Cross-disciplinary craftsmanship: The case of child abuse work

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Introduction

Child abuse work is composed of multiple foci, and is not a singular homogeneous domain. It encompasses input and cooperation from a broad range of professions, including:

- Medical personnel
- Mental health
- Law enforcement agents
- Educational counselors

Such cross-disciplinary cooperation, if implemented, potentially enables a more integral and case sensitive approach with victims of child abuse by balancing their needs and rights.
The problem of cooperation

• Research indicates that in reality such cooperation demands much effort, presently more often channeled to inter-professional bickering leading to burnout, mutual resentment, protection of territories, and information blocking.

• Part of the problem is rooted in the different professional discourses involved
Law enforcement (mainly practiced by child investigators using the forensic interview) – The discourse is characterized by factual descriptions.

Medical personnel (mainly pediatricians) – child abuse is identified and discussed along guidelines of the medical model. As such, abuse is viewed as one of many possible causes in the differential diagnostic process.

Education personnel (mainly school counselors): Child abuse is discussed along the guidelines of multicultural discourse which is dominant in that setting.

Mental health (social workers and child psychologists) – the focus is on the subjective experience
How is cross-disciplinary intervention constructed, experienced and understood by an individual participating in such interaction?

Based on Descriptive Phenomenology approach, we construct a data-based conceptual model that captures the multiple meanings participants attach to their working experience with child abuse disclosure throughout their everyday work (Giorgi, 2012).
Method

- Sample: 40 professionals, 10 of each group (law-enforcement, education, mental-health and medical personal). The sample's size was established according to the “saturation” principle (Patton, 2002).
- Data collection was performed using in-depth, semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide.
- Data analysis included open coding to identify the units of meaning, followed by cross-case analysis in which segments from each interview were condensed until core themes emerged (Lincoln and Guba, 2005).
- In the final stage the “hermeneutic circle” principle (Smith, 2008) was used to organize the emerging themes as the constituting domains of a conceptual model.
professionals negotiate cross-disciplinary work along different sub-domains that include:

- Fragmentation/integration continuum
- Power struggle/cooperation continuum
- Personal/impersonal continuum
- Background/foreground continuum
- Facilitating/initiating continuum
There is a tendency of professionals to keep the information that they have to themselves because that information gives them relative power over others. Therefore, they tend to not share that information with others. The result is that the child falls in between the cracks. As a professional, I say, I want to come to a decision, I'm not so thrilled to involve the psychologist or psychiatrist or doctor because our doctor takes the perspective that child abuse is a disease, like any pediatric disease... This involves a lot of ego, rivalry, competition politics... You see a lot of people speaking to one another and they need to share information, but they keep things to themselves... There are many “walls of China” put up between professionals.
Analysis

• Content: Cross-disciplinary spaces of cooperation are eliminated intentionally by the professionals themselves. The need to seize power, no matter what game is being played, even child abuse care, becomes the driving force, and professionals hoard information as a means to this end.

• Structure: rationalizing the power struggle. Justifying the different view points.

• Interpretation: Power struggle is a structural component and therefore immanent in the interaction.
First of all, when I began this position I initiated two things: a meeting at the social welfare office to state my personal manifesto [and beliefs], and what my expectations are in terms of interactions between the welfare and the police... I'd explain, advise, and clarify the situation. That is to say, I'll explain to you the reason why it is me who tells them what to do. Why's that?... Look, I'll tell you one thing, the role of the police is to locate, expose, and attend to [the case]. Handling the suspect is one thing, prevention is a very different story in this field with minors. We are just not the right "address" for that!
Analysis

• Content: Nadia plays two different roles, and she enacts them both at the same time. She is the active, commanding leader, pulling others along the path that she traces, and she is also the reactive agent, member of a formal (law enforcement) system, able to help and to perform if and only when certain conditions are present.

• Structure: Although Nadia holds an air of confidence in her actions and assumed roles, the use of self-answered questions, reflects her true state of internal negotiation and uncertainty.

• Interpretation: In the unfolding professional child abuse scenarios, Nadia struggles as she moves back and forth between being a central player (a leader; “I”) and a background figure (a reactive member of the system; “We”), acting out a continuous figure-ground dynamic.
Every [professional] here has his own supervisor. I am not a child investigator. I know nothing about it. I mean, actually, I do, but I can't say that I understand the nuances. I don't understand and I don't want to understand. This is the same for the child welfare service, the police officer, the doctor. I understand and know quite a bit, but am not there to replace them, that isn't my role. I need to allow the process of synergy, the exchange of information. At the end of the day this needs to happen in the optimal way, so that we know that the child and his family are strengthened in an optimal manner. That's my role. By the way, it's an impossible management position. On the one hand, I don't have the professional knowledge – and they each have their own bosses. And yet I still need to administer and direct and say that's OK, and that's not OK. It is an administrative position that is very, very complicated, if you know what I mean.
**Analysis**

- **Content:** Liora negotiates her role as a leader of cross-disciplinary cooperation, describing a working reality in which various professionals collaborate on child abuse cases. Her negotiations occur along two dimensions – negotiation of knowledge and negotiation of sharing it.

- **Structure:** Liora uses a two-step strategy to define her work. First, she excludes what is "not her role,"; then she defines "her role" as "allowing the process of synergy." By this she implies that to understand what she does, one must first understand what she does not do, a nihilist definition.

- **Interpretation:** Liora negotiates the gap between being a facilitator (allow the process of synergy) to initiator and leader of the process (I still need to administer and direct).
“By the way, it's an impossible management position. ”
Child abuse work, as emerges from the analysis, can be understood along two interrelated dynamics:

- **the improvisational dynamic** - represents cross-disciplinary role enmeshment among the different occupational foci (social-workers, law-enforcement, educators and medical personal)
- **the professional boundaries dynamic** - represents the need to differentiate and distinguish among different professional roles (“It’s not my role!”)
Cross disciplinary craftsmanship

- Education
- Mental health
- Health care
- Law enforcement

Child abuse intervention

Child abuse intervention

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Implications

• the need to acquire the ability to work as a craftsman, by enhancing the capacity of instant response to emerging needs in situations of immediacy;
• the parallel need to acquire basic knowledge of intervention protocols in several core professions related to this occupational focus including medicine, law enforcement, mental health, and education;
• the acquisition of the ability to navigate and improvise between the first two in a situational appropriate manner.