



Linda M. Williams

## The Role of Interdisciplinary Learning in the Advancement of Child Sexual Abuse Prevention: An Interview with Linda M. Williams, PhD, Former President of APSAC (1994)

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“That’s the thing about this field [of child maltreatment]—it brings together many disciplines.” Throughout our interview with Linda Williams, PhD, she emphasized that a clearer understanding of child maltreatment and a pathway toward its prevention necessitate strong interdisciplinary collaboration between those in research, practice, and policy. Prior to the foundation of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), however, there were few places for researchers and practitioners focused on understanding child maltreatment to connect with one another, share knowledge, and receive the training and emotional support necessary to work in the difficult space of child maltreatment. To address this need, APSAC was founded in 1986, bringing together people to facilitate conversation across disciplines and sectors regarding child maltreatment etiology and prevention, lessons learned, and the most up-to-date research. Perhaps more important to the identity of APSAC, however, is that it was created with applied goals in mind: to meet the professional needs of researchers, clinicians, and practitioners working together to tackle the issue of child maltreatment.

As early career researchers in prevention science and educational psychology with the shared goal of preventing child maltreatment, we find it hard to imagine a time when an organization such as APSAC did not exist, or a time when there was no mandatory reporting, when the prevalence of child maltreatment was not widely known or studied, a

time when there were no journal outlets dedicated to the dissemination of research on child maltreatment, or no places to look for rigorous evidence-based programs and policies designed to meet the needs of families affected by child maltreatment. Yet there were many years when people working on researching and providing services to child welfare-involved families did not have access to these supports, or the interdisciplinary community that APSAC represents, or the associated research, training, and professional development provided by APSAC.

According to Dr. Williams, the early ideas that would shape APSAC were first generated by a small group of researchers, sitting together at a conference, discussing the absence of a dedicated space for bringing together professionals who do work in the field of child maltreatment. It was there that many pioneers in the field recognized the need for such an organization, and who later, in the 1980s, came together to found APSAC. Among those founders was Linda M. Williams whose scholarship was pivotal in understanding the prevalence of and familial contexts in which child sexual abuse, and more specifically sexual assault, occurs. Dr. Williams was part of the early conversations with other pioneers that generated the vision of APSAC that has been realized today. She served as President of APSAC in 1994, the same year that the official journal of APSAC, *Child Maltreatment*, was founded. Together with others, she worked to

ensure the early APSAC colloquiums were relevant for professionals working across sectors toward the common goal of preventing child abuse and neglect.

## Early Career and Current Work

Dr. Williams' career commenced at St. Lawrence University and then Beaver College, located in Canton, New York, and Glenside, Pennsylvania, respectively, where she received her BA in Sociology with honors in 1971. She then began her graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, earning a National Institute of Mental Health Traineeship (1971) and her MA in Sociology (1972) before later receiving a PhD in Sociology in 1979 with a specialization in Criminology. Since then, Dr. Williams has embarked on a successful career in the field of sexual assault, investigating justice and gender-based violence, child abuse, trauma and victimization, and recovered memory throughout the lifespan using cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs. During our interview, Dr. Williams credited her entry into the field to her mentor, Joseph J. Peters, MD, a psychiatrist who was interested in the social and psychiatric aspects of sexual assault. Early in her doctorate program (1973), while working for Dr. Peters, Dr. Williams began and directed a study, results from which would eventually become the "most important article [she] ever wrote."

The study was originally designed to describe the context around and consequence of sexual assault cases. In the early 1970s, Dr. Williams mentioned that the academic world and general public were largely unaware of the prevalence of sexual abuse and had limited knowledge of who was being sexually assaulted and who was perpetrating sexual assault. The study revealed that nearly "40% of the victims of sexual assault were under the age of 18," thereby bringing child sexual abuse into the conversation around child maltreatment. The study also documented that aggressors were not all strangers, but rather "someone who was known to them." In many ways, Dr. Williams says, "it was really the discovery of ... child sexual abuse."

