

# Exploring the theory and ethics of autoethnographic social research with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper is an outline of the current stand of a doctoral research project. The research in progress deals with the phenomenon of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) as an experience of those overpowered by it in the past: the survivors. It introduces on-going autoethnographic social research, on survivors of CSA by a survivor of CSA. The aim of the paper is to give an insight into the planning phase of doctoral research, i.e. a research project that has yet to do fieldwork. It sets the theoretical context and foundation of the study, contextualising the methodological approach chosen. The empowerment theory is used as the main theoretical orientation of the study. The methodological practice, still a work in progress, is qualitative and arts-based, using method triangulation. Through the use of method triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking, the researcher wishes to employ academic rigour to ensure validity of her future research results. Ethics of such 'sensitive' research are considered and ethical approaches are proposed, in order to strike a balance between protection and safety, as well as participation and visibility. This paper frames the act of abuse as an act of overpowering, and focuses on the subsequent process of empowerment, post-abuse. Engaging in autobiographical research with hybrid methodology, aiming at incorporating both intellectual and body memories, is argued to be a sensible way forward, when trying to understand the effects of potentially traumatic experiences on people and their bodies. This paper gives an insight into the process of research development, a snapshot of the journey of a novel researcher.

**KEYWORDS:** childhood sexual abuse (CSA), survivors, empowerment, qualitative research, arts-based approach

## INTRODUCTION

CSA is a widespread sociological problem that occurs across all cultures and socioeconomic groups (see Sanderson, 2010). It is also hard to know exactly how widespread it is, as statistics are based on reported cases. Due to the strong taboo of the practice of CSA (McRobert, 2022) it can be assumed that a lot of cases go unreported and thus not recorded in official statistics. It is therefore very hard to give a clear idea as to how many people survive this kind of abuse, but it is fair to say that the social problem is significant. I am using the term *survivor* because I identify as one, and it is the most commonly used term in the literature I am using, as well as for consistency in my writing. However, it should be stated that some people who have been sexually abused do not identify with this term, preferring other terms, including *victim* (Cunnington, 2019). *Survivor* will be therefore understood as: *anyone who has experienced CSA*.

My starting point in my research and thus theoretical framework is my general quest to understand the post-abuse experience of survivors of CSA, in their everyday lives, with a focus on their bodily experience. This has led to the development of research questions: *How do survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) experience their bodies in their post-abuse, everyday life? How do CSA survivors empower themselves?*

In order to contextualise my research and approach to it, I will draw attention to influencing literature. I will begin by citing a significant German researcher Sabine Andresen (2018) and her work, in connection to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany. This is an ongoing inquiry that invites survivors to share their stories in writing, as structured reports in the form of letters, but also take part in a live hearing, where their stories will be heard and documented (Unabhängige Kommission zur Aufarbeitung sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs, 2024). Andresen used the letters written and sent in by survivors in her research, examining the accounts in the context of vulnerability and injustice.

Andresen's work draws attention to the importance of acknowledging CSA as a real phenomenon in society, not just in order to help survivors process what happened to them, but also for society at large to process such collective trauma and find a language to discuss the problematics of this established violent practice against children. The research states that children did often disclose their stories of abuse to seemingly trusted adults, but the reason they stayed hidden or not acknowledged was the disbelief from the adults who were disclosed to (Andresen, 2018, p. 53). Even if we know that this practice is illegal and that children have rights, afforded to them by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), children themselves cannot exercise these rights without an adult proxy. This is why the reaction of the trusted adult is the main factor in how the CSA is *processed*, or not. The word used in German is *Aufarbeitung*, derived from Adorno's (1959) work, translated to 'working through the past' (Andresen, 2018, p. 54). If the responsible adult disbelieves the abused children, then processing cannot

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take place, which also indirectly isolates the children (Andresen, 2018, p. 52), who later become adults.

Without this processing or working through the past experiences, CSA survivors are left vulnerable in a society that does not acknowledge that CSA can have consequences not only for one's childhood but also one's adulthood (Andresen, 2018, p. 55). Dealing with one's negative or potentially traumatic experiences requires more than just private thoughts and discussions. It is stated that the processing of such an experience needs wider interpretation, through historical analysis, by creating records, thus documenting experiences and feelings, in order to detect the wider systemic and operational modes of injustice in our society and identify their foundations (Andresen, 2018, p. 55). And so, by inviting survivors to be active and speak up, the first stage of potential individual and communal empowerment could occur. This is significant existing research in relation to my planned research, as it highlights the need to hear, witness and give survivors a stage to share their perspectives.

