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Mimicry Deception Theory applied to sexual abuse of children

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ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse of children remains a widespread problem with well-documented, adverse consequences. Often, abuse ending is contingent on a disclosure made by the victim, but victims delay disclosure if they tell someone at all. The factors associated with (non)disclosure are complex and interrelated. In this paper, we propose a new theoretical framework (Mimicry Deception Theory; MDT) to explore various aspects of the grooming process, using a qualitative content analysis of US court appeal cases ($N = 25$). Specifically, we focus on how MDT components contribute to the likelihood of a CSA disclosure. MDT is made up of five components: Victim Selection, Community Integration, Complexity of Deception, Resource Extraction, and Detectability. These five components allow us to look at several characteristics of abuse in tandem and examine how they interact to impact various outcomes, such as (non)disclosure. We provide a detailed codebook for this framework, that can be used to systematically extract relevant information from large amounts of data. Through the application of this framework, we were able to identify several factors that may play a role in delayed or non-disclosure. Further, we found repeat offenders were likely to use the exact same methods of access, grooming, and remaining undetected across victims. Implications for prevention, as well as clinical interventions with perpetrators as well as victims are discussed.

1. Introduction

Sexual abuse of children (CSA) remains a widespread problem. It is estimated that the global prevalence rate is 11.8 %, with rates from self-report studies 30 times higher than rates from studies using an informant (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). The consequences of CSA are well-documented, and include problems in a wide range of areas such as interpersonal and sexual functioning (Sullivan et al., 2020), mental health (Rapsey et al., 2019), physical health (Hailes et al., 2019), as well as an increased risk of revictimization (Scoglio et al., 2021; Widom et al., 2008).

Immediate disclosure in cases of CSA is rare (Alaggia et al., 2019). Most children will delay telling someone about sexual victimization, on average by ten years (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Paine & Hansen, 2002). Further, various factors have been identified as barriers to disclosure. These include contextual factors such as victim-perpetrator relationship (Dupont et al., 2014), the child's home situation (Alaggia, 2010; Kogan, 2004), and victim gender (Alaggia, 2005) and age (Leclerc & Wortley, 2015), as well as

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abuse factors such as severity (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Wallis & Woodworth, 2020), length of abuse (Arata, 1998), and tactics employed by offenders such as threats (Schaeffer et al., 2011; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019) or victim-blaming (Collin-Vézina et al., 2015). In the absence of disclosure, detection of sexual abuse is contingent on recognizing suspicious behavior, and identifying children who may be particularly at risk of being targeted by perpetrators.

An integral part of particularly long-term sexual abuse is grooming. Grooming is broadly defined as any act by a perpetrator that increases the likelihood of sexual abuse occurring (Craven et al., 2006). Through grooming, a perpetrator befriends a child attempting to gain their trust, as well as the trust of those around the child (McAlinden, 2006). Over time, inhibitions are lowered as the perpetrator sexualizes the relationship, resulting in an escalation to abuse (Eneman et al., 2010). Throughout this process, the perpetrator mimics being a trustworthy person, ensuring their true motives are not detected. For this reason, grooming can be characterized as a form of deception, where the deceiver is dishonest about their true intentions for taking an interest in a child.

Throughout the years, several models have been developed that identify various stages of the grooming process. For example, the content-validated model of sexual grooming (Winters et al., 2020) and Luring Communication Theory (Olson et al., 2007). The former incorporates strategies to gain access to, and isolate a child, as well as post-abuse maintenance behaviors. Luring Communication Theory identifies gaining access to a child, as well as a circle of entrapment, where isolation and grooming of the child occur. Although these models include victim selection and post-abuse maintenance, where earlier models did not, the commission of the abuse itself remains absent.

Bennett and O'Donohue (2014) point out various issues relating to both the definition and conceptualization of grooming. For example, identified stages typically overlap and offenders may cycle back and forth between stages, which begs the question whether demarcation of stages is useful. Further, it is not clear where the line between grooming and abuse is (Craven et al., 2006), which is made more difficult with varying legal status and definitions of grooming behaviors (Gillespie, 2004).

Unfortunately, grooming behaviors are difficult to recognize, by laypeople and professionals alike. Without the eventual abuse taking place, grooming behavior can be brushed off as normal behavior (Craven et al., 2006). Indeed, Winters and Jeglic (2016) found that people display a hindsight bias, where grooming behaviors are not labelled as suspicious unless the participant knows those actions resulted in abuse. This inability to recognize grooming provides a challenge for early prevention efforts.

Broadening the focus beyond grooming, various theories and models seek to understand the commission of sexual abuse (i.e. Precondition Model: Finkelhor, 1984; Integrated Theory of Child Sexual Abuse: Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Quadripartite Model: Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Pathways Model: Ward & Siegert, 2002) but these do not specifically include grooming as a part of the process (Craven et al., 2006).

It is clear that sexual abuse of children is a complex process, that encompasses various factors that interact and affect the severity and nature of consequences for the victims, as well as the likelihood for disclosure. Indeed, research has suggested that sexual offending should incorporate a situational perspective, that takes into account the circumstances of a situation and how these shape individuals' actions (Erooga et al., 2020; Holt & Massey, 2012). Similarly, Wortley and Smallbone (2006) emphasized the importance of viewing sexual abuse of children and its prevention through a situational lens. In their paper, they argue that the context is not a passive factor, but rather that it plays an active part in the behavior of, in this case, a sex offender. Further, they argue that urges following from viewing children as sexual objects are typically not acted upon due to various constraints, including personal restraint. However, such constraints may not hold up if an opportunity to abuse presents itself (Hirschi, 1988), or is actively created by the perpetrator, for example, through grooming. Indeed, situations may dynamically influence behavior, even if individuals are not predisposed to exploiting an opportunity (Wortley & Smallbone, 2006). Rather than focusing on intrapsychic factors that motivate CSA then, Wortley and Smallbone (2006) propose more attention should be paid to the factors in the immediate situation that facilitate or prevent CSA. For these reasons, it is vital to understand what role such contextual factors play in grooming strategies employed by perpetrators.

We propose a new theoretical framework, that takes contextual factors of abuse into consideration, and also incorporates various outcomes of "successful grooming", such as delayed disclosure and conflicting emotions on the part of the victim. Existing models typically do not incorporate the abuse itself (i.e. first behavior that "crosses the line" from grooming to actual abuse, length of abuse, or severity of abuse). Since grooming behaviors are only characterized as such if they lead to sexual abuse, it is important to incorporate the sexual abuse itself into any model seeking to understand sexual abuse of children. Further, this theoretical framework explicitly characterizes grooming as a form of deception.