A follow-up study was later funded to assess the long-term consequences of sexual assault within the same sample 17 years later. Dr. Williams and her team located and re-interviewed over half of the original sample, asking them what they remembered from their visit to the hospital during time one and to speak about their lives. They found that "38% of them did not appear to recall the victimization in childhood," demonstrating that adult women with documented histories of child sexual abuse may not have recollection of the abuse. In her consequential article, published in 1994, where she reported the findings of this follow-up study, Dr. Williams stated that professionals "should be open to the possibility of child sexual abuse among clients who report no memory of such abuse" (p. 1174) because "long periods with no memory of abuse should not be regarded as evidence that the abuse did not occur" (p. 1167). This study was pivotal in pushing the field's understanding of the relationship between trauma and memory, and has served as an often-cited, landmark paper for many branches of study within the sexual assault field.

Throughout her career, Dr. Williams experienced success in many other significant research and academic pursuits. Notably, she held research associate appointments at the American Foundation, Institute of Corrections (1972–1973), and University of New Hampshire (1986–2011), was director of research at the Joseph J. Peters Institute (1973–1994) and Wellesley College (1996–2005; 2015–present), and served as an instructor at Temple University (1980), University of Maryland (1982–1985), Bermuda College (1982–1985), and the University of Massachusetts Lowell (2005–present). As a measure of her scientific merit, her work has been funded by a number of federal grants and awards, in addition to contributing over 50 peer-reviewed publications, numerous books and book chapters, and many presentations on sexual assault-, justice-, and gender-violence-related topics. She was also an early contributor to APSAC (1991–2001) as a member of the board of directors, committee chair, and former president, as highlighted earlier. Additionally, she held roles as editor and reviewer

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for notable child abuse journals, such as *Child Maltreatment*, APSAC's official journal, and *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and has offered her testimony to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on topics such as criminal background checks for prospective employees and child safety in childcare settings.

Today, Dr. Williams continues to work toward ensuring that her research “serves an [applied] purpose” and ultimately addresses issues plaguing children and women through efforts in education, research, and policy. She is currently serving as Professor Emerita in the School of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the University of Massachusetts Lowell (2005–present), instructing graduate-level courses on childhood maltreatment and engaging in research to improve the prosecution outcomes of child sexual abuse cases. Also, as the Senior Research Scientist and Director of the Justice and Gender-Based Violence Research (JGBVR) Initiative at the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College (1996–present), Dr. Williams is currently designing, conducting, and disseminating research with her research team that addresses victimization and justice issues to improve the lives and safety of young girls and women (JGBVR, n.d.). Her research continues to serve an important role in the conceptualization and understanding of sexual assault with direct implications on clinical and prosecutorial policies, and on future research.

### Child Maltreatment Research at the Advent of APSAC: Progress and Needs

Dr. Williams shared several poignant examples on public attitudes and understandings of sexual assault and abuse in the early 1970s for girls and women, reflections that illustrate the stark differences in the national context in which child maltreatment research was conducted prior to and contemporary with the formation of APSAC and the present day. As noted previously, her early research focused on understanding the prevalence of sexual assault on adolescent girls and characterizing the contexts in which sexual assault occurred. Dr. Williams recalls

sharing these research findings with a local news station, citing that it was possible that around 40,000 women in the United States (U.S.) had experienced sexual assault, a prevalence rate that corresponded to less than 1% of all U.S. women in 1970. During that interview, the news reporters were stunned by this estimate, one that was much higher than researchers or the public had considered possible at that point in time. Today we know, based on self-report estimates, that the prevalence of sexual assault and abuse during childhood is much higher than what was thought in the 1970s; approximately one in five women experiences childhood sexual abuse or assault (Finkelhor et al., 2014). It is also widely accepted that these values are likely underestimates given that sexual assault and abuse are often not reported. Despite these concerning estimates, one measurable success of the field is the widespread attention and knowledge that clinicians, practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and the general public have regarding the occurrence of all forms of maltreatment, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect. Such knowledge is necessary to identify children and families at risk of maltreatment, efficaciously treat symptoms and consequences of exposure, and ultimately prevent maltreatment.

