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Getting evidence into action to tackle institutional child abuse

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is an example of a government response to survivors' demands to address the harm they suffered. It is also a major response by a national government to improve child safety in the future. Facing up to child abuse is difficult and in other countries similar inquiries have suffered delays and derailling. This commentary uses an evidence-to-action lens to explore why clear evidence of child sexual abuse may be ignored and side-lined. It argues that where evidence challenges the powerful, is surprising and shocking, or undercuts current institutional and policy arrangements, then that evidence is likely to be ignored, undermined or refuted – all factors which are present in the case of historical institutional child sexual abuse.

Many people would assume that governments, policy-makers and practitioners use the best available evidence to inform decisions they make to improve the lives of people and communities. However, research has shown that using evidence is a complex process, with much contextual variation, different kinds of evidence competing for attention and priority, and with issues of politics and power shaping decision-making contexts and outcomes (Nutley et al., 2007; Smith, 2013; Weiss, 1979). It shouldn't be surprising then that despite concerns being raised by a variety of groups, including children, parents, staff of various organisations, campaigners, activists, survivors and others, that it has taken so long for the evidence on institutional child abuse to be fully investigated, interrogated, and action to be taken (Penglase, 2005).

The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the Royal Commission) has generated considerable evidence from multiple sources about the nature of child sexual abuse in institutional settings. It has commissioned research, listened to survivors' stories, brought together existing evidence, solicited expert testimony, and combined these forms of evidence to inform its recommendations to tackle institutional child sexual abuse. In this commentary, I explore well-established challenges and issues in using evidence to examine what these existing understandings highlight when addressing the case of historical institutional child abuse. I first discuss current understandings of research and evidence use processes in the context of institutional child sexual abuse. I then look at the specific issues around learning and unlearning, power dynamics, and the challenge of combining different forms of evidence. Finally, I consider what we can learn from the Royal Commission to help develop effective practices for evidence use and what kinds of research and evidence might help take policy and practice forward in this area.

I use the term 'evidence' broadly here – including research, evaluation, data, testimony, commentary – as the combination of these sources of evidence is drawn on to help inform decisions. Much of the research about evidence use focusses on the specific use of research evidence in policy or practice (e.g. Oliver, Innvar, Lorenc, Woodman, & Thomas, 2014). However, this body of literature offers important insights that can be drawn upon to inform thinking about wider applications of evidence use, including how the Royal Commission and similar inquiries internationally might confront barriers to getting evidence into action to tackle institutional child abuse.

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1. A complex process

During the 1960's and 70's thinking about policy-making (and consequently about evidence use in policy) was dominated by a model which emphasised a rational and cyclical process, in which decision-making was informed by evidence to assist a process of cool-headed government (Hill, 2005). Since then, understandings of the use of evidence (and indeed the policy-making process) have evolved to take better account of the relationships that mediate evidence use, and the complex processes through which people learn, think, and do things differently when confronted with new evidence (Morton, 2015; Ozanne et al., 2017).

There is a substantial body of empirical work that has led to understanding evidence-use as a social process, mediated by relationships, in which any new evidence is competing with other forms of evidence as well as with current understandings, ways of thinking and doing, beliefs and values, and the political and power issues of the day (e.g. Nutley et al., 2007; Oliver et al., 2014). By understanding evidence use as a complex process, it is important to pay more attention to specific contextual variations, for example between different cultures, geographies, organisations, times, spaces and according to the particularities of the individuals and groups involved. As I outline below, the example of historical institutional child sexual abuse highlights some of the complexities and difficulties of getting evidence to be accepted and acted upon.

When considering the role that evidence plays in change processes, it can be helpful to broaden the focus from specific policy or practice changes – for example, a government making policy-recommendations to tackle child sexual abuse where previously it was unwilling to do so – and take a wider view. Research and other evidence can be important in raising awareness of an issue and helping to bring it onto a public agenda (Nutley et al., 2007). Research and other evidence is also important in developing knowledge and understanding, and in addressing ideas, attitudes and beliefs. As Wright (2017, this issue) has noted, this has been particularly pertinent in relation to child sexual abuse, as new evidence challenged existing beliefs. In fact, these changes in awareness, understanding, and attitudes are all necessary for policy or practice change to occur. Staff in youth-serving organisations, for example, need to have an awareness of child sexual abuse, they need to understand the issues, they need the right attitudes and ideas, before they can, or are willing to, make any changes to their practice.

If we view research and evidence use as a dynamic and iterative process, with information and people interacting over time, in context-specific ways, then it is not surprising that it takes time for ideas from research to slowly seep into the public discourse, gradually changing understandings, policy priorities and debates. There may be a tipping point. In the case of the Royal Commission, as Wright, Swain, and McPhillips (2017, this issue) suggest, in Australia it was in 2012 when a senior police detective made allegations about corruption and cover-ups in the Catholic Church in relation to reporting child sexual abuse. In general, official inquiries are established when governments feel the issue has become too large, complex and messy to handle through the usual political channels (Wright, 2017, this issue). This process may take a particularly long time when issues are controversial, taboo, and challenge the cultural norms and power structures of the day, and especially where powerful vested interests are working hard to maintain their position. In such cases, those seeking change may need to consider a range of ways to influence policy to accelerate the move towards the tipping point.

2. Key challenges

There are well-evidenced challenges in using evidence to inform and shape policy (Oliver et al., 2014) and practice (Williams, 2011), and some of these are particularly pertinent in the case of institutional child sexual abuse. Firstly, there needs to be a process of individual, social and organisational *learning* to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge, ideas and beliefs. This can be especially difficult if new knowledge is challenging and in this case, evidence of institutional child sexual abuse is challenging in a number of ways. In Australia, as in other countries, until recently there was a reluctance in society to accept the prevalence of this type of abuse (Wright et al. (2017, this issue)). The institutions that have been implicated were trusted and well-known, adding to the difficulties of the information about abuse to be easily accepted. Cultural factors have also undermined the ability to process this kind of knowledge (Palmer & Feldman, 2017, this issue), particularly norms that prevent talk of sexual matters, which were prevalent in institutions, especially religious organisation, but also in society more broadly.

Secondly, there needs to be a process of *unlearning* – letting go of previously held notions about the world. There may be a strong reluctance to accept evidence that is at odds with a person's beliefs. Religious and state institutions embody trust and symbolise order and care. To confront the possibility that abuse had taken place in these institutions presented a massive challenge to those who trusted and even loved them, and the impact of this is still reverberating in Australia and around the world, as seen for example in press reports and church responses to the emerging evidence (e.g. *The Week*, 2014; *The Independent*, 2017).

The reluctance of people who have been abused by authority figures in trusted institutions to disclose is now well established (Cashmore, Parkinson, & Taylor, 2017). While issues for no-disclosure are complex, a key concern amongst survivors is that they would not be believed. The process of unlearning is needed to challenge the disinclination to believe less powerless groups over more powerful ones. In this case, children were characterised through organisational and societal cultures as 'less deserving' due to their behaviour, disability or ethnicity (Palmer & Feldman, 2017, this issue). Evidence from these groups that those responsible for caring for them – their 'betters' – were abusing them was at odds with the social order. The power structures in place meant that those with the least power were more likely to be victims of abuse and least likely to be believed.

These issues draw attention to other power-dynamics, and in particular the role of the 'expert'. Evidence from experts is corralled in different ways, for example through research or testimonial. Historically, experts were usually authority figures, but cultural shifts in the twentieth century have weakened the authority of institutions and allowed for more diverse views and open conversation to take place (Wright, 2017, this issue). People reporting on their own lives have been given more credence, and the ability to dismiss

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