

**Dismantling Silos and Reducing Systemic Violence:
Unconventional Facilitation of Conversation, Community, and Collaboration
Among Sexual Violence Professionals**

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The Context: Institutions' Problematic Responses to Sexual Assault

In recent years, sexual assault has received unprecedented attention and generated widespread public interest. This is due in no small part to headline-capturing trials, such as those involving former CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi (Boesveld, 2016; Craig, 2016; Kingston, 2014) and actor Bill Cosby (Johnson, 2014; Kim, Littlefield, & Etehad, 2017; Malone & Demme, 2015), through to the outrage prompted by the “Stanford swimmer,” Brock Turner’s 3-month jail term for sexually assaulting an unconscious woman (Baker, 2016; Levin, 2016; Miller, 2016) and the #MeToo movement, originating within the work of Tarana Burke and catapulted by actor Alyssa Milano (Harris, 2018). Social awareness about sexual violence is ever increasing, as is public scrutiny of its handling at multiple institutional levels.

In Canada, the issue of sexual assault has catapulted to the top of social and political agendas, often because of this intensified scrutiny. This has been the case on Canadian post-secondary campuses and in police departments alike. The past several years have seen Canadian colleges and universities scrambling to implement or update sexual violence policies, in some cases in response to new provincial legislation (Chiose, 2016; Khosroshahy, 2016; Ward, 2017). This policy-oriented impetus was likely influenced in part by the kinds of problems documented in *The Hunting Ground* (2015), an American documentary reflecting the incidence and prevalence of campus sexual assaults and post-secondary institutions’ failure to appropriately respond to these reports (Ziering & Dick, 2015). Canadian media coverage about Mandi Gray, a York University PhD student who filed a Human Rights complaint against the university in response to how she was treated after reporting that someone assaulted her, has no doubt helped speed up these processes (Hoffman, 2015; *Mandi Gray*, 2016). Likewise, Robin Doolittle’s two-year investigative reporting in *The Globe and Mail*’s “Unfounded” (2017) series trained a social spotlight upon Canadian police departments in their handling of sexual assault cases. Doolittle asserts that in Canada, an average of one in five reports of

sexual assault are not believed (deemed “unfounded”), with several jurisdictions dismissing more than 40% of reported sexual assaults as baseless.

The Problem: The Persistence of Institutional Silos

What these exposés render stark are systematic and systemic problems in institutions’ handling of sexual assault. One of the most widely cited reason for institutions’ problematic responses to sexual assault on (Carrigan Wooten & Mitchell, 2017; *Confronting*, 2015) and beyond campuses (Hamby & Grych, 2013; Mulligan & Fan, 2017; Shaw & Andrew, 2005) are institutional silos: when people working on the same issue work in isolation, detached from and uninformed by one another, unaware of the roles and responsibilities of others working on the same or similar cases (Kelty et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2017). Silos can lead to insufficient communication across cases, work duplication, misguided work, burnout, and costly blind spots, among other negative outcomes. All of this can result in suboptimal service provision for survivors of sexual assault (Kelty et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2017).

At a recent conference addressing sexual violence on campus, one of the coordinators concluded, “one of the biggest barriers is failed relationships, or working in silos, or not engaging stakeholders, or viewing sexual violence as isolated from off-campus sexual violence” (Samson, 2016). Off campus, whether the analysis is provincial or federal, the message tends to be the same: “there is a culture of institutional silos, with and between agencies, which prevent coordinated, collaborative work” (Clarke, 2015). Minister for Women and Gender Equality Maryam Monsef, in her announcement of “Canada’s Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence” in June of 2017 asserted, “it’s critical that we begin to co-ordinate our efforts across departments within the federal government and address the silos that exist” (Smith, 2017).