Moreover, Andresen's research makes a connection between abuse and *intimacy*. When one experiences sexual violence there is a fundamentally intimate side to it, which is often infused with shame (2018, p. 53). It leads me to think that sexual violence, like consensual sexual acts, are intimate and break through people's natural space boundaries and barriers, both mental and physical. This points to a need to look at this phenomenon in a nuanced way, always questioning one's previously formed prejudices: pre and/or mis-conceptions. Misconceptions surrounding what abusive sexual interactions look like would need to be challenged and questioned. It is possible that distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy sexual relating is harder to differentiate than one expected. A definition of the practice of CSA thus may be helpful.

### DEFINING CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE (CSA)

An official institutional definition of CSA reads:

... any sexual act performed on, with or in front of children and adolescents against their will or to which they cannot knowingly consent due to physical, emotional, mental or linguistic inferiority is defined as sexual abuse or sexual violence. The abuser uses her/his position of power or authority to satisfy her/his own needs at the expense of minors (Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues, 2024).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), defines the child as a person up to the age of 18 (United Nations, 1989). This may be a problematic definition of childhood for this definition of CSA to rest on (Independent Commissioner for Child Sexual Abuse Issues: 2024), considering this CSA definition is inextricably linked to the ability to consent to sexual activity, and that *ages of consent* range from as young as 11 to as old as 18

years old worldwide (World Population Review, 2024). So, a universal CSA definition, based on consent, is problematic.

Various questions can be raised, for example:

- (1) Does this definition imply that children are defined as everyone under 18, even if in some countries people under 18 can legally consent to sexual activities, thus exempting them from such definition?
- (2) Should this form of sexual abuse be categorised to only apply to young people under the legal age of consent in their respective countries?
- (3) Is the definition thus country-specific?
- (4) Is the definition culture-specific?
- (5) Can we really have a universal and all-encompassing definition of CSA?

Thinking about this definition of CSA, I cannot help but think that *consent* or the lack thereof is in fact only part of the picture. I am more interested in the intricacies of the power dynamic between all involved parties. For the sake of exploring that aspect, I wish to turn the lens away from issues of the establishment of consent for the time being, and refocus on the feeling of one's power being taken away through such activity. A suggested definition of CSA for the sake of this focus is:

CSA is when a child is overpowered and disempowered through activities and actions involving sexualised or sexual interventions, whether physical, verbal or immersive, passive or active.

The definition then is oriented by the feelings of the children involved, rather than the evaluation of whether the child can consent or has consented, according to the assessing adults and legal structures in place in respective countries. If a child feels like their power and control over their bodies or lives has been taken away by someone who has engaged with them sexually in any way, then this is termed as abuse. Whether this is sex, penetrative or not, actively involving their bodies or forcing them to witness sexual activity, or even hear sexualised language about themselves or others this could be experienced as abusive and invasive. Like any definition it is imperfect and open to interpretation. Also, expressing and defining one's feelings may be a difficult or impossible task for survivors. Having said this, it is important to state that establishing consent is very important and sometimes needs to be defined by outside parties, in the cases of children who are too young to know what is happening, for example. However, it has limitations in the way it is assessed legally, with differing ages of consent worldwide (World Population Review, 2024), but also because it can be decided by others, other than the survivors of the abuse themselves.

From a factual and potentially legal standpoint, defining CSA cannot be just about es-

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tablishing a lack of consent or just about how the survivor interpreted what happened or if they felt disempowered or not. Definitions must incorporate both aspects. We cannot always get a clear idea of how a survivor felt, especially if at the time of abuse, they were not able to communicate or even remember, as in the case of children who are pre-verbal or drugged, for example. It can be argued, though, that a lack of giving consent is paralleled to a lack of control over the situation, leading to feeling invisible and/or unheard, and arguably, in a state of disempowerment. Thus, it is to be understood that the lack of or taking away of consent is in fact the taking away of power. So, disempowerment and sexual activity without consent are seen as synonyms, in this piece of writing.