1.1. Mimicry deception theory

Mimicry Deception Theory is a theoretical framework that characterizes deception as long-term or short-term (Jones, 2014). Along four components, different aspects of deception are examined. These components are: 1. Community Integration; the extent to which a deceiver integrates the community and portrays themselves as trustworthy and sincere, 2. Complexity of Deception; the number of deceptive behaviors engaged in as well as the complexity of these behaviors, 3. Resource Extraction; the number of resources extracted and the duration of extraction, and 4. Detectability; the effort the deceiver goes to, to ensure that they are not discovered. We propose to add a fifth component; Victim Selection; how the deceiver selects a victim that is relatively easily manipulated and exploited. In our adapted version of MDT, Victim Selection is the first component, followed by the original four. MDT has been used to study financial (Jones & de Roos, 2016) and workplace deception (Blickle et al., 2020), but has not yet been applied to interpersonal crimes such as child sexual abuse.

In this paper, Mimicry Deception Theory will be introduced as a theoretical framework to examine sexual abuse of children. Establishing steps in the commission of a crime provides information useful to therapists who deliver treatments aimed at reducing

recidivism (Leclerc et al., 2009). Specifically, mapping of these strategies allows clinicians to teach offenders how to recognize their chain of offence and stop before it escalates to abuse (Kaufman et al., 1996). Further, examining tactics used by offenders is useful in the context of relapse prevention treatment, insofar as it provides a framework to identifying obstacles to abuse. On the victim side of treatment, having detailed knowledge about tactics used will enable clinicians to evaluate behaviors with a victim, and help them distinguish mal-intended behaviors from prosocial ones (Leclerc et al., 2009). Such an understanding may reduce the likelihood of revictimization later in life, but insight into this process may also help alleviate persistent feelings of shame and self-blame in victims. Finally, parents and caregivers should be aware of this information to give them the tools to help prevent sexual abuse of children.

1.2. Applying MDT to grooming

In terms of the first component of victim selection, offenders may be particularly adept at choosing a vulnerable victim to abuse (e.g. Elliott et al., 1995). Vulnerabilities may include a child's need to feel loved and appreciated (Elliott et al., 1995; Kaufman et al., 2006), children who are quiet, troubled, or lonely, often with parents who experienced various problems (Budín & Johnson, 1989; Jackson et al., 2015; Drerup Stokes et al., 2013), or those who have experienced prior victimization (Assink et al., 2019). Indeed, it is in the offender's interest to choose a child who is easily threatened or manipulated, thus minimizing the risk that the child will tell someone about the abuse. Children who are vulnerable in the manner described above may indeed be less likely to disclose than others, but importantly, they may also be less likely to have someone to disclose to. In a similar vein, where there is a lack of guardianship by responsible adults in the child's life, this further contributes to the child's vulnerability to abuse (McKillop et al., 2021).

The second component, Community Integration encompasses victim access. Offenders may have access to their own (biological or step-) children or gain access in a different manner. Indeed, most convicted CSA perpetrators know their victims well (Elliott et al., 1995) for example, through a friend/family connection, or they have a position of trust awarded them through employment (Home Office, 2021). An example of such trust would be leaving the children alone with the perpetrator. Offenders may also attempt to befriend adults in the child's life, such as parents or caregivers to facilitate access to the child.

The third component, Complexity of deception covers various behaviors and statements on the part of the offender, typically with the intent of a) befriending the child, b) strengthening the relationship with the child, and/or c) sexualizing the relationship with the child. Reported behaviors include befriending the child, for example through playing games with them, and giving the child money (Budín & Johnson, 1989; Winters et al., 2020). Retrospectively, victims identified the offender treating the victim differently from other kids, telling them they were different, special, or the only one who understands the offender, not respecting their privacy, making excuses to be alone with the victim, asking sexual questions, and treating the victim like an adult or acting like a child themselves (Elliott et al., 1995; Winters & Jeglic, 2022).

With the fourth component, Resource Extraction, grooming and preparation escalate to abuse. As such, it is of interest to determine what the first step was in crossing this line, how the offender progressed to this stage, and how victim distress was responded to. In addition to tactics used by the perpetrator, Resource Extraction also documents the nature of abuse, such as its severity and frequency. With regards to a first "abusive move", Elliott et al. (1995) reported a small minority of offenders admitted to using physical force. In contrast, most offenders used a more subtle manner of escalation, such as touching or kissing, or slowly desensitizing the child to sexual activity. Such a subtle escalation without use of force is likely to lead to more confusion on the part of the child, as it becomes increasingly difficult to pinpoint when abuse started. The effect of this subtlety is reflected in offenders' response to victim distress. If a child showed distress during the abusive acts, perpetrators were more likely to use a subtle method of control (i.e. stopping briefly only to continue coercing) than violence or threats (Elliott et al., 1995).

The final component is Detectability. Most CSA victims delay or never reveal the abuse to friends, family or authorities (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Kogan, 2005). This absence of disclosure unfortunately means that the abuse is likely to continue, although it is important to note that even when children do tell, this is not a guarantee that the abuse will stop (e.g., Berliner & Conte, 1990; Gomes-Schwartz et al., 1990). Apart from these characteristics of abuse, this component focuses on offenders' active role in preventing disclosure. Threats have been associated with delayed or non-disclosure (e.g. Schaeffer et al., 2011; Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). Aside from physical threats, an offender may tell a child no one would believe them or that they would be blamed (Elliott et al., 1995; Winters & Jeglic, 2022), capitalizing on the child's fears.

1.3. Successful grooming

MDT includes outcome measures that can be objectively assessed. We term these "successful grooming" and place them within the Detectability component. The absence or delay of a disclosure can be characterized as "successful grooming"; the abuse continues, and the offender is not discovered. However, there are other indicators of successful grooming, many of which may correlate with non-disclosure. For example, in a sample with CSA victims, more than half reported that they loved their abuser and relied on him (Berliner & Conte, 1990). Indeed, the complex emotions of children toward an abusive parent or caregiver are well-documented across various contexts (e.g., Lundqvist et al., 2004; Zinzow et al., 2010). In the context of grooming, the offender instigates and cultivates such a relationship where one does not exist (i.e., caregiver vs. family friend), thus actively decreasing the likelihood of disclosure. Similarly, a majority of victims in this sample indicated that they did not know at the time that what happened to them constituted abuse or was wrong (Budín & Johnson, 1989; Elliott et al., 1995). This confusion is facilitated by the offender's misrepresentation of their intentions and actions. Both of these factors reduce the likelihood of a disclosure taking place, and are likely to result in complex emotions on the part of the victim, which affect the trajectory of negative consequences associated with CSA.