Dr. Williams mentioned that during the same period of years in which she had been researching the prevalence of sexual abuse and assault, many girls who were brought into medical facilities (often by police) as victims of sexual assault were placed into juvenile correctional facilities, not because of a juvenile referral, but because professionals had few options or knowledge about the best placement for girls who had experienced sexual assault. There were few appropriate placement options available that were not deemed to risk the welfare of other vulnerable children. Moreover, Dr. Williams pointed out that evidence clearinghouses such as the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, established in 2006, or the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, signed into law in 2018, did not exist, thus leaving policymakers and professionals with few comprehensive resources to

make evidence-informed decisions in selecting and implementing social and behavioral interventions for youth and families affected by child maltreatment. Dr. Williams considers these clearinghouses, and the many evidence-based programs indexed within them, to be essential to the field of child maltreatment prevention. Further, she credits the development of programs toward not only treating the individual but also the family to be a critical advancement for more effective supports for individuals and families affected by child abuse and neglect.

Dr. Williams noted that the criminalization of trauma in young girls involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (e.g., commercial sexual exploitation) remains an area in need of further research. Efforts toward developing programs tailored to the needs of these youth, improving the coordination between the bifurcated juvenile justice and child welfare systems, and reforming policies to reduce the prosecution of youth who are victims of sexual exploitation need to be further supported. However, there has been some progress in these areas, such as the reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), which makes explicit calls to recognize the need to address the traumatic experiences of justice-involved youth (P.L. 115–385) that disproportionately affect girls (e.g., Baglivio & Epps, 2016; Harner et al., 2015). Dr. Williams wisely reflected that as we advance as a field, we often must revisit the lessons we learned in the past and relearn them for new or related issues. She shared that we must revisit lessons learned regarding the most appropriate supports and treatments for girls who experienced childhood sexual abuse and apply or adapt them for girls who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation.

These examples highlight the progress that has been made in the field across the past four decades regarding what is known about the widespread problem of child sexual abuse, as well as the professional means to intervene. Although current prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse and underreporting are both concerns warranting further attention, there is also evidence that rates of sexual

abuse have also begun to decline substantially (Finkelhor et al., 2010). Dr. Williams and many APSAC pioneers have been critical in shaping the societal and professional responses to child sexual abuse and other forms of child maltreatment that exist today.

## **Future Directions for Child Welfare Researchers and APSAC**

As we closed our interview with Dr. Williams, she reflected on important priorities for future research in the field of child maltreatment. She identified the need to ensure that research is actionable, that it is, “at minimum, addressing policy and practice.” She drew from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, noting that individual change is difficult without changes in the larger ecosystem. As an illustrative example, Dr. Williams remarked on her current research, a policy-oriented study aimed at understanding how sexual assault cases are prosecuted across the United States. Initial findings from this work have led her to see the imperative to understand societal and cultural responses to sexual abuse that can be evident in the way jurors might respond to sexual assault cases, or in the way law enforcement interacts with victims. The complexity of social institutions, communities, and cultures is important to explore across the spectrum of topics on child maltreatment. Dr. Williams suggested that a vital next step is both “addressing the community response to the issue of child maltreatment and the need for the community to be more involved in coming up with solutions.” She noted that although this type of research is challenging to conduct, future study should focus on changing community norms and values around child maltreatment, as this has implications for society’s response to maltreatment at every level of the ecological model.

In discussing next steps for APSAC specifically, Dr. Williams raised the question as to whether the membership of APSAC has reached child welfare itself (e.g., administrators, caseworkers, staff). She emphasized that it is important for APSAC to sustain its “heart,” the original vision, addressing

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the professional needs of all researchers, educators, practitioners, and clinicians who support families and children involved in child welfare, ensuring they have access to the body of knowledge and network of support that is APSAC. In our interview, Dr. Williams commented on all the many ways you can enter into the field of child maltreatment research, noting that many of her friends and collaborators were social workers, psychologists, criminologists, and sociologists. She suggested that APSAC serves as one point of entry, and that APSAC should continue engaging people “across disciplines, including those newer to the field of child maltreatment, to keep ideas fresh.” To this point, she remarked that APSAC has many different initiatives and ways for individuals to become involved, a strength and marker of growth in the organization.

### Advice for Future Child Maltreatment Leaders

The child maltreatment field has had its champions, such as Dr. Williams, who have shaped the current climate and status of the field. Many important developments have been made to ensure that children are kept safe through data-informed policy decisions of prevention and intervention methods spearheaded by passionate and concerned research leaders. Moving into the future, new champions in the field will be needed to continue to push matters forward. Throughout the interview, Dr. Williams touched on several themes that would benefit institutions and future leaders, including funding, mentorships and collegiality, and interdisciplinary approaches to research and policy.