### THE STATE OF CHILDHOOD

In order to further understand CSA, as sexual abuse that takes place during childhood, having an orientation of the meaning of 'childhood' might be useful. Even though the CRC has been used as an orienting tool in this piece of writing, its definition of a child as anyone under 18 is limited and arbitrary (United Nations, 1989). More meanings are needed. So, I wish to turn our attention to a dictionary definition of this phase of life. The Miriam-Webster online dictionary defines *childhood* thus:

- (1) 'the state or period of being a child',
- (2) 'the early period in the development of something',
- (3) 'a young person especially between infancy and puberty',
- (4) 'a person not yet of the age of majority' (Miriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023).

The dictionary definition could be said to reflect the mainstream and even colloquial societal understanding of childhood. However, it is lacking nuance and historical context. I wish to contextualise the definition and conceptualisation of childhood within the historical background of imperialist Europe, as it highlights the power structures at play in its establishment. There is a theory that states that before the imperial powers of Europe could go overseas to colonise and overpower other countries, there needed to be members of their own societies who were framed as wild, primitive and in need of care, protection, education and to some extent, control (Liebel, 2020, p. 34). This demographic was children. Every country, class and society had them. This was based on the projection that other peoples should be colonised, or overpowered, on the basis of being inferior, primitive and in desperate need of care and education. If the populations of Europe were used to seeing a group in their own society framed in such a way, then they were more likely to not conceptually question the imperialist movement (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 38).

The child and their childhood are likened to a kind of colony (Liebel, 2020, p. 34) which is dominated, meant to be directed, indoctrinated, annexed to safer, more private spaces

of society, like the home and school. The child is seen as primitive, ignorant, rough, and in need of the adult who will civilise them (Ashcroft, 2001, pp. 37-38). This endorses paternalism, as do earlier theories of children as blank slates (Locke, 1689) and as innocent, angelic beings (Rousseau, 1762). This in turn leads to a disproportionate amount of control on the part of the adults, which could be seen as, at least potentially, abusive in itself. Children and childhood are categorised to the lowest rung of society, much like the formerly colonised regions and peoples of the non-European world, as both were seen as in need of being developed (Liebel, 2020, p. 48). Thus, a sort of double overpowering occurs when children are sexually abused or overpowered, as opposed to adults, as children are a demographic already lacking autonomy.

Furthermore, such framing of children as primitive, needing education or intervention, leads to systemic discrimination, termed more recently as *adultism* (Flasher, 1978, pp. 517-523), and is generally defined as ‘the tendency to believe that all adults are superior in all skills and virtues to children’ (Flasher, 1978, p. 517). Adultism can therefore be said to be the first form of discrimination one experiences, one that assumingly everyone has been privy to in some capacity. Discriminatory measures include categorising, labelling and separating (Liebel, 2014, p. 129). I would argue that silencing is another measure, since children’s voices and needs are seen as inferior to adults’. This makes children perfect prey for any misdemeanor, as they have a lower status, no legal rights, are less likely to be believed or even given the platform to be heard. So, in the case of CSA, whether the CSA perpetrator is an adult or a child, perpetrators count on the invisibility of the (victim or) survivor to protect them. Even if a sexually abused child speaks up, this will only be consequential if they are believed by an adult, and furthermore by society at large. As already mentioned, research shows that children do disclose their experiences of abuse but are unlikely to be believed (Andresen, Pohling & Schaumann, 2021), hindering the processing of the abuse.

### EMPOWERMENT THEORY

The theory I ally myself with in this research is the *empowerment theory*, specifically the one developed by Zimmerman (1995). This theory is in line with the agenda of my study, which is to enable CSA survivors to actively participate in research about CSA, both in the role of the researcher and the subject, shaping how they are represented in this discourse.

*Empowerment* is to be understood as the process of gaining control, competence and influence over matters that involve and interest one (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 581). So-called ‘psychological empowerment (PE)’ is referring to empowerment on an individual level, not a communal level. It refers to a person and their sense of control over their lives and how they approach their environment. This always insinuates a sense of proactivity, agency and awareness of external factors (ibid). Even if someone has little influence over

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environmental factors, their *awareness* of these factors and their own capacity to change them, however small, is part of the process of empowerment. Empowerment thus means that one is aware of the obstacles and restrictions in their environment but still sets goals for themselves and is resourceful and creative to achieve them (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 582). Empowerment is how an individual assesses their own competencies, engages with and understands the complex dynamics in their environments (ibid).

