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Competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of child sexual abuse in the Caribbean

### Original Citation

Pasura, Dominic, Jones, Adele, Hafner, J.A., Maharaj, P.E., Nathaniel-DeCaires, K. and Johnson, E.J. (2013) Competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of child sexual abuse in the Caribbean. *Childhood: A journal of global child research*, 20 (2). pp. 200-214. ISSN 0907-5682

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the dynamic interplay between competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of sexual abuse in the Caribbean. Drawing on qualitative data from a study undertaken in six Caribbean countries, the article suggests that Caribbean childhoods are neither wholly global nor local but hybrid creations of the region's complex historical, social and cultural specificities, real or imagined. As childhood is a concept that lies at the intersection of multiple frames of reference, context-specific definitions of childhood – what it means to be a child – have a direct impact on the way in which the issue of child sexual abuse is constructed and understood.

## **Keywords**

children, Caribbean childhoods, hybridity, child sexual abuse, social construction

## **Theoretical perspectives**

Over the past three decades, there has been remarkable intellectual, political, economic, cultural and social interest in the constructions of childhood (see, for example, Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Qvortrup et al., 1994; James et al., 1998). This work responds to dominant conceptualisations of childhood, which, premised on theories of

socialisation and cognitive development and often taken as universal and normative, define childhood uncritically as the lack of adult power and capacity. Constructing the boundaries for the new social studies of childhood, James, Jenks and Prout set out the study's defining paradigm:

The child is conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights or differences—in sum, as a social actor .... This new phenomenon, the “being” child, can be understood in its own right. It does not have to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competence, reason or significance (1998: 207).

James et al. (1998) suggest four different ways to conceptualise contemporary childhoods: the socially constructed child, the social structural child, the minority group child and the tribal child. The socially constructed child is said to reflect the social, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which children are embedded (Crawley, 2011; James et al., 1998). Contrary to naturalistic and universalistic assumptions about childhood, social constructionists ‘are more likely to be of the view that children are not formed by natural and social forces but rather that they inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interaction with adults’ (James et al., 1998: 28). Hence, as Christensen and James (2000: 69) argue, ‘the “socially constructed child” is a local, rather than a global, phenomenon and tends to be extremely particularistic’. By contrast, theory of the social structural child portrays

childhood as a universal category whose ‘manifestations may vary from society to society but within each particular society they are uniform’ (James et al., 1998: 32). For instance, Qvortrup et al. (1994) emphasises the importance of social structures such as generation, ethnicity, class and gender in shaping children’s lives. The third conceptualization is the minority group child who is ‘an embodiment of the empirical and politicized version of the “social structural child”’ (James et al., 1998: 210). Within this category, children inhabit an adult-centred world and are portrayed as dependent and incomplete. As Archard (2004: 39) puts it, childhood is defined as ‘that which lacks the capacities, skills and powers of adulthood. To be a child is to be not yet an adult.’ The fourth conceptualisation, the tribal child, perceives children as constructing and inhabiting a separate world from adults. For instance, Punch’s (2003) work highlight the importance of understanding children’s agency and voice.

James’ et al. (1998) typology is useful in describing two contrasting ways of theorising childhood, in what has been termed the ‘plurality versus singularity debate’ (James, 2010) or the ‘global/local split’ (Holloway and Valentine, 2000) in childhood studies. The plurality of childhoods scholars emphasize the ways in which children’s lives are shaped by different social, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which children are embedded. Yet other studies accentuate the universality of childhood, thus seeing childhood as a social category. This article explores the

hybridization of Caribbean childhoods illustrating how global and local childhoods are embedded within one another and not oppositional categories.