The view that institutional silos inhibit effective responses to sexual violence emerged first for me, in my doctoral research. Institutional silos were described by participants in the research interviews and

focus groups that I held with victim-facing professionals in my doctoral work, “Talk About [Men's Perpetration of] Sexual Assault [Against Women]” (2016). In this research, I spoke with post-secondary students (part of a demographic most at risk of perpetrating or becoming victims of sexual assault) and victim-facing professionals. These professionals included sex crimes detectives, social workers, crown prosecutors, nurses, and sex educators. While it fell outside of the scope of the study that I ultimately produced, part of what I became aware of through my research was the magnitude of institutional silos. During interviews and focus groups, professionals spoke about the consequentiality of working in silos, observations that resonate with troubling findings in the literature (e.g., that territoriality and the absence of coordination between agencies significantly impacts victims in terms of things like their ability to navigate systems [Murphy, Banyard, Maynard, & Dufresne, 2011]).

Significantly, some of these concerns with silos were advanced by professionals who were previously or actively part of collaborative sexual assault programs underway at the time. One program consisted of a multi-disciplinary site, and the other, a Sexual Assault Response Team (SART). The former consisted of a multi-disciplinary team including dedicated social workers, medical specialists, and law enforcement who were co-located, also referred to as “multi-agency” sites (Robinson, Hudson, & Brookman, 2008) and “Multidisciplinary Centres” (Powell & Cauchi, 2013). The latter offered access to multidisciplinary services, but as a mobile unit. Critical assessments of such multi-disciplinary models yield positive results – outcomes suggesting that sexual assault victims and service providers alike feel more informed and more satisfied with how sexual assault-related processes are managed when multiple agencies are involved (Powell & Cauchi, 2013; Powell & Wright, 2011; van Staden & Lawrence, 2010). The research also indicates, however, that ongoing challenges faced by these programs include sustaining participation, competing agendas and priorities, and “uneasy alliances” (Robinson, Hudson, & Brookman, 2008). This combination of professionals’ comments and the literature suggests that multi-agency work might be imagined as a foreign locale where divergent

institutional representatives meet to do complementary work. Temporarily leaving their respective silos, as foreigners both to the site and to one another, each learns just enough of the other's disciplinary language to get by. While helpful, these exchanges can remain largely superficial. Professionals lack a shared, transdisciplinary language of collaborative practice, inspired by what they collectively want and need to know, and how they will come to know it. As it stands, the absence of enduring and meaningful coordinated, cross-disciplinary efforts leave many professionals without a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of challenges that victims encounter as they interface with a spectrum of multi-disciplinary sexual assault services.

The consequences of siloed work are real and significant, and can compound the violence experienced by people who have been sexually assaulted by other people. Without transdisciplinary practices and a more informed and holistic awareness of victims' experiences, professionals are at risk of promoting "revictimization" (Maier, 2008), more commonly known as "secondary victimization" or "behaviors and practices engaged in by community service providers, which further the rape event, resulting in additional stress and trauma for victims" (Campbell & Raja, 1999). Exacerbating the psychological and sometimes physiological harms victims suffer as a result of siloed practices, access to justice may be compromised as well. Ontario lawyers point to silos to explain why, in some jurisdictions, sexual assault cases will proceed to court, while in other jurisdictions, they will not. In other words, because of silos, survivors' access to trials may hinge more on where they happen to live than on legal criteria (Mulligan & Fan, 2017). An inquiry into a recent case in Australia where a man was wrongfully convicted and served six years for a rape he did not commit, found that siloed work – limited exchanges between medical, scientific, and law enforcement professionals – created this undue risk of wrongful imprisonment (Kelty et al., 2017).

A Response: Conversation, Community, Collaboration

Addressing these problems requires a blueprint for the dismantling and discouragement of institutional silos in terms of a lasting, collaborative and transdisciplinary model that inspires “buy in,” and an ongoing and long term commitment to collaboration. This requires the cultivation of informed cross-disciplinary conversation, community mobilization, and ultimately the collective establishment of transdisciplinary aims. Accordingly, the research program I’ve undertaken involves three objectives:

1. Facilitation and nurturing of cross-disciplinary dialogue and discussion about sexual assault,
2. The mobilization of a cross-disciplinary community sustained by meaningful and enduring cooperative engagement, and,
3. Collective development of transdisciplinary education priorities to inform the implementation of transdisciplinary training.

