, the costs required for this were criticised as too high. 'The budget seems to be too high in relation to the planned sample sizes' (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft-und Raumfahrt, personal communication, 19 March 2017).

A second attempt was made to realise SELFORG in a different setting. Here, too, the project was supported by scientists from a university. However, even before the application was submitted, it turned out that the funding guidelines for health research were not feasible to carry out the kind of survivor-controlled research envisaged. Nevertheless, the many discussions between the scientists and CSA survivors during these processes enabled the development of a research concept.[11]

Design for Self-Organised Research (by Survivors of Sexualised Violence)[12]

Initial Group

As mentioned in self-organised research, the division into researcher and research object is abolished. The question arises: Who initiates the research and who develops the research question? Usually, this is a small number of CSA survivors who have a common interest in finding an answer to a question or problem. They invite others to participate who have the same question. The responsibility for the coordination of the research process from application to publication lies primarily with the initial group, but it is crucial to include as many of the participants as possible. Self-organised research is democratic research.

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[10] The distinction between academic researchers and CSA survivors is not quite correct because there are CSA survivors who have a background in academic research and vice versa. A more precise distinction would be between research projects in which openly acknowledged CSA survivors define the project and those in which academic researchers do so.

[11] The author explicitly thanks the involved scientists who showed a lot of courage and shared a lot of knowledge.

[12] Although this research design was developed for research by CSA survivors, it can easily be adapted to self-organised research by any other group.

Research Groups

The research groups should consist of diverse CSA survivors (backgrounds, gender, etc.). Usually, it is assumed that a group discussion is best conducted with a fairly homogenous group to enable all participants to partake in the discussion (Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 243). This is because the interpreting researchers later work out different circumstances that lead to different behaviours. If research subjects and research objects coincide, it is useful to bring together different positions in the group discussion so that greater depth through contrast is possible.

One qualification of the participants should be a certain capability to reflect on their experience and relate it to the experience of others. This is best achieved if all participants have partaken in self-help groups before.

It seems advisable to have a certain number of research groups (three or more) to counteract any distortion by dominant spokespersons who may be present in one group. The size of the groups should not exceed five to six people to have enough time to focus on different experiences. On decisions necessary before any group discussion, see Lamnek (1993, p. 146).

Research Group Meetings

The meetings of the research groups should take place at a central location (particularly if participants from different locations are to participate). If possible, meetings should last for a longer period, e.g. three days. Meetings for a longer time at the same place enable better exchange and communication between the participants in the different research groups between single sessions, thus allowing for productive stimulation in the groups.

During the individual sessions of each research group, every group member should have time to relate their experience concerning the research question. The others can discuss the input with the speaker and relate it to their experience and that of the others. It also seems advisable to implement certain rules of discussion to avoid unnecessary injuries. This is comparable to the normal process in a self-help group.

Because the goal of this research is 'structural generalisation' (Holzkamp, 1994, p. 152) more than one meeting, most likely three to five, is needed, particularly if an advisory board and the inclusion of 'outside sources' (Abma et al., 2019, p. 177; discussed later) are planned. The exact number of meetings depends on the research question and amount of work assigned to the research groups.

A coordinator who has partaken in self-help groups and preferably has experience in self-organised research should be assigned to every research group. The sole task of the coordinator is to ensure a systematic procedure to guarantee a certain quality of research. They are not a researcher who is doing participant observation in field research, but a participant of the research group with a special task.

First Meeting

Training in research methods is an essential part of all kinds of participatory research and even more so for self-organised research. The first meeting necessarily has to focus on introducing the basic categories of Critical Psychology, especially the principles of the reason discourse. Concepts like reasons for action, premises, meaning, etc. need to be understood in relation to one another.

Second, the first meeting has to include a training on how to transcend the immediate by transforming experience clad in everyday terms into scientific categories. Transcending the immediate is facilitated by working in a group of fellow survivors. They look at the actions of the focal participant from their own subjective standpoint, which enables the focal participant to see different aspects. The alternation between individual introspection and reflection in the group enables the individual to look behind the scenes. This was first practiced in a research project in 1984 about becoming a subject in childhood (see Bader et al., 1984; Holzkamp et al., 1985; Markard, 1985). They developed the method to write diaries that were discussed with two advisors and the whole research group.