1.4. Present study

The goal of this study is two-fold. First, to introduce Mimicry Deception Theory as a framework through which various aspects of sexual abuse of children can be studied. Given the complex nature of CSA, the low likelihood of immediate disclosure, and its far-reaching consequences, a comprehensive framework is needed. Such a framework allows an organized extraction of abuse factors which facilitates the studying of complex relations between these factors and their relevance to various outcomes such as, for example, consequences of abuse, or disclosure of abuse. This new framework combines various aspects of existing models such as contextual factors, grooming strategies, as well as abuse characteristics and outcomes. A detailed codebook with measurable factors nested within MDT components was developed from the literature. Further, MDT characterizes grooming as deception. Second, to illustrate how MDT may be used to examine factors that facilitate or impede disclosure of abuse, we apply MDT to a randomly selected initial subset of 25 CSA cases from the larger sample. In this application, we provide examples of what MDT looks like in cases of CSA, and we link these extracted data specifically to disclosures. To this end, this study will employ a qualitative content analysis, and it will be exploratory in nature.

2. Methods

2.1. Search strategy

LexisNexis was used to identify federal and state appeal cases in the US. Appeal cases were chosen to ensure the suspect had been convicted. Cases where the guilty verdict was overturned were excluded. Initial data collection was started in 2015, but due to various practical constraints, there was a significant delay in finishing the analyses. We searched cases that were heard over a forty-day period in 2015. The following search terms were entered:

(child* OR adolescen* OR infan* OR youth* OR teen*) AND (sex* abuse* OR sex* offen* OR sex* assault* OR sex* aggression* OR incest* OR rape* OR rapist OR rapists OR sex* devian* OR pedophil* OR paedophil* OR moles* OR sex*)

Case details were entered on a spreadsheet, and duplicates were removed. Following this, cases were screened and excluded if the subject of the case was not a sexual offence; for example, the search terms identified cases where “sex” was used as “biological sex”, or where the legal precedent(s) for the appeal included discussion of sex offence cases, but the appeal was not about such an offence. Following these exclusions, the exclusion criteria in [Table 1](#) were applied.

This resulted in 212 cases being identified for inclusion. [Fig. 1](#) details the selection procedure. The purpose of this study is to introduce Mimicry Deception Theory as a framework for analyzing sexual abuse of children, and to explain its five components. At this initial stage, we are not yet looking to conduct inferential analyses on the full data set. Instead, we randomly selected an initial subset of 25 cases for inclusion in this study to provide examples of how Mimicry Deception Theory can be applied to cases of child sexual abuse.

2.2. Codebook development

A detailed codebook ([Table 2](#)) was developed based on relevant factors identified in the literature. This literature incorporates studies with various perspectives; professionals, victims, and perpetrators. As such, it constitutes a bottom-up approach where relevant aspects of abuse are sorted into the five MDT components. These factors were selected based on the literature as they either have been identified as significant risk factors for sexual victimization, or as factors that decrease the likelihood of disclosure, or, as is often the case, both. We followed [DeCuir-Gunby et al.'s \(2011\)](#) recommendations for developing and using a codebook. All factors related to characteristics of the victim or victim's life were grouped under Victim Selection. Factors that related to victim access and to other adults in the victim's life were placed under Community Integration. All factors that focused on specific behaviors or statements made by the perpetrator before abuse occurred were included in Complexity of Deception. Resource Extraction encompassed all factors related to the abuse itself, as well as anything the perpetrator did or said during the commission of abuse. Finally, Detectability concerned those factors that took place after abuse, with the intent of keeping the abuse from being discovered. This led to an initial codebook, which was subsequently revisited when the data demanded greater precision of codes. Through a process of generating code, reviewing and revising codes using the data, and establishing reliability, in line with [Boyatzis \(1998\)](#), we developed the codebook with detailed descriptions, as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria and examples. Whenever a refinement or addition was made, the data was revisited to ensure coding compliance with the codebook.

Table 1

Court case exclusion criteria.

1) Adult victim	Cases of rape, sexual harassment, or sexual assault of an adult
2) Juvenile or female perpetrator	Cases where the perpetrator was not yet 18 at the time the offence was committed, or where the perpetrator was female
3) No conviction	Cases where a guilty verdict was overturned, or where allegations were made that never proceeded to trial
4) Non-contact offence	Cases of possession/distribution of child sexual abuse material, online solicitation, or exploitation
5) Not enough detail	Cases where the offence was mentioned in passing rather than described in detail

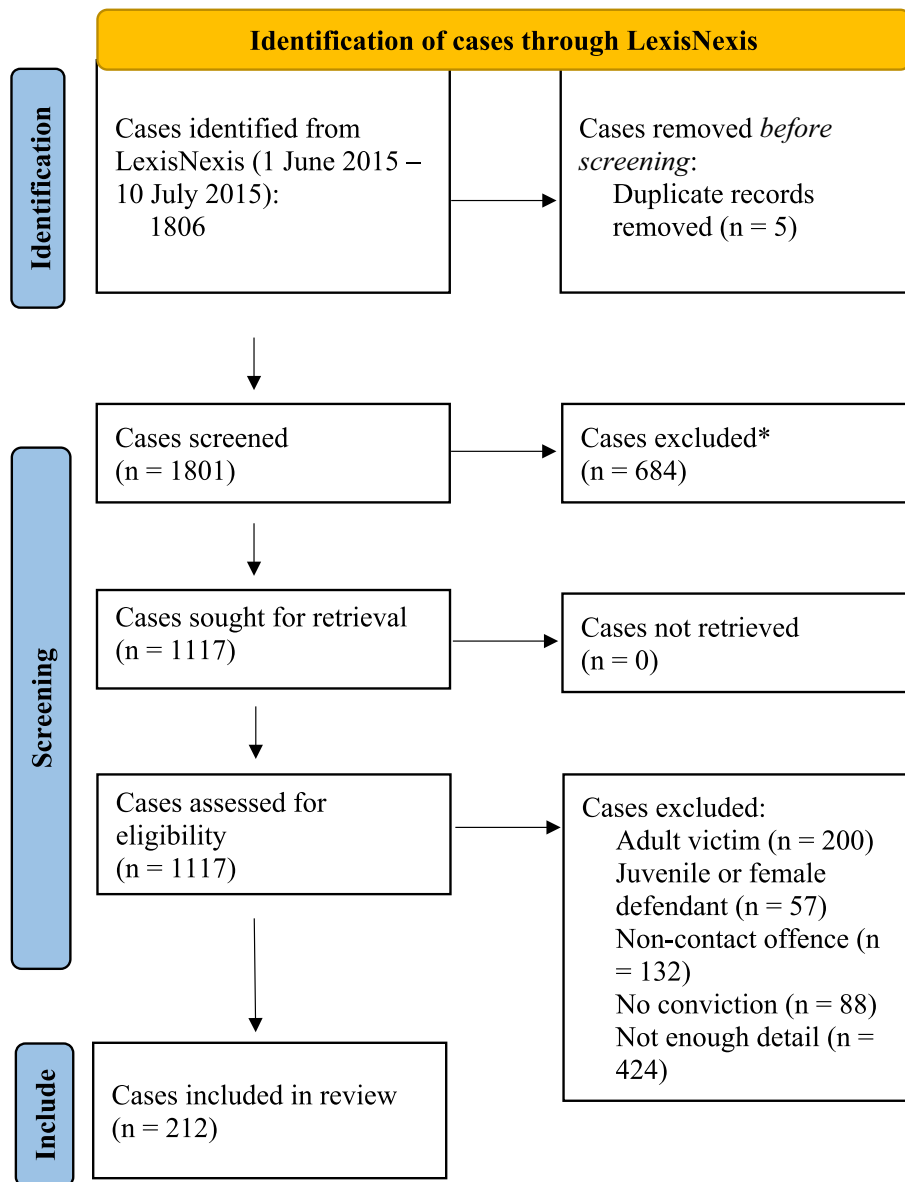


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow chart detailing selection of cases for inclusion

