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Categorizing Complainant-Accused Relationships in Cases of Child Sexual Abuse: The Distinctive Nature of Community Connections

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ABSTRACT

We examined the categorization of relationships between child complainants and accused perpetrators in cases of child sexual abuse (CSA). Researchers that have focused on complainant-accused relationships and other case variables, often combining two extrafamilial complainant-accused relationship categories: Relationships where the accused is connected to the child through their position in the community (i.e. community connections) and relationships where the non-relative accused is known to the child through a connection to the child's family (i.e. non-relative family connections). Using a database of 4,237 Canadian judicial decisions in cases of CSA, we reviewed a subset of 1,515 judicial decisions to explore differences between these two relationship categories. Compared to cases involving non-relative family connections, cases involving community connections had more male complainants, more multiple complainants, older complainants, higher frequencies of abuse, longer durations, and longer delays. We conclude that community and non-relative family connections are distinct relationships that should be separated for analyses in future research. Practical implications of recognizing the distinctiveness of non-relative family and community connection relationship categories in the context of abuse prevention and treatment are also discussed.

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From a very young age I was raised to respect those in authority. I was also taught that there are certain people who are there to help you: doctors, teachers, pastors, police officers, so going to see Nassar . . . that was my belief system, that he was there to help. (Victim D, as cited in Wellman et al., 2021, pp. 323–324)

Larry Nassar, a physician for USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University, repeatedly abused his position of trust with his young female patients for sexual purposes (Wellman et al., 2021, pp. 323–324). Over the course of his career, the self-proclaimed “body whisperer” disguised his sexual

abuse of over 100 female athletes as legitimate medical treatments (Levenson, 2018). Nassar was sentenced to 60 years on federal charges of child pornography and between 40 and 175 years in relation to sexual assault charges (Sarkisova, 2018).

Sadly, Nassar's case of child sexual abuse (CSA) perpetrated by a respected member of the community is not unique (Erooga et al., 2020). Although prominent community members may not fit the standard conceptualization of a typical child abuser, they are uniquely able to manipulate their high-status positions to access, groom, sexually abuse, and conceal this abusive behavior (Erooga et al., 2020). In this paper, we examine the ways in which the relationship between the child and the alleged perpetrator has been operationalized in published research with special attention to those who are connected to the child through their position in the community. We then present analyses on a large sample of CSA criminal cases to see if being connected to the child through the community should be a distinct relationship category or if it can be combined with other non-relative relationship categories as it previously has in prior research.

Complainant-accused relationship categories

Various relationships between child victims and perpetrators are frequently examined in the CSA literature. Given the current paper focuses on criminal prosecutions of CSA, when we discuss our data we use the terms complainant-accused relationship rather than victim-perpetrator relationship because the former are legal terms and capture instances in which a conviction has not yet been made. Therefore, complainant-accused relationship describes how an individual accused of committing CSA is known to the child complainant.

Complainant-accused relationships can be used to describe a study's sample or make comparisons between groups (e.g., intrafamilial versus extrafamilial relationships). In a clinical context, identifying and understanding the relationship between the complainant and accused can be useful for risk assessment and treatment of offenders. For example, one risk factor in the Static-99 is whether the accused sexually abused any unrelated complainants (Phenix & Epperson, 2016). With regard to child complainants, examining the complainant-accused relationship can assist in understanding disclosure patterns (Kogan, 2004), health outcomes (Kiser et al., 2014), and treatment options (Grosz et al., 2000).

Some complainant-accused relationship categories (e.g., stranger and family member) have been defined relatively consistently in the published literature (see Table 1). However, other complainant-accused relationship categories have not been consistently defined in prior research, and we argue that such inconsistencies may lead to misrepresentations in the literature. Specifically, we discuss how the broad categorization of extrafamilial relationships has the

potential to mask the uniqueness of cases that involve accused individuals who are known to the child through their position in the community.