The Details: A Series of Gatherings Informed by Evidence-Based Practices

These objectives are achieved in the provision of a series of cross-disciplinary, monthly gatherings, that invite participants to learn together with the aims of promoting cross-disciplinary dialogue, sharing tools to facilitate the building of a lasting and sustainable community, and the establishment of collaborative, transdisciplinary training priorities. A total of ten gatherings will take place. (At the time of this writing, nine gatherings have already been held.)

Participants and the Structure of the Gatherings

In order to ensure a mixture of cross-disciplinary participants with various forms of engagement with sexual assault, snowball recruitment efforts targeted victim-facing professionals across social work, healthcare, and criminal justice disciplines. During the recruitment and informed consent process, those interested in participating were asked to come to these gatherings curious, reflective, committed to preserving confidentiality, and interested in mutual learning (Novy, Habersack, & Shaller,

2013) with the aim of ultimately working toward establishing cross-disciplinary community and transdisciplinary training priorities. Gatherings were described as sites where knowledge hierarchies are replaced by a framework in which multiple forms of knowledge are welcome and valued not in spite of, but *because of* their diversity.

A total of 15 participants have attended one or more of the nine monthly gatherings held to date, with a core group of between eight and ten participants who have attended the majority of gatherings. Several others expressed interest and/or aspired to attend, but could not for reasons including challenges supporting remote participation, weather-related travel difficulties, and last-minute work demands. These participants reflect various professions. From social work, there is representation at the local sexual assault centre level as well as at the provincial association level, including representation from education and outreach workers, sexual assault centre Executive Directors, criminal justice coordinators, and collaboration coordinators, and advocates from multiple post-secondary campuses also attend; from healthcare there is representation from physicians, physician residents, care managers (overseeing the health aspect of sexual assault response teams), community nurses; and, from policing there is representation from sex crimes detectives, child abuse detectives, and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Participants are engaged as equal bearers and producers of knowledge, informed by Palmer's notion of "communities of truth" (1998), a view of knowledge (or truth) as something that is interactively and dynamically produced by "knowers" – all with valuable, if different, kinds of knowledge – gathered around a subject, in this case, sexual violence. Research indicates this approach – one that does not privilege one form of knowledge over others – can indeed promote "interdisciplinary cognizance" that sparks understandings of interconnected relationships "between subject areas that were previously disconnected" (Carrigan Wooten & Mitchell, 2017).

Data Collection

Certified by our institutional research ethics board (the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board), participants have signed written informed consent forms to participate in the overarching study. At the end of each gathering, they again provide consent for each of the means of data collection I use in order to ensure that they feel some degree of control and awareness about the specifics of what it is they are consenting to, since they are consenting to something they have *just* participated in.

These “Community in Conversation” gatherings, as I have called them, involve various means of data collection. All meetings are audio recorded, and will be transcribed verbatim. The artefacts generated in each meeting are also retained. Furthermore, building upon the insights of Creamer (2005) who suggests various additional approaches to documenting collaborative work, our gatherings are also recorded by an ethnographer and a graphic recorder. The former is a colleague with ethnographic experience who attends each meeting and records high level observations about the gatherings, documenting participant interactions. For example, an observation she recorded at one of the gatherings captures the shift from disciplinary to collective talk: “this is the first time(ish) that the participants are theorizing about sexual assault/abuse and the coping strategies without referencing their disciplinary backgrounds or couching their comments in professional parameters.” An excerpt from another meeting reflects participant engagement: “What are the end goals of your sexual violence work, and what do you have to do to achieve them? The participants are ready to jump in on this and heads go down immediately as they get into the forms provided. Everyone works beyond the three minute mark and only two participants are chatting...” The graphic recorder — someone who listens and makes public visual notes of our meetings — also reflects high level gathering outcomes in wall-sized posters that are generated at each meeting and all are brought back and posted during each gathering. The visuals she produces representing the conversations that take place offer another kind of interpretive reflection of the matters taken up (e.g., she drew an image of a woman cowering underneath an

oversized shoe about to step on her alongside the title, “Sexual violence is an expression of oppression”). These enormous images are powerful reminders of what we have contemplated and worked on, as a new found community over several months.