Most international agencies and NGOs' work with children in the Global South is premised on what Robinson (2008: 115; see also Ansell, 2010) called 'fixed, adultcentric, white, Eurocentric, gendered, middle-class values of childhood.' Childhood is seen as a natural and essential category marked by characteristics such as innocence, vulnerability and passivity and thus distinct from autonomous adulthood. Hence, western models of childhood, often based on biological and historical discourses, have often been taken as the 'ideal type' against which other children's experiences can be classified as 'normal' or abnormal. For example, referring to western historical discourses of childhood, Jenks (2005) points to two contrasting views of children. On the one hand, children are constructed as inherently good and innocent, and on the other hand, children are viewed as evil and sinful. As Rogers (2001: 30) points out, the two images of children, 'the innocent and wholesome child' and 'the wicked and sinful child' are based on two discourses: the 'discourse of welfare' and the 'discourse of control'. Some of these Western ideas of children have been exported and globalised through the process of colonisation and democratisation, and continue to be propagated through the child protection policies of international development agencies. For example, Penn (2002: 118) examines how the imposition of the World Bank's neoliberal policies on countries in the Global South contribute to the globalization of

western notions of childhood. The conception of childhood as a universal category, what Boyden (1990) refers to as the 'global child', underpins the work of international agencies at all levels.

Recently, several scholars have sought to deconstruct the notion of universal childhoods by demonstrating the diversity of childhoods, that is, the ways in which children's lives are shaped by different social, economic, cultural and historical contexts (Holt and Holloway, 2006; Thorne, 2007). Examining the ways in which childhood studies may be a broadly defined interdisciplinary field of study, Thorne (2007: 149) challenges us 'to interrogate our starting assumptions and organizing categories, including the long history of western scholars imposing their frameworks on the less privileged.' Similarly, Kesby et al. (2006) argue for the importance of understanding the diversity of childhoods in the Global South in terms of what they are and not in terms of idealised western norms. More often, childhoods in the Global South are conceived in terms of what they 'lack' in contrast to an idealised model of childhood marked by characteristics such as innocence, vulnerability and passivity. It is important to note, as Kesby et al. (2006: 185) remind us, 'that local, culturally specific understandings of childhood also need to be theorised and deconstructed.'

From the discussion above, it can be seen that most childhood theorists (Qvortrup et al., 1994; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 2005; Prout, 2005) have been concerned with putting conceptual boundaries to the terms childhood and children.

There are scholars who focus on the commonalities of childhood, while emerging scholarship also exists that emphasize the diversity of childhoods. Reviewing the singularity versus plurality debate, James (2010) questions if it is at all possible to integrate the two within the single enterprise of childhood studies. In fact, James (2010: 485) describes childhood studies as having reached ‘a crossroads in its development because of the growing diversity of the interests and agendas.’ While still contributing to this discussion, this article concentrates on the dynamic interplay between competing meanings of childhood and social constructions of child sexual abuse (CSA) in the Caribbean. In the next section, the article briefly examines the phenomenon of CSA in the Caribbean and globally.

### **Child sexual abuse in the Caribbean**

In using the term ‘child sexual abuse’ we are mindful that we run the risk of reproducing universalist assumptions and evoking specific perceptions that the article seeks to dislodge. Defining the sexual victimisation of children is complex and influenced by political agendas and particular academic traditions as well as socio-historic specificity which may or may not be captured by the term abuse. Yet, as Smallbone et al. (2008: 4) caution us, ‘while it is important to acknowledge the problems associated with defining CSA, it is equally important not to overstate them.’ In a study of 75 countries, ISPCAN (2008) found that there was greater commonality

than difference in defining CSA. This may in part reflect current discourse on domestic violence which increasingly refers to 'domestic abuse' as a means of encapsulating the range of abusive behaviours that women (primarily) are subjected to. Importantly, the term 'domestic abuse' has been found to be an important strategy for women's survival since it can lead to recognising the behaviours that often pre-empt physical violence. In respect of children, 'abuse' implies among other things the abuse of trust and power which have been found to be a key component of their sexual victimisation. While being mindful of its limitations, we therefore appropriate the term sexual abuse for the purposes of our review of the literature although later on we offer a deeper theoretical reflection about the social construction of abuse.