Few institutions across the country have a nexus of childhood maltreatment where promising scholars and scholars-in-training can enter the field. Despite APSAC being one organization that supports the interdisciplinary work necessary to effectively address child maltreatment, Dr. Williams also recounted the many institutional barriers present for both trainees and faculty or researchers who are siloed in their departments, who may not have institutional support or funding to do this kind of

work, and whose contributions to the field may not be recognized when they step outside the boundary of discipline-specific tenure and promotion or incentive structures. To create opportunities for research, Dr. Williams points out that a more concerted effort into thinking about “what...the field needs” and “what...investments we need to make...” must be made “even if this is hard.” At times, funding for maltreatment research is reallocated or terminated based on changing administration or leadership; however, to push the field forward, she believes that institutions should aim to provide a steady stream of funding that facilitates opportunities for graduate and postdoctoral students to receive specialized training in childhood maltreatment and connection with mentors in the field to foster their development. Further, institutions will need to be thoughtful in developing new ways to support and give credit to researchers who are doing this applied and actionable research.

For future leaders in training, Dr. Williams suggests it is important to find a mentor whose personality matches that of the student, who has a source of funding to sustain training opportunities, and who is willing to meaningfully engage in the student’s training goals. Mentors with these qualities encourage opportunities for the student to write and engage in substantive research with their mentors and in collaboration with other colleagues who find maltreatment research interesting and important. This includes those who are from disciplines outside of their own expertise.

Because we work in an interdisciplinary field, future leaders should continue to seek experts or mentors from other disciplines. As someone who mentored a student outside of her department, Dr. Williams found the experience to be successful and mutually enriching, with the caveat that the student strategically selected her because Dr. Williams could help access a part of the field that the student was interested in. According to Dr. Williams, this may be an opportunity in which APSAC and others could “help with the professional development and career development of the people who want to do work

in this field.” Here is an opportunity to continue to address their mission to improve society’s response to the abuse and neglect of its children. Providing purposeful and strategic training in actionable practice and policy-focused research across multiple integrated disciplines, providing mentorship, and obtaining reliable funding can all serve as avenues to encourage the development of future leaders in the field of childhood maltreatment.

### Reflections From Early Career Child Maltreatment Researchers

Throughout our interview with Dr. Williams, she commented several times on holding tension among perspectives of being critical of the past and status quo, celebratory but humble about lessons learned, and optimistic about the potential for change. This thread of conversation was about taking an honest look back at what we, as a field, have accomplished or not accomplished, not in the spirit of negativity, but toward the goal of identifying and addressing the true challenges and barriers that remain. Dr. Williams used the idiom of considering whether the “glass is half full or half empty” to describe this ongoing reflection as she has worked diligently across the decades to see significant reductions on the occurrence of child sexual abuse and assault. She described holding this tension even now as she seeks to understand the policy implications that might hinder or help progress in this area.

Although each of us used this idiom lightheartedly throughout the interview, we feel it represents well the concept of a “complex hope,” which is discussed by Sandage and colleagues (2014) and defined by social justice theorists as neither “cynical and immobilizing fatalism” (Freire, 1998, p. 70) nor a simple optimism, but instead a “courage to hope for betterment against the odds” (West, 2004, p. 216). Understandably, putting forth the idea of hope in the conversation of child maltreatment may sound glib to some; nevertheless, as we reflect on how an understanding of child sexual abuse has changed across the past four decades, we see clearly that the strides made toward reducing and preventing child

sexual abuse and assault (and of all forms of child maltreatment) were not made without the significant dedication, perseverance, and investment of many pioneers who believed that extinguishing child maltreatment was and is possible.

In closing, we would like to thank you, Dr. Linda Williams, for encouraging us to continue to engage in necessary interdisciplinary collaboration, for challenging us to learn new ways of thinking about the issue of child maltreatment through conversations and collaborations across disciplines and sectors, and for describing the narrative arc of the fight against child maltreatment that shows us just how far the field has come—and, how far the next generation of child welfare researchers have yet to go.

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