The Goals of the Gatherings

The aims of the gatherings first consist of promoting interaction and cross-disciplinary conversation – to establish comfort and some degree of familiarity between participants (McKinney et al., 2006) – an often overlooked yet essential ingredient to meaningful participation and community building (Beaudoin, 2012). For example, I begin each gathering with an icebreaker activity to facilitate lighter exchanges and playful engagement with social risk taking. My intention was to create space where participants develop some sense of interactive comfort early into each gathering before later engaging in more serious discussions that could evoke or promote discomfort. This is based both on experience and informed by research indicating that sharing embarrassing stories (versus stories about strength or success) increases collective brainstorming (Thompson, 2017). I opened one gathering by asking participants to share their “mundane but thunderous epiphanies,” informed by examples from the viral twitter thread started by Shannon Proudfoot (@sproudfoot) (e.g., “I was 27 years old when I realized you’re not supposed to kick your leg when the doctor taps your knee with a hammer, but that she is in fact checking your reflex. Oops” from @TinaLikesBooks, and “I had no idea raisins were dried grapes. Too embarrassed to say what age I was when I discovered this” from @portianpadre). I used this icebreaker at a gathering in which participants were later asked to describe some of their most significant breakthrough learnings (threshold concepts) about sexual violence. Participants shared embarrassing and hilarious stories that helped create a playful but safe space for moving and emotional sharing that took place later in the gathering.

I also worked toward the aims of promoting cross-disciplinary conversation and community-building by facilitating conversations that I hoped would surface commonalities among professional

groups despite their different disciplinary orientations. Participants were invited to reflect upon their own and others' disciplinary orientations in light of sexual assault-related matters in a variety of active learning exercises. For example, at the first gathering, participants were asked to create pamphlets about themselves, with headings that included, "one of my super powers at work is...", "my colleagues would tell you that I bring to the team...", "someone whose case I've worked on might tell you that I'm good at...", "in this work, I struggle with...", and "some of the toughest things I have to do in my job are...". They were given materials including markers, scissors, glue, and a selection of small images they could cut out and paste into their pamphlets. As they developed these pamphlets — an intentionally vulnerable-making exercise for accomplished professionals who are used to working in contexts of mastery — they discussed their responses both to the activity and in terms of how they were responding to these questions. These honest and revealing discussions facilitated immediate cross-disciplinary commonalities around shared human qualities such as compassion, openness, and a commitment to team work, as well as shared struggles in terms of boundaries, holding space for pain, and feeling under-resourced.

As the series progressed participants workshopped "essential tools" and "vexing challenges" they used and faced in their work, as well as assumptions that are made about them and their work because of the professional disciplines in which they work. Again, despite different disciplinary training, the commonalities among these groups connected by their shared commitment to sexual violence work powerfully demonstrated to participants that their tools and struggles were more similar than different. Several gatherings later in the series, participants were asked to revisit the troubling assumptions that are made about other disciplines, and invited to challenge these descriptors with the new and positive knowledge they had gained of one another. Their new descriptors were a powerful indication of how deeply they had come to recognize the contributions of each other's work.