* Because the offence subject to the appeal was not a sex offence; this was typically due to a semantic hit (i.e., sex as in biological sex, or a mention of precedents that included discussion of a sex offence, even if this was not the subject of the appeal).

2.3. Procedure

This study used a deductive qualitative content analysis, which is well-suited to making inferences from data to their context (Krippendorff, 1980). After selecting 25 cases, two authors independently reviewed each case, immersing themselves through reading each case several times. Using the codebook, relevant factors were extracted and entered onto a spreadsheet under the relevant codes. Upon completion of this part of the process, we established the intercoder reliability as follows: We used the formula described in Miles and Huberman (1994): $\text{reliability} = \frac{\text{number of agreements}}{\text{number of agreements} + \text{number of disagreements}}$. In this manner, we calculated reliability for each coding category. We treated cases coded as “not enough information” as missing data, except where there was coder disagreement (i.e., one coded as “not enough information”, the other as “zero”; this was counted as a disagreement) so as not to artificially inflate the agreement. Two of 35 codes where data were coded fell short of 0.8 reliability. In line with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) suggestion that 80 % of agreement on at least 95 % of codes is sufficient, we established intercoder reliability. Both coders then met and discussed each case in detail, reviewed the case material, and discussed each inconsistency until consensus was reached.

Table 2
MDT Codebook with description of components, coding instructions, and supporting literature.

Victim selection	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Single parent home	Victim lives in a home with one parent when perpetrator enters their life	New partners of the parent coming into the child's life	Biological parent living in the child's home from birth	Both parents living in the child's home	Elliott et al., 1995; Finkelhor et al., 1990
	Distress at home	There are indications of problems in the home of the victim at the time the perpetrator and victim meet, or in the case of family, when the abuse starts	Abuse in the home, substance abuse, illegal activity, parental conflict	Personal history (i.e., abuse, criminality) of parents/caregivers unless it results in current conflict in the home	Problems with extended family only or explicit mention of no problems at the home (outside of eventual abuse)	Avery et al. (2002); DiLillo et al. (2000); Dong et al., 2004; Hamby et al., 2010.
	Distress at school	There are indications of the victim experiencing problems at school	Bullying, poor academic performance, isolation		Explicit mention of no problems at school.	Assink et al., 2019; Brownlie et al., 2007; Shakeshaft, 2004.
	Other vulnerability	Anything else that makes the child vulnerable to victimization	Physical disability, mental health problems, prior victimization			Alriksson-Schmidt et al., 2010; Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995.
	Victim age	Age (in years) of the victim at the first instance of abuse (any adult victims go in "anything else")				Finkelhor, 1984; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Kogan, 2004; Roesler & Wind, 1994.
	Gender ¹ preference	Did the perpetrator abuse only boys, only girls, or both	References to prior convictions / allegations (but specify if allegations)	Mention of adult sexual partners		Holt & Massey, 2012
	Other preferences (specify)	Reason expressed by perpetrator as to why he chose this victim	Pretty/ attractive, small/ young, special relationship, provocative		Reasons related to opportunistic motives unrelated to preference (the child was there)	Elliott et al., 1995; Mooney & Ost, 2013; Olson et al., 2007.
	Vulnerable mother	Indication mother was vulnerable at the time the perpetrator entered the victim's life	Mental health, financial problems, legal issues, relationship issues, prior abuse	Any problems that occurred as a result of the abuse		Baril et al., 2016; Lanning, 2010; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000.
Community integration	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Victim access	The perpetrator's relationship to the victim at the time the abuse started	(step)parent, nonparent family, friend of family, professional capacity/volunteer, other, please specify (note: mother's new partner can be coded as "other")			Arata, 1998; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Sorenson & Snow, 1991.
	Family trust	Indication family knowingly left child alone with offender	Trusting child with perpetrator in professional capacity		If family was not aware that perpetrator would be in same location as child, if family actively mistrusted perpetrator	McAlinden, 2006; Raine & Kent, 2019
	Time known to victim	Closest estimate of how long the victim knew the perpetrator at the time of the first incident of abuse in months / years	In cases of caregiving parents or other family, this is presumably "life"			Craven et al., 2006
	Time known to family	Closest estimate of how long the family of the victim knew the perpetrator at the time of the first incident in months / years	In cases of caregiving parents or other family, this is presumably "life"			Raine & Kent, 2019

Complexity of deception	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Befriending	Indication that the perpetrator tried to befriend the child	Taking child out, spending time with them, catering to their interests. In case of family, a sudden increase in such behaviors		Befriending child was skipped or unnecessary	Conte et al., 1989; Craven et al., 2006; Elliott et al., 1995
	Play games / Teaching activities	Indication that the perpetrator played games or engaged in "teaching activities" with the child	In case of family, a sudden increase in such behaviors			Lanning, 2010; McAlinden, 2006
	Bribes / special favors	Buying the child things, allowing the child to go places, granting them special privileges	Bribes are explicit quid pro quo, may also be more subtle (specify)			Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995
	Lies	Lying to the victim about the child or the nature of the relationship between perpetrator and child	Calling the child special, different, or the only one who understands. Statements of love and affection outside of what may be expected in a familial context if perpetrator is family member.			Conte et al., 1989; Elliott et al., 1995
	Not respecting privacy	Any indication that the perpetrator did not respect the child's privacy before abuse	Walking in when the child is undressing / in the shower	Accidental unintentional walking in when the child is undressed		Berliner & Conte, 1990; Christiansen & Blake, 1990
	Casual touching	Any indication that the perpetrator engaged in casual touching before abuse	Non-sexual touching such as having the child sit on their lap	Touching of intimate places		Lanning, 2010; McAlinden, 2006
	Exposing self	Any indication that the perpetrator exposed himself before abuse	Purposely walking around naked where the child can see, taking off clothes in front of child	Accidental encounters with child when perpetrator is naked		Elliott et al., 1995
	Showing pornography / CSAM	Exposing the child to pornography or CSAM at any point before abuse	Showing the child pornography or nude photographs			Elliott et al., 1995
	Other deception	Any other behavior that is deceptive, leading up to the abuse	Stories / magic, asking child for help, indication of child's need to be loved, act like child, treat like grown up, other, please specify			Elliott et al., 1995