For example, engaging in the study of CSA has empowered me to disclose my abuse, discuss this phenomenon at large, contribute to the creation of information surrounding the subject and to understand this further for myself. By using my survivor identity in this context, I have reframed it from a sociological stigma to a resource that can be valuable in this niche of study. This process of personal empowerment has led to a sense of dignity and validity for me. Personal empowerment could also lead to communal empowerment, as a number of survivors coming together to contribute to research could have an effect on how society sees this demographic. But as this is hard to measure and can only be speculated at this point, I wish to focus on individual empowerment.

The assessment of personal empowerment, can also be difficult, especially considering this can change and evolve over time in each individual, and displays itself differently in different contexts. The way people and their personalities choose to go about empowering themselves is highly unique and cannot be universalised. It may also be helpful to distinguish between empowering processes and empowered outcomes (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 583). But in the case of seeing how empowered CSA survivors are in their post-abuse lives, I believe the most empowered way forward is to ask *them*.

### **EMPOWERMENT AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: SURVIVORS AS EXPERTS**

CSA researchers identifying as CSA survivors or CSA survivors who conduct research on the phenomenon are rare but not unheard of. As the researcher is studying members of a demographic that they are also a member of, this practice is known as *autoethnography* (Minge, 2007, p. 253). The autoethnographic approach is rooted in methodologies that work with biographical narratives (from participants) and autobiographical exploration (from the researcher) (Minge, 2007, p. 254). It is said to be a form of activism (Minge, 2007, p. 269), as access to this kind of information is granted by the person who experiences it with their own agenda. The agenda of survivors working in this way, I would argue, is empowerment, through expression, visibility, participation and contribution to the knowledge accumulated in the world about said phenomenon. This can be part of the wider goal of understanding one's abuse and also using this experience to create and contribute further than oneself. To link one's individual experience to a wider social phenomenon, that is experienced by many other people, is a significant step towards feeling a sense of social solidarity, which is integral to the processing (*Aufarbeitung*) of such experiences for the individual and for society at large, shedding light on otherwise

hidden or taboo phenomena.

Claire Cunnington's PhD entitled *Adults Recovering from Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Salutogenic Approach* (2019) is an example of a PhD thematising CSA, written by a person who openly and publicly identifies as someone who experienced CSA. It focuses on recovery from CSA, using a salutogenic framework, based on Antonovsky's 1979 book *Health, Stress and Coping*, focusing on health rather than illness, interviewing adult survivors about their experiences of CSA and the aftermath of it. It talks about the effect of the taboo and stigma surrounding CSA. It also gives suggestions on amelioration to the problem of CSA. As a researcher and someone who experienced CSA, she terms herself as having 'insider status' and doing 'insider research' (Cunnington, 2019, p. 46). She does not use the term 'autoethnographer' but I would categorise her as one. Furthermore, her use of Salutogenesis is a positive approach, focusing on the participants' strengths and capabilities, rather than ailments and obstacles. It is a strengths-based approach, that is arguably about the empowerment of survivors, through their own abilities.

Another example of autoethnographic research is the work of Tracie Hitter and colleagues (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017), as Hitter openly identifies as a survivor of CSA who is researching the effects of CSA. She displays a certain self-awareness and self-reflection throughout her work, as she uses her colleagues as sounding boards throughout, in order to avoid her own biases in her analysis, which have been declared before research (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 275). Hitter also kept a self-reflective journal as part of her ethical approach to her research (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, pp. 273-274). The research had a different focus to that of Cunnington, as it looked at a survivors' sexual life, but is also framed within the discipline of psychology, not social science. The researchers wished to see how sexual relationships could be healing, and how conducting sexual relationships could develop a sense of sexual agency (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 278). Even practicing risky sexual relationships were found to lead to a sense of healing and safety in the long-term (ibid), as survivors took responsibility for the consequences of their 'risky' sexual behaviour and grew from that (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 285). Findings showed that 'relational healing' was part of many relationships, sexual and romantic ones only being some of them (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 283). Other relationships included friendships and relationships with own children (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 279). The relationships that showed love and kindness, as well as openness to sexual exploration, were the ones that were deemed the most healing (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 270). Healing was also not linear or a process that was deemed finished, but instead 'fluid' and lifelong (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 285).