The World Health Organization (2001) described CSA as an epidemic and a public health crisis. Yet, over the last three decades, responses to the sexual abuse of children has been 'more visible in North America and Europe, where research-based knowledge and resources have been available to address it' (Mildred and Plummer, 2009: 601). By comparison to the rich studies about this phenomenon in the Western world and the considerable progress made in the areas of prevention, intervention and policy (Finkelhor, 2009; Jacobson, 2001), few empirical studies of CSA have been conducted in the Caribbean. Recently available evidence indicates that CSA is a significant social problem in the region with some estimates indicating a high prevalence of sexual victimisation (World Bank, 2003; Barrow and Ince, 2008). For



example, the World Bank study (2003) shows that the Caribbean has the earliest age of sexual ‘debut’ in the world, with many young people being initiated into sexual behaviour as a consequence of child abuse as early as ten years old, and in some cases even earlier. This article is among the few emerging scholarly attempts to empirically examine the culturally contexted dynamics of CSA in the region.

Globally, CSA is a widespread social problem that negatively affects individual children and adults, families, communities and society (Pereda et al., 2009; Finkelhor, 2009). Some estimates indicate Africa (34.4%) has the highest prevalence rate of CSA in the world followed by America and Asia (between 10.1 and 23.9%) and Europe (9.2%) (see Pereda et al., 2009). Examining the international prevalence rate of CSA in 21 countries, Finkelhor (1994) demonstrated that 7-36% of women and 3- 29% of men had suffered sexual abuse during childhood. A more recent prevalence study by Pereda et al. (2009) concluded that up to 53% of women and 60% of men had suffered some form of abuse. The variability of the statistics also illustrates the interpretive complexities in the categorization of CSA. Perceptions and definitions of CSA are a product of a specific cultural, social and historical context; that is, they are socially constructed. Moreover, how childhood is defined is linked to the way in which CSA is constructed and understood. And, as Crawley (2011: 1174) points out, ‘recognising that the boundaries of “childhood” are socially and culturally constructed has important implications, not just at the theoretical level, but also in terms of understanding the

concrete, material existences of children and their everyday lives' and the larger social issues involving children.

### ***The Study***

This article draws on data collected as part of a large-scale study exploring how Caribbean adults perceive CSA, what behaviours and social conditions contribute to it, what the impact of CSA is on those most affected and what views are held about the forms of action that might be needed. The study was conducted by two of the authors from October 2008 to June 2009 in six Caribbean countries: Anguilla, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, and St. Kitts and Nevis selected to collectively represent regional diversity. The research was underpinned by a comprehensive ethics protocol with ethical approval being obtained from the research institution, governments and participating organisations. The study was multi-method in focus, utilizing a theoretically derived questionnaire, stakeholder consultations, focus group discussions and interviews as the main methods of data generation. Across the six countries, approximately 120 people attended stakeholder consultation sessions and 859 respondents completed the community survey (stakeholders, defined as any adult with an interest in the prevention of child sexual victimisation were recruited via local radio stations). Furthermore, the research involved 36 focus group discussions and 110 interviews (42 policy-focused and 68 practice-focused) with key policymakers, practitioners and clinicians. A rigorous sampling strategy was employed to ensure

representativeness across the span of socio-economic circumstances and social strata of Caribbean societies. Participants were selected from a range of settings, for example, community and religious groups, youth groups, sports groups, employment settings and education institutions. Discussion topics explored people's views about definitions of abuse, their own experiences of abuse (and of others they knew), retrospective reflections on prevalence and projective techniques to identify views on the type of services and responses needed. Deeper meanings of survivorhood and sexual victimisation were explored through narrative interviews with eleven adult survivors of CSA. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and qualitative data were analysed thematically using the template method and in the case of narrative interviews, through the 'Listening Guide' approach (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). When disaggregated by country the data revealed demographic, geographic and political differences at the national level however there were striking similarities across all countries in terms of participant responses and perceptions of childhood and abuse. This was corroborated by the qualitative data which yielded consistent themes across all six countries and we therefore present the findings as reflective of the region.