Resource extraction	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Stress factor ¹	Indication of stress in the perpetrators life at time of abuse	Criminal behavior, substance misuse, financial problems, mental problems	Problems that occurred as a result of the abuse, distant prior criminal issues in anything else		Elliott et al., 1995
	Fantasies	Indication perpetrator fantasized about the victim or previous victims				Elliott et al., 1995
	Drugs / alcohol	Indication perpetrator ingested drugs or alcohol on day of abuse	If perpetrator chronically abuses substances and does so on a day where abuse takes place		Code chronic problems with substance abuse under stress factor or other	Elliott et al., 1995
	CSAM	Indication perpetrator watches CSA material on day of abuse	If perpetrator regularly watches such material, and does so on a day where abuse takes place		Code earlier viewing of CSAM under stress factor or other	Elliott et al., 1995
	Other factors	Any other relevant factors in the	Problems mentioned above that are historic rather than current			

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Table 2 (continued)

Resource extraction	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	First move	perpetrator's life (specify timing) The first instance of abusive behavior by the perpetrator	Physical force, touching / genital kissing, undressing / lying down, other, please specify	Subsequent abusive behaviors, first moves at later incidents		
	Severity	The most serious abusive behavior the perpetrator was convicted of	Expose / fondle, masturbation, oral sex, simulated intercourse, digital penetration, attempted penile penetration, completed vaginal / anal penetration		EXCLUDE: allegations that did not result in conviction	Gomes-Schwartz et al., 1990
	Frequency	Frequency of the abuse (once or multiple times)	Once if there was only one incidence of abuse, multiple if the abuse occurred on at least two separate occasions on two separate days			
	Length of abuse	Time between first and last instance of abuse in months / years				Arata, 1998
	Minimize responsibility	Perpetrator minimizes own responsibility during commission of abuse	Normalizing statements, expressed helplessness	Any such statements made not during the commission of abuse		
	Physical threats	Perpetrator makes physical threats during commission of abuse	I will hurt you	Any such statements made not during the commission of abuse		Paine & Hansen, 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2011
	Psychological threats	Perpetrator makes psychological threats during commission of abuse	I will hurt your family; you will be taken from your family	Any such statements made not during the commission of abuse		Paine & Hansen, 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2011
	Educational benefits	Perpetrator frames abuse as being beneficial to victim during commission of abuse	I will teach you so you know when you are older	Any such statements made not during the commission of abuse		
	Other statements	Anything else the perpetrator says during commission of abuse				
	Victim distress	Victim displays distress during commission of abuse	Tries to get away, push perpetrator off, shout, cry		If victim explicitly states they were not distressed at the time of the abuse	

Detectability	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Physical threats	Perpetrator makes physical threats to keep victim from disclosing	I will hurt you	Any such statements made that are not with the goal of keeping the victim from disclosing		Paine & Hansen, 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2011
	Psychological threats	Perpetrator makes psychological threats to keep victim from disclosing	I will hurt your family, you will be taken from your family	Any such statements made that are not with the goal of keeping the victim from disclosing		Paine & Hansen, 2002; Schaeffer et al., 2011
	Disbelief	Perpetrator tells victim no one will believe them if they disclose				
	Loss of relationship	Perpetrator tells victim they will lose	They will put me in prison, I will never see you again			

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Detectability	Code name	Code definition	Coding YES includes	Coding YES excludes	Coding NO includes	Source(s)
	Other threats/ statement	the relationship with the perpetrator if they disclose Any other statement or threat the perpetrator makes to keep the child from disclosing	Don't tell anyone			
	Blaming the victim	Perpetrator blames victim for abuse	This is your fault for doing [something], you wanted this, you let me do this		Perpetrator explicitly takes full blame and tells the child so before the abuse is disclosed / discovered	
	Victim love	At any point after the abuse, the victim expresses love or affection for the perpetrator				Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Schaeffer et al., 2011
	Victim protect	At any point after the abuse, the victim protected the perpetrator from being found out	Victim denies abuse when asked			Bradley & Wood, 1996; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; Leander, 2010.
	Victim disclosure	Whether the victim disclosed, and if so, how long after the first instance of abuse	Victim was asked about abuse and admitted, explicitly told someone, someone walked in on the abuse, it came to light in a different manner (pregnancy, std., inappropriate sexual behavior displayed by the child)			Alaggia, 2004
	Victim unaware	At any point after the abuse, the victim was unaware that the abuse was wrong	Victim explicitly states at some point that they did not know that the abuse was wrong			Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Tyler, 2002

3. Analysis

3.1. Case details

The 25 selected cases included 39 victims, with a range of 1–4 victims per case. In several cases, additional victims that did not lead to conviction were identified. Victims were female in all but five cases (exclusively male victims = 4; male and female victims = 1), and their age at start of abuse ranged from 19 months to 16 years ($M = 9.93$ years, $SD = 4.20$ years). Perpetrators in this sample had a clear preference for gender, but not for age (largest range in victim age for one perpetrator: 13 years). Six cases concerned one incident of sexual abuse, whereas the remaining nineteen cases went on for longer (range: 1 month – 12 years). In terms of severity of abuse, most cases were on the lower (Fondling; $n = 6$) or higher (Rape; $n = 8$) end of the spectrum of severity. Most victims (11 out of 39) were abused by a (step)parent or by a nonparent family member ($n = 10$), with some abused by a family acquaintance ($n = 7$). Four victims were abused by someone who gained access to them through their employment, and two victims were abused by strangers.

3.2. Victim selection

A variety of vulnerabilities were coded across victims. Several victims were experiencing distress at home when the abuse started. For example, one victim “went to live with the defendant while her mother (defendant’s ex-wife) was emotionally fragile following the death of her husband”. In other instances, there was evidence of arguments between the victim and her mother, such as one victim, whose “mother told detective that victim had prior discipline issues, a propensity for lying”. Another victim’s mother also offered a troubled history of the victim and used this to explain the allegation made against the mother’s partner:

Victim frequently disobeyed her mother by bringing boys to the house, and her mother had caught her lying to her friends that her mother and grandmother had died. Victim’s mother testified that she believes victim is lying in this case to avoid punishment for running away.