At another gathering, participants were asked to reflect upon their work in sexual violence in accordance with criteria I requested of them, then to gather in disciplinary groups and create a brief presentation for the others about their work, and to respond to questions from the others about it. In this activity, differences in terms of access to mental health supports, for example, emerged as a significant topic of discussion, since mental health support was not equal across disciplines. A further gathering involved facilitating participants to speed interview one another. In a speed dating-like setup, participants each asked one key question of the rest of each of their colleagues, and at the end, reported the outcomes back to the broader group. Feedback about this exercise was that it allowed for important one-on-one time with others whom they might have only really spoken with in a group setting. Throughout all of these activities, the insights that flowed from them were instrumental in terms of community-building and developing deeper insights about how to better collaborate in the future.

As the series progressed, participants were invited to participate in collaborative exercises that promote discussion and cooperation in a relatively low-stakes environment (e.g., where real case outcomes are not at stake). For example, participants were assembled into multidisciplinary groups to collectively assemble puzzles designed to “challenge assumptions,” since they do not come together like typical puzzles (*Challenging Assumptions*, n.d.). In these newly configured groups, participants were required to meet this low-stakes challenge together and to describe how they did so. Conversation was illuminating, revealing themes around observation-making, listening, and hearing one another.

In another gathering early in the series, participants were invited to contemplate the content, as well as the benefits and challenges of transdisciplinary training, in short, to envision what “Sexual Assault 101” delivered from no distinct disciplinary standpoint and offered to all victim-facing professionals might include, as well as the kinds of benefits and challenges such training might lead to. Themes in terms of content revolved around the kind of approach taken and the frameworks used, addressing trauma, making sense of roles, responsibilities, and practices, bridging knowledge of various roles, and

demystifying myths and stereotypes. Participants' workshopping of benefits and challenges made clear that they envisioned that this kind of training would better the outcomes for people who had been sexually assaulted by other people, that they wanted to increase their own cross-disciplinary understanding and awareness, and that they hoped to improve overall systems, processes, and the big picture of sexual violence response. Challenges included attending to others' devaluing assumptions about transdisciplinary training, finding places within existing sexual violence work for it to fit, working through logistics, determining objectives, as well as deciding who should attend and who should deliver it. Many gatherings later in the series, participants were invited to articulate how they would now respond to these challenges to transdisciplinary training, imagining that their colleagues objected on the basis of the challenges they had earlier listed. The responses they developed to speak back to those challenges, again, demonstrated how much participants had come to see the value in shared training and learning.

These facilitated, research-informed, engaging exercises within intentional gatherings created a low-stakes site in which participants were encouraged to discover, deliberate, and determine strategies to overcome barriers to meaningful and cooperative exchanges, as well as to identify, increase, and invite more frequent use of strategies that nurture and support collaborative engagement. As a result, as the series of gatherings progressed, participants established relationships and honed approaches that have better equipped them to meaningfully collaborate formally and informally in the future.

A Collaborative, Multi-Perspectival, Knowledge-Building Framework

The overarching framework that informs this trajectory is an adaptation of what is known in health research as *Integrated Knowledge Translation* (IKT), a collaborative framework that brings researchers and knowledge users together to identify problems and implement research recommendations (Kothari, McCutcheon, & Graham, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014; Preyde et al., 2013). Sometimes referred to as the "co-production of knowledge," IKT is an increasingly popular cooperative framework recognized for

“accelerating the uptake and impact of research” (Gagliardi & Dobrow, 2016; Kothari, McCutcheon, & Graham, 2017). “Researchers bring methodological and content expertise to the collaboration” and knowledge users bring situated and contextual knowledge as well as the ability to speak to implementation potentials (Kothari, McCutcheon, & Graham, 2017; Kothari et al., 2014; Preyde et al., 2013). While my experience and expertise suggests that the cultivation of cross-disciplinary relationships and the establishment of meaningful transdisciplinary priorities is best facilitated in this unconventional way, it was ultimately participants’ experiences “on the ground” that gave context and shape to these relationships and the actionability of the priorities they generated. Importantly, IKT approaches used in health research, have been shown to improve health, services, and the system more so than research that does not involve knowledge users (Gagliardi & Dobrow, 2016; Preyde et al., 2013). These are successful outcomes that point to the significant and practical impact this kind of research can have.