### **Competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of child sexual abuse**

Kempadoo (2009: 1) describes Caribbean sexuality as 'both hypervisible and obscured.' She notes that there are very few studies on Caribbean sexuality, and of those most deal

with ‘violence against women and children, sexually transmitted infections ... and economic imperatives.’ Kempadoo further suggests that Caribbean sexuality should be viewed as much more intricate due to alternatives to the dominant heterosexual discourse, transactional sexual abuse and sex tourism. Further culturally situated examples include sexual abuse and natural disasters and parental pimping. One of the major findings of this article relates to the extent and gravity of CSA in the Caribbean. Narratives from respondents suggest almost an acceptance of CSA as ‘normal’ and inevitable for some children. Drawing on personal experiences in many cases, many respondents presented a picture of a social problem that is escalating, has multiple layers and is perpetuated not only by adults who carry out harmful sexual practices with children but also by non-abusing adults through complicity, silence, denial and failure to take appropriate action.

### ***Legal construction of childhood***

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as ‘every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’ (Article 1). By specifying children as persons younger than 18 years of age, the CRC definition is as much a social construct as local construction of childhoods. It has been noted that the CRC definition has a global standardizing effect in the construction of local childhoods (Ansell, 2010; Boyden, 1990). The majority of Caribbean countries, as signatories to the CRC, are striving

towards harmonising domestic law with this definition. Indeed current debates on the topic in some Caribbean countries are concerned with whether the legal age of sexual consent should be raised from 16 to 18 years. The majority of the respondents were of the view that children were children at least until the legal age of sexual consent but with the exception of sexual activity of close in age and adolescents. As the study noted, sexual intercourse with persons under the age of 16 or statutory rape was the most prevalent type of sexual abuse. Stepfathers, mothers' partners and other male acquaintances were identified as the most common perpetrators.

As James (2011: 169) reminds us, 'different social and cultural conceptions of what childhood is and should be are made manifest in laws, policies, and a range of age-based social divisions and institutions that contextualize the everyday lives of children in any society.' In many Caribbean countries, there has been recent acknowledgement that age-bound laws related to sexual consent are inadequate and subsequent revision of legal frameworks have been implemented. For instance, in Antigua and Barbuda the legal age of sexual consent was increased from 14 to 16 years in 1995. Similarly, in Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, sexual intercourse with a child under 14 is now punishable by life-imprisonment and with a child 14 to 16 by up to 12 years (UNICEF, 2004). Despite these developments, evidence from the study discussed in this article noted many ambiguities and contradictions in respect of age limits within the laws of the Caribbean and the lack of consistency and clarity regarding the legal status of the

child may be a contributing factor to illegal sex with minors and sexual violence against children. However, it is important to note that clear, consistent and enforced legalistic constructions of childhood do not by themselves change or reinforce protective social norms, that is, those norms that would ameliorate the frequency of the abuse of trust and power and sexual harm to children.

### ***Children as 'willing participants'***

Based on the findings of this research, situations where older men were involved in sexual relationships with female minors were sometimes described as widespread and 'normal'. The teenagers involved were viewed as 'hot' and 'desired' to engage in that type of sexual behaviour. In these types of relationships, girls were often viewed as 'willing participants' who were 'giving it away' and who were supposedly capable of making their own decisions. In this study, some respondents believed that girls introduced to sex at an early age may regard sex or economic exchange relationship as one of choice, one of personal expression of rights to self-determination, and demand that these rights be respected as others might. The majority of male respondents described girls who find themselves in these sorts of situations as 'big women', 'hot girls', 'in life' and 'wanting their thing'. In making decisions to engage in commercial sexual activities, this example demonstrates how some Caribbean girls are drawing on wider global discourses of children's rights. Similarly, in her ethnographic study of the connections between consumer culture and the production of Nevisian girls' sexual