In some instances, victims also experienced distress at school, such as a case where the “victim stole a cell phone from a classmate when she was thirteen and victim only admitted to the theft when she was caught by the police”. Some victims had made prior allegations of sexual victimization. One victim “made a prior allegation that, when she visited family, her grandmother’s boyfriend forced her to watch pornography”. Another victim’s mother reported on her daughter’s prior allegations of abuse:

According to victim’s mother, when victim was in eighth grade, she posted on Facebook that she was pregnant and exchanged naked pictures with boys. When victim’s mother confronted victim and asked why sex was on her mind, victim told her, while crying, that she was raped when she was at her grandmother’s house. According to victim’s mother, these allegations could not be corroborated

In both instances, it did not appear that the allegations were reported to authorities, or that any intervention occurred. Other vulnerabilities were identified, both chronic and situational. One victim suffered from chronic disability:

Victim was born with spinal bifida and has difficulty with daily tasks such as managing her personal hygiene. She has bladder problems and has worn diapers all her life. Victim can read and write, but she has difficulty with many activities that “normal kids” can do. Although she was fifteen [at the time of the abuse], her maturity level was several years delayed.

A few victims were sick at home from school when the abuse happened, and one was on crutches, indicating a more situational vulnerability that ties in with access to the victim. Another victim was incarcerated in a Youth Offending Institution when she was repeatedly abused by a member of staff.

Several victims lived in a single parent home at the time the perpetrator entered their lives. Often, the perpetrator was a new romantic partner of the victim’s mother. In some instances, the defendant repeatedly engaged in relationships with single mothers, and abused their children. We explore these issues further in Community Integration.

There was some indication that perpetrators were attuned to these vulnerabilities. For example, for one perpetrator with multiple victims, a court psychologist noted the perpetrator would resume his abusive behavior whenever he had access to a vulnerable victim.

Those victims who experienced multiple vulnerabilities such as distress at school and in the home disclosed less than other victims. Only one of victims with documented vulnerabilities told an adult within 48 h. Two victims told their mother at a later time, but they were dismissed, and the abuse continued, e.g.: “The victim told her mother of the incident, but her mother told her that the Defendant was taking medications and could not recall the incident”. Another victim also received an inadequate response from her mother:

Victim told mother that defendant kissed her lower stomach. Mother seemed sad and she vomited. But she did not do anything or call the police. Instead, they went to the church once for counselling by a nun. Afterward, mother would sometimes come into victim’s room to ask her if she was okay and if there was anything she needed to tell her.

In the cases of four victims, the abuse was discovered by an adult. In one case, the victim admitted what happened after she ran away from home and her mother threatened to go to juvenile court. Another victim became pregnant because of the abuse. The perpetrator (her stepfather) convinced her mother that the victim had had sex with a boy, which the mother believed.

These findings suggest that due to their situation, vulnerable victims in particular may not feel they have a safe person to disclose to. Given that when younger children (pre-adolescents) disclose sexual victimization, they are most likely to do so to a parent or caregiver (Roesler & Wind, 1994), the absence of such a figure in the child’s life increases the risk of a delayed disclosure, and by extension, ongoing abuse. However, in some instances, even when these vulnerable children did disclose at a later stage, several were dismissed. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests children may not be believed when they speak out (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Gomes-Schwartz et al., 1990), and particularly when the perpetrator is a parent (Roesler & Wind, 1994), disclosure does not unanimously lead to intervention.

The harm of disclosing and no intervention taking place was highlighted by a victim expressing she did not see a point in trying again: “She felt there was no point because nothing had changed, and she was only 12 or 13 years old and did not really understand what defendant was doing to her. She was not really able to explain it.”

Since we know a dismissive response to disclosure is particularly harmful and may lead to more significant negative consequences for the child, these findings regarding Victim Selection highlight the need for trusted adults outside of the child’s home. It also underlines the depressing fact that teaching kids to “just tell someone” is futile in the absence of intervention, whether this takes the form of criminal prosecution, or protective action to safeguard the child.

3.3. Community integration

The information coded in Community Integration suggests a majority of victims were entrusted to the perpetrator by their families. There were several other indications that the perpetrator had gained the trust of the adults surrounding the victim. For example, the grandparents of one victim asked the perpetrator to spend the night in their RV with their grandson present, and parents of a male victim abused by his substitute teacher allowed the teacher to take their son bowling and to the movies. Most victims were abused by someone they knew well, and only two victims were abused by strangers. As mentioned previously, almost one in four victims were abused by the romantic partner of their mother (not their biological father). One offender repeatedly used this as a way of gaining access to children; while on probation for sexually abusing his stepdaughter, he began a relationship with a single mother who had a daughter of the same age as his first victim. He offended against this daughter as well. In a similar vein, we found several cases with multiple victims that showed an identical method of accessing victims consistently over several years; for example, abusing a friend of the perpetrator’s child when that friend visited the home. This was summarized in one case:

[defendant displayed a] common plan or scheme to fondle and digitally penetrate vulnerable pre-teen or teenaged children who were in his home where he had access to them because of his relationship with them or their relationship with his children or grandchildren.

Looking at Community Integration and disclosure, we made several observations. As has been extensively documented in the literature, the victim-perpetrator relationship impacted on the likelihood of disclosure. The eight victims who disclosed at the earliest opportunity were all abused by someone outside of their own home (i.e., father of a friend). Of the 17 victims who were abused by a family member and where information on disclosure was available, only three victims told someone the next day. In all three cases, the victims were abused by a non-parent family member. The other victims told someone much later, or the abuse was discovered in a different manner. Similarly, of the ten victims abused by a stepparent, only two disclosed to their mother. One victim only did so after the second incident, the other victim told her mother but was dismissed.

From this, we can deduce that vulnerable children may be less likely to have someone to disclose to, but may also be at risk of having their disclosure dismissed. These findings also highlight the complexity of having a parent or trusted relative perpetrating sexual abuse. However, it must be noted that abuse perpetrated by a family member usually continues for a longer period of time than abuse perpetrated by a family friend or professional. In this sense, victim-perpetrator relationship and duration of abuse are conflated.

3.4. Complexity of deception

Regarding Complexity of Deception, we found that perpetrators employed a variety of tactics to earn the child's trust and cultivate a relationship. These tactics included various behaviors such as taking the child out for bowling or offering to paint their nails. Some perpetrators offered bribes or special favors, for example in one case "[the defendant] gave the victim food and candy, and in later visits he engaged in improper sexual conduct", in another "the defendant had promised to help the victim buy some shoes, but he did not indicate what the victim had to do in exchange for the money".

In terms of sexualizing the relationship, several perpetrators did not respect the child's privacy (i.e., by entering the bathroom while the victim was in the shower or changing). Where perpetrators started off with "casual" touching, the victim was under the age of 12 in all but one cases (5 victims). One victim testified:

Defendant touched victim's feet in a "massage way," which the victim thought was "odd," so she pulled them away. Defendant continued to rub the victim's feet and moved his hands up her leg almost to her knee. The victim testified that she was afraid at this point.