Further findings of this study showed that for some participants, feeling powerless due to the objectification of the abuse, caused them to dissociate from their bodies as a coping mechanism, but also to reclaim a certain level of control over themselves and their lives (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 286). The way that participants became reconnected with their bodies post-abuse was indeed through gaining a feeling of agency and control



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in the context of their emotional, intimate and sexual relationships (ibid). Sexual agency and sexual exploration with multiple partners/promiscuity were seen as helpful (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 286). The final but maybe most significant finding was that the (exclusively female) participants of this study stated that they participated in this research specifically because they wanted to give their own accounts of their experience. An experience that is often framed as a 'victim narrative' in mainstream culture (Hitter, Adams, & Cahill, 2017, p. 288). By coming forward to contribute to research, survivors are trying to change society's (negative) perceptions of them.

Moreover, in my research I frame adult CSA survivors as now past the stage of being overpowered children, and thus in an empowered, sovereign adult phase, exercising their agency over their bodies and lives. They are invited to participate in discourse, expression and research that gives them the opportunity to talk about their now self-governed bodies. By changing the structure of such research from the study of victims by experts to the study of survivors by survivors, a long-standing research dynamic is reframed. Those who experience it can also be the people who are studying it, not only the ones to *be* studied. The insider perspective (Cunnington, 2019) of those who have experienced the phenomenon in question is an enrichment to the overall discourse on CSA. This is not to say that non-survivors cannot still be researchers, who offer important insight in this phenomenon. It is only to say that in addition to the existing modes of research, the research done by survivors can enrich the discourse and widen the spectrum of knowledge on how the experience of CSA is lived and embodied.

### **THE ROLE OF THE BODY: EMBODIMENT**

My main research interest is to explore the embodied effects of CSA in adulthood. I am interested in seeing how people experience their bodies in everyday life. This is an added challenge to the study, as research on the body is less prevalent in the context of social science. However, the idea that the body stores (traumatic) memory and is a large part of processing these memories has already been propagated. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (2014) states that the body, not just the brain, stores experiences, namely the experience of trauma. As CSA is recognised as being potentially traumatic, and an experience that can happen in very early childhood, when a child is still pre-verbal, this is relevant research to draw from.

Van der Kolk researched the long-term effects of trauma with his own patients. One of the main findings was that even though people being able to verbalise their traumas helped them immensely to process their experiences, it was generally not all that was necessary (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 21). He states that in order to really process trauma, one's body needs to be convinced that the threat is no longer there and have the ability to be in the present (ibid). This can happen with working on achieving a kind of bodily autonomy, whereby people are fully aware of their bodies, with all their 'visceral dimen-

sions' (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 27). Autonomy can be achieved when one not only is aware of their many parts, but also takes responsibility for themselves, exercising their own agency, free will and decision-making abilities. Having agency can lead to resilience, an inner strength and conviction that one can make a difference to their lives through their own actions (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 335). I would argue it could lead to empowerment.

In his research, Van der Kolk and his colleagues only collected data on selected *parts* of the participant's experiences, like certain visuals, sensations and sounds, and not their whole stories (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 40). This was because he believes that it is in this way that trauma is actually experienced (*ibid*). That is, viscerally. He believes that all trauma is pre-verbal (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 43), in that it is hard to put words to it or is not at all linked to them. Even if one is eloquent and clear in their verbal expression there is a possibility that of a lot of meaning will be lost in translation, from the visceral to the intellectual. Trauma may be intellectually incomprehensible or something that we have not been given the language to talk about. CSA is a social taboo (McRobert, 2022, pp. 17-34). There is no language to talk about children in any sexual capacity, let alone an abusive one. This generally leaves people who experience it alone, to try to comprehend it for themselves. The taboo that is meant to protect in fact conceals abuse, making survivors invisible and silenced.

Van der Kolk goes on to say that certain visceral fragments of the traumatic experience, like smells, sounds and bodily sensations, are stored in one's memory quite independently from the intellectual narrative (2014, p. 44). This means that one can have memories that are only feelings, without a clear image-based memory that one can place in a clear biographical storyline. So, any memories and traces of traumatic memory are likely to be organised in a non-coherent, non-narrative, non-linear way. Recollection of the abuse is most likely to be tied to inputs that are more physical than cerebral, for example, certain sounds, smells, feelings and mental pictures (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 176).