subjectivities, Curtis (2009: 5) examines 'the practices of sexual-economic exchange through which girls trades sex, consciously or not, for access to goods and services,' demonstrating how 'sexuality is a domain of multiple contradictions: a locus of both power and powerlessness, of self-determination and cultural control.' Curtis (2009) describes how adolescent girls navigates not only religious and traditional discourses on sexuality which produce normative sexual practices but also global influences linked to consumer culture. The availability of globally mediated scripts, in particular the influx of network programs, websites and imported DVDs, including pornography 'produce subjectivities that in turn affect and at least partially determine sexual practices and the general concept of the erotic' (Curtis, 2009: 71).

The girl as active participant and seducer came across strongly in the male group discussions. There appeared to be a growing sentiment that children, but especially girls, were becoming more sexually assertive and aware of their sexuality. One participant openly asked the question 'How the children get so hot? These girls should be shaped up!' Another male respondent remarked, 'some girls dress up and act up in ways to provoke you. They want something from you and they think sex is the way to get it. They know how to turn you on.' The majority of male focus group participants did not see these types of 'consensual' relationships as abusive and thus expressed difficulties with the idea of reporting them to child protection agencies. Using carefully selected vignettes from her fieldwork, Curtis (2009: 15) provides vivid accounts of how

girls were 'being forced into sexual relations, and how within Nevisian society sexual coercion has become the norm, blurring the line between coercion and consent.' Yet, as Curtis asks the question, are Nevisian girls able to exercise agency when sexual coercion appears normative. For Curtis (2009: 29), Nevisian girls' sexual agency is established along two axes: 'first, one that foregrounds the negative and constraining aspects of sexuality ... and second, one that recognizes the creative and positive possibilities of sexuality despite the seemingly overwhelming obstacles that Nevisian girls face.'

In terms of sexual relationships involving older women and young boys, respondents made it clear that gendered norms make it very difficult for this type of abuse to be acknowledged. If a boy is abused by a woman, social pressures make it more likely that this will be reframed as the boy's 'education', 'initiation', or his 'good luck' regardless of any damaging effects, and if abused by a man, homophobia, fear of becoming homosexual and macho social norms would lead to the experience being suppressed. Although very few experiences of women abusing boys were cited, the processes of sexual socialisation mean that neither female nor male abusers of boys are likely to be confronted about this behaviour.

The discourse of 'children as willing participants' provides a valuable insight into ways in which respondents combine global and local constructions of what childhood is and the implications thereof in terms of CSA. What is interesting from the



above examples is that female children are constructed as 'hot girls', 'willing participants' and 'big women', thus girls are not only viewed as autonomous individuals; they are also a potential threat to men and the social order. The polarized constructions of children as autonomous individuals and a potential threat the social order draw in part on western construction of children and childhood. Writing in the UK context, Scott et al. (1998: 689) point to the key antinomies that have emerged in relation to children and childhood in late modernity: 'the paradoxical perception of children as both at risk and as a potential threat to other children and to social order.' In this case, the sexuality of children and women combine to threaten social order by provoking uncontrollable male sexual desire. It has been argued that the positioning of children as 'in danger' and 'dangerous' leads to two discourses, that is, the 'discourse of welfare' and the 'discourse of control' (Rogers, 2001).

### ***Transactional sexual abuse***

Most of the respondents did not think that men engaging in sex with 'consenting' underage teenagers for money or material goods was sexual abuse and suggested that, at the level of the public perception, many people might regard this behaviour as wrong, but would not describe it as sexual abuse. As one of the key informant puts it:

Child sexual abuse is very prevalent in our society, girls openly tell you that they receive and go out with older men and receive financial support and their parents

do nothing about it. These older men sleep in homes of girls who are under 16 years and nothing is done about it.