Apart from behaviors, several teenaged victims received letters from their abusers detailing a desire for sex, or more specifically, "to sleep with a virgin". Another perpetrator "wrote a letter to the victim asking if she "want[ed] to do anything" with him, "that can last a while and forget your mother." In addition to such letters, one perpetrator "promised the victim that after she finished her sentence [in the Youth Offending Institution] the two of them could be in a relationship".

Where a perpetrator had multiple victims, a similar pattern of deception was observed as he moved from one victim to the next. This pattern was often evidenced by extensive allegations, sometimes spanning decades, which were testified to in court, but not always prosecuted. For example, a youth worker, with three convictions for abusing a child under fourteen, and an estimated number of victims of over forty, used his position to earn the trust of a child and family, then took the child to a hotel out of state and abused them. The same pattern of befriending, isolating, and abusing was testified to in court by his (alleged) victims.

It seemed that offenders may adjust their strategy based on victim age. Younger children were typically taken for activities, whereas older children were more often provided drugs or alcohol by the perpetrator. A similar difference in grooming has been found in previous research (Lanning, 2010).

3.5. Resource extraction

For Resource Extraction, we found most perpetrators used escalated touch, and only a few used physical force to cross the line into abuse. Interestingly, in all but one of the cases where physical force was used, the abuse was limited to one incident. In the fifth case, the abuse occurred on multiple occasions over a period of less than one month. Such force often occurred in response to a victim's resistance:

The defendant then asked the victim several times to undress, and the victim responded by removing only his shoes and coat. The defendant then became aggressive, demanded that the victim take off the rest of his clothes or else be killed. Defendant then picked up a knife from a shoebox, and held the knife "as if he was going to use it."

Several studies have examined resistance in cases of sexual abuse of children Leclerc et al., (2010) reported that (threats of) physical force increased victim resistance, which has been linked with non-completion of the offence (Leclerc et al., 2022). However, there are many reasons why victims may not be able to resist, and indeed physical force is likely to have the added effect of frightening the child:

On at least one occasion, the victim tried to scream for help, but the defendant got on top of her, held her down, covered her mouth, and told her to shut up. At times, defendant would "fight" the victim and remove her clothing, pull her hands, and scream and yell at her. [...] The victim felt horrified and did not disclose the molestations because she was scared and afraid of defendant.

We found that statements made during the abuse concerned physical or psychological threats, or normalizing statements. These normalizing statements included one victim being told the perpetrator was “teaching her a lesson so that she would know what to do when she got older”. Another victim reported her father “would come into her bedroom with no pants on and say “I got something to show you to prepare you to be better in life””. Another perpetrator told his victim “something like “[t]his is what every kid goes through,” or “[t]his is what happens to every kid””. In one instance, the victim’s mother was present during the abuse, and the perpetrator told her that he was “checking [the victim’s] temperature”. This final point is interesting from a situational perspective. Leclerc et al (2022) noted that in addition to victim resistance, the presence of another person may lead the perpetrator to cease the abuse. It may be that in an intrafamilial context, where other family members are also groomed, having another family member nearby does not serve as a deterrent. Indeed, a similar conclusion was drawn by McKillop et al. (2021) who specifically discussed guardianship in the home as a contextual factor for CSA. They highlighted grooming efforts targeted at other adults in the home, and how these may result in reduced objectivity in judging a situation as safe.

Some victims were given alcohol or another substance by their abuser. One victim testified:

Defendant laid the victim on the bed and gave her something to drink. Defendant told the victim that “[t]his will help you sleep.” The victim drank it because defendant told her to drink it and she was brought up to listen to her elders.

This quote particularly highlights the power dynamic at play and how these may be informed by sociocultural norms regarding how children should respond to adults.

It is likely these behaviors and the severity of the abuse itself affect the likelihood of a disclosure. It appeared victims disclosed immediately more often when the abuse was on the highest or lowest end of the severity spectrum, a finding consistent with the literature (e.g., Arata, 1998; Gomes-Schwartz et al., 1990). However, in this sample, less severe abuse was more often perpetrated by an acquaintance than someone with a closer relationship to the child. Given that disclosures are more likely following extrafamilial rather than intrafamilial abuse (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989; DeYoung & Lowry, 1992;), it would be interesting to explore the extent to which these two characteristics are confounded, and whether they indeed both have an effect on the timing of disclosure.

3.6. Detectability

We coded threats or statements made with the aim of securing the child’s silence in Detectability. Several instances were present in these data. One victim reported: “Defendant told her not to tell anyone because “it will hurt everybody and [he] can never, ever see them again.” He also told her that he could not live his life “the same.””. Another victim reported “She would threaten to tell her mom what was happening but the defendant would tell her that her mother would not believe her”. Such statements appear to have the desired effect, as this victim explained:

The victim said she never told a teacher about what was happening because she did not want children’s services to get involved and have her family split up. The victim said she was afraid of being called a liar and she was ashamed.

Interestingly, the threat did not need to be explicit or directed at the victim to have a silencing effect. One victim reported: “she had seen defendant at times be “violent” toward her mother. She also noted that after she asked defendant if he would ever hurt her, defendant told her that he did not “think so.””. Another victim also voiced concerns about disclosing:

The victim was “confused” on whether she should “really” disclose the molestations to anyone. She did not want anyone to judge her or have her mother be disappointed in her or angry at her. In addition, the victim was concerned about defendant and cared about him and did not want to hurt him.

This passage also indicates what we have labelled “successful grooming”. The victim experienced mixed feelings toward the perpetrator, and confusion. Another victim expressed “being afraid she was also going to jail”. A similar indication of the victim not being fully aware of the wrongness of the abuse is illustrated by a case where a victim realized she had been abused after watching an instructional video at school, and a case whereby the victim’s parents talked to her about sex which led the victim to disclose.

Another victim expressed embarrassment which kept her from disclosing when she became pregnant at twelve because of her father’s abuse. When the abuse was witnessed by a sibling, she expressed relief as she finally had proof of what had been going on so people would believe her. The cost of disclosure of intrafamilial abuse to the victim was evident in several cases. One victim testified she did not have “much of a relationship” with her mother or her siblings since the incidents occurred, and her family was “torn to shreds” because of the defendant’s actions.