Data, Analysis, and Orientation

Research data consists of the conversations that take place in the gatherings (recorded, still to be transcribed); the artifacts generated by participants the gatherings (and sometimes before and after the gatherings), which include all of the reflective activities identified earlier and the collaboratively generated, transdisciplinary education and research priorities; the ethnographic notes; and, the graphic recordings. All data will be examined using a “grounded theory” approach. At the risk of oversimplifying, “grounded theorizing” involves simultaneous engagement in data generation, data analysis, and theorizing, where researchers oscillate between analysis, explanation, and theory construction (Mason, 2002). This approach allows for ongoing monitoring while creating space for minor amendments to the research process as it unfolds.

The questions this research aims to answer are both specific and broad, attending both to understanding the learning and collaborative *processes* of a cross-disciplinary group of subject-specific

knowledge users, and to identifying the *outcomes* of these collaborative learning processes (what the list of collectively established, transdisciplinary education and research priorities will actually consist of). These questions therefore include, but are not limited to inquiries such as: How do participants describe their knowledge about sexual assault? How do they describe their knowledge in relation to others'? What differences and similarities do participants observe in these types of knowledge? How do they describe these differences and similarities (e.g., in positive, negative, or other ways)? What interactive exercises do participants identify as most facilitative of conversation, community-building, and collaboration, and what activities prove challenging? What specific transdisciplinary education and research priorities do participants identify? How do they describe the process involved in arriving at these priorities? What, if any, strategies will participants take away from this research project? What do participants find most impactful about the series of gatherings? What recommendations would they offer for future iterations of the series/research program?

The theoretical orientation of this work is, broadly speaking, constructionist, aligning with what Miller (2000) refers to as the “poverty of truth-seeking.” This means that the work is focused not upon locating a universal or common “truth” about sexual assault shared by participants, but is instead about acknowledging multi-perspectivity, and asking “What do experts in different domains have to say to each other? What can they learn from each other?” with the awareness that dialogue “deepen[s] understanding and empower[s] actors to better tackle the issues” that confront them (Novy, Habersack, & Shaller, 2013). The trajectory of the gatherings is therefore both informed by and culminates in transdisciplinarity, “an epistemological innovation to foster multi-perspectivity, context-sensitivity and stakeholder involvement” (Novy, Habersack, & Shaller, 2013). Phrased differently, transdisciplinarity is both the process and the outcome of the research program.

The Significance: Social Innovation Research with Immediate and Long Term Contributions

Forming part of a broad and burgeoning area of study known as “social innovation research,” this work brings together segregated groups to study both the process and outcome of their coming together, using “research practices that focus on socially innovative community building” – efforts that contribute “to transformations of social relations in and through knowledge production processes” (Moulaert & Van Dyck, 2013). As a result, this work yields practical outcomes that include newly established cross-disciplinary relationships informed by actual experience collaborating and a series of jointly developed, transdisciplinary sexual assault education and research priorities. This research also generates contributions to inter- and multi-disciplinary literatures including, but not limited to, education, social work, health, sociology, and criminology, in more specific subject areas including but not limited to the scholarship of teaching and learning, higher learning and continuing education, community building and collaborative practices, knowledge mobilization and translation, unconventional research methodologies, transdisciplinarity and social innovation.

On the whole, this research responds to an ongoing and increasingly pressing social problem: the prevalence of sexual assault and the institutional silos that inhibit more effectively responding to it (Carrigan Wooten & Mitchell, 2017; *Confronting*, 2015; Hamby & Grych, 2013; Mulligan & Fan, 2017; Shaw & Andrew, 2005). These silos have been identified by victim-facing professionals on and off campus as a significant impediment to holistically responding to victims of sexual assault. The outcomes of this research – both the cross-disciplinary and collaborative practices it facilitates, and the education and research priorities it identifies – will make both an immediate difference in participants’ work and thus in the lives of the victims they interact with, and serve as catalysts for transformative institutional change.

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