Similarly, another participant explained: 'You have a young girl who is 12 years old and all of her friends have the latest cell phones...the father, or the guy next door who thinks she looks good takes advantage of the child's vulnerability. The girl may not see it as abuse, she's just getting a cell phone.' While transactional sex between girls and adult males sometimes takes place for inconsequential material goods (for example, mobile telephones, phone cards, clothes and concert tickets), it also occurs as a means of survival. For instance, Cabezas' (2009) work on sexual formations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic illuminates the ways in which sexual and affective relationships are intimately connected to political economy. Similarly, Curtis (2009: 182) uses the term 'commodity erotics' to describe 'the collapsing of sexual desire with commodity desire or conflating sexual pleasure with pleasure received from commodities.'

The Caribbean has many of the negative socio-economic characteristics linked with commercial sexual exploitation such as under-employment, social class and gender inequities (UNICEF, 2004) and retains a historical legacy informed by colonial relations in which economic sex exchange was a common feature (Young, 1990). These factors together with the feminisation of poverty mean that women and their daughters often depend financially on men for their survival, whether it is the mother's partner or

another adult male. In exchange for silence and sex, many of these men contribute money to rent, groceries and schoolbooks. It should be noted that the transactional sexual abuse of girls in order to supplement a family's income and the collusion of adults in this behaviour was reported as social reality by all 36 focus groups and by many key informants. While this finding highlights the role of non-offending parents in facilitating abuse, the practical implications are clear. Any understanding of the dynamics of CSA in its relational context must examine the interests of the family and even the child in terms of their basic needs. And these needs must be taken into account in the design of prevention policies and practices.

It may be useful here to differentiate between the terms 'transactional sexual abuse' and commercial sexual exploitation. The conception of transactional sexual abuse refers to the exchange of sex for material goods and money but it also involves the sexual abuse of a minor. By contrast, commercial sexual exploitation can be described as the process by which individuals make financial gains because of the sexual exploitation of children. Whereas transactional sexual abuse places responsibility for this behaviour with the men or women who engage in sex with girls and boys, commercial sexual exploitation expands itself to all individuals accruing financial benefits.

### ***'Anything after 12 is lunch'***

One of the findings of this study is that there were some men, in the focus group discussions, who considered childhood as ending at 12 years. One of the male focus group participants expressed what he referred to as a general perception among males about children. He explains, 'anything after 12 is lunch.... Once they're sitting on the toilet and feet touch the ground they are ready.' Another participant stated, 'although all types of child sexual abuse are viewed as perverted especially if a child is under 12, if a child is 13 or 14 many people don't bother because it's so common here.' This may help to explain why some men indicated that they considered girls to be 'legitimate sexual targets' once they reach their teens. The same point is highlighted by Curtis (2009: 188) who describes the expression 'twelve is lunchtime' as a cultural milieu 'identifying the social category in which girls find themselves viewed as sexual objects.' Every society has some concept of childhood that differentiates children from adults. Yet, as James (2011: 169) argues, 'it is the cultural evaluations about what those differences amount to, on what basis such distinctions are to be made and what social consequences they might have for children, that vary.'

### ***Puberty or sexual debut marking the end of childhood***

In the focus group discussions, some men believed that puberty or sexual debut marked the end of childhood. By puberty, respondents meant the time when girls start menstruating. In addition, some respondents conceptualised motherhood and childhood

as states that cannot co-exist for teenage mothers. This highlights the contradictions and dilemmas that many teenage mothers face as they come to terms with being mothers while they are still children. The view that puberty or sexual debut marks the end of childhood reinforce western historical discourses that constructs children as inherently good and innocent (Jenks, 2005). As Kehily and Montgomery (2009: 70) point out, 'the concept of childhood is frequently premised upon an idea of innocence in which ideas about childhood are constructed in opposition to a dangerous and potentially corrupting adult world.' Consequently, sexuality and access to sexual knowledge are seen as some of the key boundary markers between children and adults (Scott et al., 1998; Robinson, 2008). CSA is thus perceived as corrupting a child's innocence.