This piece of writing frames CSA as a potential trauma that is embodied. The difficulty of intellectualising the physical is the main challenge of this work. In order to give the body validity as a part of the discourse, it needs to be seen as agentic and capable of storing and communicating information. Not unlike children, who are seen by society as less than (Flasher, 1976), all bodies, the brain not included, are seen as secondary, primitive and lacking in intelligence. If the body is not seen as one unified entity, complete with an intellectual brain, a pumping heart, a processing gut and the capacity for emotion and physical agency, the understanding of the effects of CSA cannot be fully understood. However, by framing the whole body as the site of experience, with the entire organism including all its organs as the interacting agent, one can introduce another dimension in the discourse surrounding CSA, which presents the experience as one of multi-dimensional proportions, one which needs the brain to be only one of the actors.

With drawing the focus on the body as the site of the investigation, one veers down the

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path of a lesser theorised and possibly less theorisable territory. The geography of bodies incorporates social life in its entirety, as there is no human experience that is undergone without a body (Eadie, 2003, p. 74). Through focusing on embodiment, I wish to turn the lens from pointing outwards to pointing inwards, from the interpretation of how society sees CSA survivors to how they perceive themselves. I wish to investigate how they experience not only their life in general terms, but their life in their body. The body being the vehicle they move through the world in, the site of their abuse, and their potentially vast memory storage unit.

### ACCESSING THE CORPOREAL: ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Body memories are said to be triggered through activities of the body (Hand, 2021, p. 2131). How can feelings, memories and associations stored in the body be accessed? If the access is through the visceral and non-cerebral, then one could look at creative expression of survivors of CSA. A form of artistic expression that already has a long legacy amongst people who have experienced potentially traumatic experiences, including CSA, is creative writing and poetry (Sharma, 2019, p. 26 and Wright & Thiara, 2019, p. 12). Using artistic methods to inquire about and understand one's trauma is also known as *embodied art* and can merge a variety of creative approaches that can be used autoethnographically in order to comprehend how the body warehouses its memories of abuse (Minge, 2007, p. 252). One takes initiative to explore, study and discover themselves and their reactions to their difficult experiences, by transforming and reframing them via artistic expression (Sharma, 2019, p. 25), thus producing works of art. The further examination and analysis of these artworks can help us further understand the effects of the abuse on the person. Putting language to pain that lives inside us is a challenging undertaking. To reveal one's pain is to reveal oneself. The depth and complexity of this stored pain is likely to go deeper than what we can express or represent with words (Minge, 2007, p. 253).

Poetry is understood as a form of art that uses words and speaking, but also incorporates performance, movement and is politically positioned (Minge, 2007, p. 274). It has rhythms and cadences, it gives space for emotions and it inhabits public space. It is individual and unique, allowing one's voice a platform to share one's personal perspective (Minge, 2007, p. 275). As people who have been abused and oppressed could be said to have had their voices silenced, poetry can offer an antidote to this muzzling. Thus, allowing those who were otherwise unheard to be heard again, by others and themselves. Self-witnessing, as well as public and communal witnessing, are imperative to the processing of trauma (Andresen, 2018), as acknowledgement of its happening is the first step. Moreover, art has the capacity to be a collective endeavor. This can be a means of bringing people together but also of reaching and working with marginalised demographics (MacAulay & Levy, 2022, p. 348). Making art is a process and an experience, more about the journey rather than the end product (MacAulay & Levy, 2022, p. 351).

This experiencing can shed light on the meanings of the themes explored and expressed through this art-making. In the field of social work, for example, arts-based approaches are recognised as helpful to allow clients who usually feel invisible and silent to describe their own experiences, rather than them only being described and laid out by the professionals they work with (MacAulay & Levy, 2022: 348). The framing of the client as expert of their own experience helps to balance out the power imbalance between client and social worker (MacAulay & Levy, 2022, p. 349). This results in both parties actively contributing and thus avoiding the model of the passive client and the (pro)active social worker. Instead both can instigate or receive feedback.

Using creative methods such as poetry and drawing, in addition to conversation, can enrich communication. Even if the art created cannot be interpreted fully, its creation and process can act as a stimulus for further connection and comprehension of one's position and experience (MacAulay & Levy, 2022, p. 350). Furthermore, autoethnographic art-making is said to offer the opportunity to resolve issues otherwise concealed by the effects of trauma, as well as give the space to create new meanings (Hand, 2021, p. 2130). As poetry is published and performed in public spaces, whether physical or digital, it communicates to outsiders and society at large. Poetry about CSA, for example, can spread understanding and awareness of the experience of CSA survivors, thus reframing how survivors are seen in society (ibid). Giving the survivor a platform, a voice and authority over their own experiences can invariably lead to empowerment, for them as individuals and them as part of a larger group of survivors who also identify with these accounts. Through their own creative and artistic agency CSA survivors can empower themselves and others, while simultaneously reducing the social stigma and taboo that the phenomenon they are dealing with has (Hand, 2021, p. 2134). Retelling one's story of abuse is a way of reclaiming one's history. Thus, controlling one's own narrative helps to rebalance power structures post-abuse (Hand, 2021, p. 2137). As mentioned, survivors writing poetry can be a form of activism, resistance and a mode of opposing oppression, while practicing social justice through the sharing of common experiences (Hand, 2021, pp. 2137-2138).