There is a large body of research on the effectiveness of threats in ensuring a child’s silence (e.g., Lyon, 1996; Sauzier, 1989), but less is known about more subtle statements perpetrators make to normalize the abuse. Certainly, with younger victims, such statements, and associated acting as if nothing is out of the ordinary or nothing happened, are likely to have a serious impact on a developing child’s schemas regarding the world, their place in it, and other people. However, it also appears that offenders directly targeted the confusion, fear, and embarrassment of children through threats aimed at the likelihood that they will be believed, or how nothing will be the same once they disclose. We found such statements more commonly occurred in the context of intrafamilial abuse, where it is feasible that a disclosure would lead to disruption within the family. Such a threat would be less effective when the perpetrator is a mere acquaintance to the victim. In this regard, it is of particular interest to anticipate what a perpetrator may tell a victim to avoid detection. This is evidenced by a study conducted by Quas et al. (2018), where they found a putative confession (telling a victim: “Offender already told me everything”) was a useful interview technique for eliciting disclosure of abuse details, regardless of the victim’s age. By alleviating a child’s fears about disclosure, which may have been actively nurtured by a perpetrator, this interview

tactic can be further developed to aid disclosure. However, this does require a child to already be in contact with law enforcement.

Other victims reported they did not want to lose the privileges awarded them in return for their silence:

She had not told anyone about the abuse before because defendant would buy her things and tell her that if she told anyone, he would not buy things for her anymore. Victim said defendant bought her a phone and other things she wanted like clothes and shoes, and that he generally "just did more for [her] than he did for the rest of the kids.

We documented the absence of disclosure as successful grooming, and noted several other manners in which abuse became known. In some instances, the abuse was discovered, for example through an adult walking in on the abuse, or finding notes the defendant wrote to the victim. In some cases, the victim contracted an STD at the same time as the perpetrator, or the victim became pregnant as a result of the abuse. On occasion, a victim would disclose only after another victim had already done so, for example, a friend or sibling of the victim. In one case, the abuse was discovered when the victim's sexually inappropriate behavior toward her younger stepbrother caused concern. These findings are consistent with research that shows disclosures may take various forms, such as purposeful, accidental, elicited, behavioral or triggered (e.g., [Alaggia, 2004](#)).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was 1) to introduce a new theoretical framework (MDT) through which various aspects of sexual abuse of children can be studied, and 2) to illustrate how MDT may be used to examine factors that affect the likelihood of disclosures. Through analysis of appeal court cases, information on each MDT component was coded, and a structured snapshot of each case was created.

First, we found that the coding process allowed us to fine-tune several of the codes, making them more specific where possible. For nearly all proposed codes, we found relevant information across multiple cases. This supports the idea that MDT can be used as a theoretical framework to study the complex nature of CSA.

With a focus on disclosure, it appears each MDT component covers abuse characteristics that affect disclosure, and these characteristics do not operate in isolation. Another interesting finding, is that when perpetrators had multiple victims, a repetitive pattern emerged across several components. Some perpetrators used the exact same method to access a child as they moved from one victim to the next. Several used a similar tactic to gain their trust, such as doing the child favors or using bribes. In two instances, even the way abuse took place (as well as the location) was exactly the same across multiple victims. Such a consistency in strategy or modus operandi highlights the importance of a theoretical framework of abuse strategy that allows us to look at multiple characteristics in tandem. [Kaufman et al., 1998](#) Underlined the value of therapists examining behavioral patterns with offenders to aid them in preventing re-offending, or to disrupt offending at an earlier stage ([Cornish, 1994](#)). MDT can provide steps in such an offence chain, for example by focusing on the identification of a vulnerable victim, isolating, or accessing that victim, and using deceptive tactics to earn their trust, resulting in abuse that they would know from prior experience is difficult to detect.

4.1. Implications

The Mimicry Deception Theory framework appears to be useful to map out offending strategies employed by people who sexually offend against children. From this study, a complex picture emerges, where vulnerable children are at risk in multiple ways, as they may be more susceptible to deceptive grooming tactics used by a perpetrator, while they may also be less likely to have someone to disclose to.

Further, from a clinical perspective, creating opportunities to offend may be elucidated by an offence chain that uses the various MDT components to break down the perpetrator's strategy for selecting, grooming, and abusing a child. Given the importance of identifying steps in the offence chain, as highlighted by [Leclerc et al. \(2009\)](#), MDT may also be useful in examining obstacles to offending, such as difficulty integrating into a community, all with an eye to prevention.

Mimicry Deception Theory could be useful in terms of situational crime prevention. [Wortley and Smallbone \(2006\)](#) emphasized the focus of prevention should not solely be on creating safe individuals, but also safe situations. Much research indicates opportunistic behavior in response to situational circumstances, and not necessarily substantial individual differences in sexual deviance that would fully explain sexual abuse of children. However, in addition to opportunism, the offender may also actively create the circumstances that facilitate abuse for example by targeting single mothers, or abusing friends of their own children during sleepovers. These findings provide further support for the importance of situational prevention of sexual abuse of children.

On the victim side, given the increased risk of revictimization later in life, exploring abuse characteristics through MDT in a clinical setting may help victims recognize tactics used by perpetrators, as well as provide a focus for identifying trusted people in the victim's life whom they may turn to in case of victimization. Indeed, [Berliner and Conte \(1990\)](#) noted that providing child victims with a framework to help them understand how offenders behave, may facilitate understanding of what happened to them, and identify strategies to prevent further victimization. However, it must be noted that the responsibility for prevention should not be placed on children, but rather, should extend its scope to adults surrounding the child.

Finally, in terms of research into the complex picture of CSA, MDT seems a helpful framework to systematically extract relevant information from an individual case, which can then be used to test various hypotheses, taking into account the complex interplay between these variables.

4.1.1. Strengths and limitations

This study has a few limitations. First, although the court cases record much detail, not every detail relevant to this study will have

been recorded. As a result, it may be the case that some aspects of the MDT framework were relevant to the cases studied, but if those aspects were not recorded, they were not included in this study. Second, and related to the first, several cases included various allegations that did not lead to prosecutions. On occasion, these were a result of additional victims coming forward years after the abuse, when another victim came forward. Their testimony was used by the prosecution to establish a pattern of conduct in the defendant. In some cases, the defendant admitted to additional victims. Where information of such allegations has been included, we have stated so clearly. Finally, the sample size was limited, although this was by design. Future research should broaden include a larger sample that will allow some of the suggested patterns to be analyzed inferentially.

However, strengths can also be observed. For the most part, each factor could be coded for with the current sample. Through the provision of an organized, theory-based framework, we were able to condense large amounts of qualitative data into a format that would allow complex analyses that seek to elucidate the interplay of various factors related to CSA and their impact on (non)disclosure.

4.1.2. Future directions

The MDT framework can be used to extract relevant information from cases of CSA and organize this information in an objective manner. MDT highlights how various dynamics of abuse manifest and how various components of abuse are manipulated by a perpetrator to facilitate ongoing abuse over a longer period. Future research might apply this framework to a larger dataset to quantitatively analyze strategies that offenders use to 1) gain access to a child and the child's environment, 2) groom the child and the child's environment, 3) maximize the likelihood of abuse going undetected.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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