Holzkamp used the term *social self-understanding* to describe the research process in which researchers and the objects of research are the same people. He talked about a process of successive transformation from pretheoretical discussions to scientific conceptualisation:

> One talks, in the end, about the same problem as at the beginning, but on a higher level of self-reflection and object-relatedness. This process gains its depth and stringency from the gradual issue-related integration of the pertinent basic subject science concepts discussed above. In this way, their relations to the overall concept are progressively established through which the initially noncommittal talks gain scientific stringency. This development is tantamount to changing from pre-theoretical discussions to theoretically conceptualising the topic at issue.
>
> (Holzkamp, 2013c, p. 338)[13]

In other word, the training can enable the research groups, which initially will be more of a prolonged self-help group, to increasingly become scientifically working research groups.

This first meeting also allows the formation of the research groups and gives the participants a chance to get to know one another. This is inevitable, because it is likely that most of them don't know one another and they will be working together on a topic that usually is regarded as very private. Enough room is needed to build up trust among the participants.

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[13] Original in English.

Following Meetings

The actual research begins with detailed reports from the participants about their experience regarding the research question. The other group members have the task to encourage the speakers and ask them why they acted the way they did. This can easily be misunderstood as a rejection or questioning of their perception. That makes it indispensable that the principles of the reason discourse (see previous discussion) are explained with ample time in the first meeting. This session is audiotaped and transcribed. Based on the transcription, each person writes a summary of their experience and explanations for their behaviour.

In the next sessions, the respective reasons for action are worked out from these summaries. From these reasons for action, the premises are explicated and jointly questioned to reveal abbreviations and interpretations. On this basis, the conditions and meanings underlying the premises are elaborated. The precise description of these conditions and meanings determines the respective scope of validity of the results. Thus statements are made under what circumstances actions appear subjectively functional and are aspired.

The research groups present their results to the other groups and discuss them with them. Seemingly contradictory results suggest different scopes of validity, i.e. they force a specification of the scope. Afterwards, the research groups meet on their own again and revise their results in the light of the results of the others.

A written report of their research and results is the last task of the different research groups. The responsibility for organising a joint publication that compiles the results lies with the initial group.

Possible Additional Improvements

Members of the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research have stated in their book *Participatory Research for Health and Social Well-Being* that in participatory research, it is necessary 'to be open to results that may not be, what we expected or hoped for' (Abma et al., 2019, p. 175). This is equally true for self-organised research. Among others, they propose 'comparing to outside sources' (p. 176) and 'consulting with critical friends' (p. 177), two options that are easily adaptable for self-organised research.

Consulting With Critical Friends: A Scientific Advisory Board

An interdisciplinary advisory board of scientists with profound experience in research concerning sexualised violence, Critical Psychology and survivor-controlled research can be formed to advise the CSA survivor groups. The intermediate results of the research groups can be presented to this board, which could comment on the results and give suggestions. The comments and suggestions will be incorporated in the next research group meetings.

Comparing to Outside Sources: Research Databases, Online Surveys and Literature Review

The easiest step to including external material is to investigate whether there are results from any other research projects with a similar research question. Considering how often CSA survivors think that research does not really help them with their problems (Schlingmann, 2016), it may not seem very likely, but it is still a possible source.

Online surveys are in no way participatory or self-organised research, but they may be a form of subject science research. The fact that online samples usually are convenience samples and not representative is irrelevant for subject science because it aims for another form of generalisation. Online surveys are a fairly easily accessible tool, and it seems worth a try to ask interested people open questions in the language of the reason discourse. It seems advisable to look for a cooperating university or research institute to start such complementary research, which would be necessary to evaluate whether subject science online surveys are possible and under what circumstances.

CSA survivors in self-help groups, political initiatives, counselling centres and as activists produce a huge amount of grey literature. In literature reviews, this literature usually is not taken into account. Considering that this literature is based on personal experience of CSA survivors, it is likely that a review of the grey literature will enrich the research.

Conclusions

Although the SELFORG research was not funded, developing it through cooperation between scientists and CSA survivors was a very fruitful process. If such self-organised research were to be conducted, important impulses would emanate from it for research on sexualised violence. In such a way, results can be achieved that could not otherwise be obtained. Moreover, such research would be a breakthrough in subject science research in general.

Such research could also have considerable effects beyond the immediate scientific interest: Survivors of sexualised violence could break out of their socially ascribed role as eternal victims and provide important contributions to research on sexualised violence. It would be difficult to achieve a greater empowering effect with this breadth and radiance in any other way.

Such models for subject science knowledge production could also enable CSA survivors to develop new models of coping with their experience in self-help groups. From thereon, it might be possible to develop methods that could allow children and adolescents to shorten the process of working through the violence in the long run. Both aspects are especially important for those who do not have access to other support.

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