In addition to its transformative and empowering properties in terms of helping the processing of abuse in society as a whole, autoethnography has gained recognition as a tool of qualitative research, which challenges and questions the more dominating, traditional positivist research structures and practices (Sharma, 2019, p. 24). In addition to potentially restrictive and silencing research methods implemented, as well as the social stigma and taboo of CSA as a phenomenon, the added element of shame felt by the survivors themselves is often the final nail in the coffin. This is something that can lead to stories never being told. It is imperative that the study of CSA through working with survivors is done using tools that empower and enable those wishing to tell their stories and share their experiences. This is a clear aim of my doctoral research.

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## DEVELOPING ETHICAL AND VALID RESEARCH METHODS

*How do survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) experience their bodies in their post-abuse, everyday life?*

*How do CSA survivors empower themselves?*

Based on my interests and the research questions, repeated above, I wish to invite survivors to talk to me about their post-abuse experience, their everyday lives and their experiencing of their bodies within this. As an inexperienced researcher, I chose to do trial research to help me develop my research methods. I conducted trial interviews with five people who did not identify as survivors of CSA, using a set of questions, in the style of the semi-structured qualitative interview, with the option to draw. I also used the same structure and got someone to interview me, so that I knew *both* positions. Some participants chose to draw while being interviewed and some did not. When interviewed, I contributed a verbal interview and a drawing.

My questions focused primarily on people's experience of their body in everyday life and not so much on the past or the CSA experience. This process was very enlightening and helpful. Even if the data collected from my participants cannot be used in my research, the process of interviewing and the subsequent mistakes I made, were a great learning curve for the future. Being in the position of participant brought the trial full circle, in that I now have a better idea of how to talk to people. The trial was done mainly for me to become sensitised to the ethics of working with others, to develop ways of talking to people that both protected and empowered them. I felt that this was achieved, and through this process, methodological aspects of the research also became clearer.

Due to the confronting nature of my questions surrounding the body, I decided to keep the interviews even less structured, directing the participant but not giving them concrete questions about the themes I wish to investigate. My deeper investigation into the embodiment of CSA and body memory surrounding trauma can also be done in the analysis phase. It was clear that talking about one's body was intimate and potentially triggering even for those who have not experienced CSA. The body is our interface between us and the world, or arguably is us. I realised that my prodding about bodily experience possibly clammed my participants up, rather than encouraging them to open up to me, as my approach probably made them uncomfortable. Due to this, a narrative interview format will be used going forward, where I ask them an opening question and let them open up slowly, asking follow-up questions based on what they have said, instead of having something very fixed prepared in order to project onto the conversation.

When considering the validity of my methods, it needs to be disclosed that I have so far, engaged in colloquiums with peers set up in a form of peer debriefing (Spall, 1998, p. 282), whereby my peers, also PhD students under the supervision of the same professor, have spent time reading, commenting on and questioning my work so far, as I also have

the chance to do for them. It was through this peer debriefing that I was prompted to develop my interview approach, based on the trial interviews that they read, questioned and discussed with me, as well as feedback from my own self-evaluation as an interviewer and interviewee. They are a group of people who I can always ask to proof my work, give feedback and critique what I am doing. This has been invaluable in getting me out of my own world and seeing how my work is seen by others in a similar field. This exchange will continue throughout the writing of my doctorate.

Talking about methodology, this research will employ hybrid research methods, or *triangulation* (Patton, 1999). The type of triangulation in this case is specifically called 'method triangulation' (Carter et. al., 2014, p. 545) as there will be data collected in the form of interviews, but also the option to contribute artistically expressed messages, in the form of drawings or poetry, thus making artistic artefacts also part of the data to be analysed. It is believed, that by using a triangulation approach, qualitative research can be more rigorous and yield more scientifically valid results (ibid.). So, in a nutshell, the research is autoethnographic (Minge, 2007), and uses qualitative approaches like the interview but also arts-based approaches (Gerstenblatt, 2013), like the creation and subsequent interpretation of drawings and poetry. It uses the theory of empowerment as its theoretical base. The exact form of triangulation is likely to evolve with the participants, as the research aims to be participative and hopefully empowering to the participants. Conducting the research as an autoethnographer is empowering for me, but also aims to be empowering for those I am working with.