It is perhaps for this reason that some participants had difficulty in determining if those aged 15 and 16 should be considered 'children' and whether sexual relationships with this age group could be considered CSA, if the sexual act was 'consensual' between both parties. Most of the focus group participants described sex between children as undesirable but not abusive. As one respondent explains, 'a 17 year old boy who has a sexual relationship with a 15 year old girl is not abusive. It is a teenage relationship.' Similarly, another respondent said, 'teenagers having sex is wrong, but it is about experimenting, not abuse.' Several participants were of the view that this was not conduct deserving of criminal sanctions, although it might prompt some kind of investigation.

### *Slavery and child sexual abuse*

Some respondents discussed how the historical, colonial and post-colonial constructions of childhood shape people's understanding of CSA. The mixed gender focus group drew similarities between incest and slavery. Several examples were cited of fathers who abused their children, with the rationale being that children were their property and they were doing no harm. An extension of this was that the father sometimes became jealous and resentful when the child he had abused grew up and viewed their boyfriends as sexual rivals. Incest was viewed as a form of ownership and linked to a slave mentality where the child is considered as 'chattel' and the property of the adult. The male focus group also considered its presence as a 'generational curse' which could be passed on through generations of families. Some male participants expressed strong sentiments towards incestuous relationships.

During slavery, sexual violence against women was not an exception and in many instances the rape of Afro-Caribbean slaves resulted in pregnancy and childbirth (Kempadoo, 1999). As Kempadoo (1999: 7) explains, mixed-descent women (fathered by European 'whites' and mothered by Afro-Caribbean 'blacks') used their 'exoticized' status to elevate their own power, sometimes by sexual means. This view of Afro-Caribbean women's sexualised unrestraint has, to some extent, transcended centuries and much social change. This view is at best flawed and has perhaps been reproduced to vilify 'black' women and even to romanticize their rape. Within a contemporary

Caribbean context, to place a history of slavery as the centre of blame for CSA is to stretch too far away the culpability of the perpetrator. In spaces where colonial rhetoric is scarcely absent from any discourse care must be taken not to over-extend its reach, however compelling it may be to attach it carelessly to current social issues like CSA. More realistically, the cultural reinforcement of children's subjugated status may be related to normative harsh practices such as corporal punishment and silenced sexual violence in the Caribbean.

## **Discussion**

The article has not exhausted all the possible meanings of childhood expressed by respondents. Yet, by focussing on the varieties of meanings ascribed to the concept of childhood within and across the Caribbean, this analysis demonstrates that Caribbean childhoods are hybrid creations that absorb diverse cultural and social influences. Moreover, there is no universal definition of childhood, since childhood reflects the social, economic, cultural and historical contexts within which children are embedded and childhoods are socially constructed out of this meld.

The discourses about childhood have been debated within several sets of binary oppositions such as adult/child, Global North/ Global South, childhood/childhoods. Although these dichotomies can be useful as heuristic devices, they are also 'false dichotomies' in that 'while they help us to understand some things, they serve to

obscure others, such as the complexity of the experiences of individuals, who bring together and contain, in many different ways, the tensions between these dualities in their daily lives' (James, 2010: 490). Recently, Ryan (2011) describes the emergence of new wave of scholars (see, for example, Jenks, 2005; Prout, 2005) who use concepts such as 'hybridity' and 'multiplicity' in an attempt to move beyond the global/local and singularity/plurality binary at the core of childhood studies. For instance, examining the discursive construction of childhood and youth in AIDS interventions in Lesotho's education sector, Ansell (2010) demonstrates how representations of childhood and youth goes beyond the global and local dichotomies. As Ansell argues,

Although the representations of childhood and youth produced through the interventions are hybrid products of local and global discourses, the power relations underlying them are such that they, often unintentionally, serve a neoliberal agenda by depicting young people as individuals in need of saving, of developing personal autonomy, or of exercising individual rights (Ansell, 2010: 792).