An example of participative research would be to employ *member checking* (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1804), whereby the participants will be given the option to give feedback after the interview, be in touch with me in regard to questions about the research, review the transcripts of their interviews and give feedback on the analysis of them. This is in order to check whether my interpretations are in fact also in line with how they meant to express themselves. This is to avoid misinterpretations and bias on my part, thus making my findings more valid. This is not to involve the participants in deep coding and analysis, but for me to know that what I am coding is correctly recorded on my part.

In terms of the ethics of working with adult CSA survivors, a number of considerations have been made. I am sourcing participants through specialised organisations and therapists who support survivors of CSA throughout their post-abuse processing. I would advertise the research through leaflets and emails, that will be sent out by the organisations or therapists. If people are interested they can contact me directly. I have no access to their contact details beforehand. Criteria for participation include: identifying as a survivor of CSA, having a therapist who can be there to support in case they need it throughout the research process and being over 18. I only need about 8 to 10 participants. Once participants have gotten in touch, a meeting will be set up, either in the physical or digital realm, depending on practicality or preference of both participant and researcher, in order to aid in the establishment of an environment that feels safe and relaxed. I

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will provide the participants with written and verbal information about the research, as well as readiness to answer any questions they may have, so that they can give informed consent to participation. A consent form signed by both parties will allow me permission to work with the participants. The interviews will be audio recorded, in order to be transcribed later, and the accounts immediately anonymised. Contact with me will be allowed throughout the whole process and the participant can withdraw participation anytime before publication.

The safety and wellbeing of my participants is of utmost importance, but only being protective is not enough to achieve this. I need to approach them with dignity and trust. I need to trust that they have come in contact with me because they have something to share. I wish to give them a safe and open platform to do so. I do not want to restrict or paternalise, but instead offer a context for (further) empowerment. Creating a safe and empowering environment is not just up to me, but also something that will be established in exchange with them. I too have contributed to projects where survivors shared their stories and the very act of sharing was empowering for me. I had something to say, I wanted recognition and I wanted to be heard. Participating in the project gave me acknowledgement I needed. I expect this to be the case for other people who come forward. So, I will aim to foster a secure and open environment, while at the same time approaching participants as experts of their own experience.

Furthermore, in terms of the ethics of a CSA survivor researching CSA, which could also be potentially challenging, I also have an assigned therapist guiding and supporting me through the process, in order to avoid retraumatisation but also to help process anything that might come up. I am also working in a self-reflective manner, and in frequent exchange with my peers and supervisors, as well as the ethics board of my university, which has approved the research plan moving forward.

## CONCLUSIONS

Through weaving together existing literature surrounding CSA, empowerment, embodiment, autoethnography and arts-based approaches surrounding the understanding and processing of abuse and trauma, this piece of writing gives a theoretical foundation and context to the proposed research on CSA survivors. The focus is two-fold. One focus is to keep the body in the forefront of our investigation, keeping in mind that *body* means every part of the human body, brain and mind included. The second focus is the process by which the survivor feels like they have become or will become empowered. This keeps in mind that empowerment is not a linear process and a certain processing or healing from the effects of abuse is not necessarily going to ever be concluded, but instead it is important to identify the tools for managing life. Certain approaches and methods that have been deemed successful in aiding empowerment may be identified, by the survivors themselves. This will be a process of discovery throughout the investigation, rather than

proving a specific theory.

This work aims to augment the research done on CSA so far. It is doing so by and with survivors. This does not negate or take away from existing research done by non-survivors or research focusing on perpetrators. It is aiming to enrich the whole discourse surrounding it.. The added element of an arts-based approach aims at pioneering a research methodology that tries to access information that is stored in body memory and possibly less intellectual, as well as the cerebrally stored information that is usually accessed in scientific research. With the implementation of triangulation, member checking and peer debriefing, the research aims to be rigorous. The sample size is too small to be fully representative, but qualitative approaches will be able to identify codes and patterns that could help shed light on how people live with the effects of CSA in adulthood.

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