Thus, it is imperative to problematize and deconstruct binary categories at the core of childhood studies, exposing the ways in which language conspires to legitimate and



perpetuate unequal power relations. More importantly, it allows us to question and challenge dominant discourses of childhood grounded in Eurocentric traditions.

Borrowing from ideas which emerged within postcolonial theory (see, for example, Bhabha, 2004), the terms hybridity, creolization and syncretism are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the cross-fertilization between different cultures and religions as they interact. Cohen (2007: 371) describes hybridization and creolization as 'potential subversive concepts' in that they destabilize fixed ideas of race, ethnicity, nationalism and religion. It can also be suggested that, by emphasizing hybridity, Caribbean childhoods are subversive to globalized western notions of childhood. In the Caribbean, we are not only witnessing the creolization of different cultures but also the reconstruction of meanings attached to childhood.

The varieties of meanings ascribed to the concept of childhood within and across the Caribbean demonstrate how childhood concepts are not only non-universal but are indeed hybridized. This finding highlights a core ethical dilemma in the child maltreatment field; the tension between 'absolute' and 'relative' values. A relativistic approach is based on the socially and culturally determined aspects of what constitutes child maltreatment or in this case the role of childhood in defining CSA. In practice, non-universal aspects of CSA and a relativistic approach to addressing child sexual abuse across cultures risks failing to protect children (Reading et al., 2009). Similarly within professional practice there may be contradictory conceptualizations among

practitioners about what constitutes childhood and abuse that could add to the complexities of intervention in CSA, but the centrality of child protection needs to supersede ambivalence.

## **Conclusion**

As this article has argued, the discourse of childhood has always been employed as a singular, universal phenomenon, hiding differences within and between communities, cultures and societies. Earlier studies have assumed the export of western models of childhood to be unidirectional and that local childhoods should be judged by how far they deviate from this 'ideal typical' childhood. However, the growth of postmodernist and poststructuralist social theory has challenged fixed and hard notions of childhood. Social constructionists, influenced by postmodernism, draw attention to the multiple ways in which childhoods are constructed, performed and expressed across and within different cultures. Reviewing the singularity versus plurality debate, James (2010) questions if it is at all possible to integrate the two within the single enterprise of childhood studies. As this article has argued, to make significant progress requires an alternative conceptual framework, one less fixated on difference but more attentive to the hybridization of childhood. As Holt and Holloway (2006: 138) argue, there is need to 'emphasise the interconnected "glocalised" processes of transformation that variously impact upon children's differential embodied experiences.' By illustrating the

hybridization of Caribbean childhoods, we have demonstrated that the customary way of categorising childhood as global or local suit certain philosophical and socio-historical ideologies rather than being simple reflections of reality. In his essay on creolization, Cohen (2007: 382) describes the manifestation of cultural interactions and interconnections in this age of globalization as ‘the soft sounds of fugitive power, but you may need to have your ear cocked to the ground, or your finger on the pulse, if you are to hear them fully and discern their influence.’

This article suggested that Caribbean childhoods are neither wholly global nor local but hybrid creations of the region’s complex historical, social, gendered, sexualised and other cultural specificities, real or imagined. We have demonstrated the dynamic interplay between competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of sexual abuse in the Caribbean. But as Jacobson (2001: 232) reminds us, ‘how childhood is defined at any particular point in time becomes the measure of that which is considered abusive.’ Power relations between adults and children, as well as between genders also condition what is seen as abusive. The findings suggest that despite sexual offences being clearly defined in legal terms, at the conceptual level, sexual abuse is not fixed; it depends upon a range of circumstances and how abuse is defined is influenced not only by the characteristics of the victim and the abuser, but also by characteristics such as gender and patriarchy. Yet these cultural and socially

determined aspects of what constitutes CSA do not undermine children's absolute need for protection from harm.

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