Strangers

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, "stranger danger" became a focus of public discourse due to the increased media attention surrounding abducted and murdered children (Best, 1987). Parents' fear surrounding stranger-perpetrated crimes against children also grew. For instance, Stickler et al. (1991) found 56% of the parents ($n = 200$) were worried about a stranger sexually abusing their child and 72% ($n = 257$) were worried about a stranger abducting their child, despite the risk of a stranger committing such acts being low. When Connolly and Read (2006) reviewed 2064 judicial decisions in Canadian historic CSA cases, strangers accounted for only 2% of the accused individuals. Focus eventually shifted away from the "stranger danger" narrative and toward those who are most likely to commit CSA: individuals familiar to the child (Hahn-Holbrook et al., 2010).

Family members

Intrafamilial CSA can be particularly traumatizing to the child because the accused is someone the child should be able to trust (Horvath et al., 2014). Family members (e.g., parents, grandparents, and uncles) account for approximately 40% of the individuals accused of committing CSA (Fischer & McDonald, 1998; Magalhães et al., 2009). When compared to extrafamilial accused perpetrators, research has consistently shown that intrafamilial accused perpetrators are more likely to target a younger child, repeatedly abuse the child, commit more intrusive sexual acts, and abuse the child for a longer duration (Fischer & McDonald, 1998; Loinaz et al., 2019). Additionally, the trust and (sometimes) caregiving relationship between the child and the accused can mean that delays from the offense to reporting and from the end of abuse to court proceedings can be long. However, the evidence is mixed; intrafamilial abuse has been shown to be associated with longer delays between the abuse and reporting to police (e.g., Cashmore et al., 2017) but also associated with shorter delays between the end of the abuse and court proceedings (e.g., Connolly et al., 2015). The influence of the complainant-accused relationship on delay has primarily been studied when individuals who are connected to the child through their position in the community were categorized in a broad extrafamilial category with other non-relative relationships. As discussed below, this approach may mask some of the effects the complainant-accused relationship has on these cases, which could explain the inconsistent findings.

Non-relative family connections

A potentially important sub-category of accused persons consists of those who are not relatives but are connected to the child through the child's family (e.g., family friend, neighbor, babysitter, parent of child's friend; Connolly & Read, 2006). While research has been conducted on specific subtypes of individuals who meet this classification (e.g., non-relative babysitters; Margolin, 1991), substantially less research has examined this category of accused persons as their own group when making comparisons to other relationships. The limited extant literature suggests that adolescents (aged 12–17) are more likely than younger children to be abused by adults who are connected to the child through the child's family (Giroux et al., 2018). Further, there may be a shorter delay from the end of abuse to court when the accused is connected to the child through the child's family compared to other extrafamilial relationships (Connolly et al., 2015).

Other non-relative connections

As discussed previously, some categories of relationships have been consistently defined in the literature (i.e., parents, relatives, and strangers). However, there remains a substantive group of accused persons who have varying relationships with children that has been inconsistently categorized (see Table 1). Some researchers have created categories labeled familiar adults, unrelated adults, familiar non-family adults, or extrafamilial adults. Importantly, grouping such adults into these broad categories can miss important nuances that may help to better understand risks to children. Here, we argue that there are unique circumstances and challenges in understanding the abuse when the accused has access to children through their status in the community.

Accused individuals who are known to the child through their position in the community may be referred to as "community connections" (e.g., coach, religious leader, teacher, doctor; Connolly & Read, 2006). These accused persons may be similar to those labeled as powerful or professional perpetrators in the existing literature (Erooga et al., 2020; Sullivan & Beech, 2004). This relationship category is full of complexities, which is why community connections cannot be clearly characterized by specific job titles (Erooga et al., 2020). Instead, this category is comprised of accused individuals who build trust within the community and then use their position of authority, hierarchical status, and respectable reputation to gain a child's trust, abuse them, and avert disclosure (Erooga et al., 2020; Higgins & Moore, 2019).

Research has focused on understanding targeted subgroups of respectable community members who commit CSA (e.g., Catholic priests; Terry, 2008). However, as can be seen in Table 1, when researchers directly compare

multiple complainant-accused relationship types, community connections are often combined with other non-relative relationships into a broad category that includes accused that do not have community status. Importantly, prior explorations of community connections as a distinct relationship group have identified several ways in which this relationship category is unique. For instance, Coburn et al. (2019) found males are at a higher risk than females of being abused by adults who are connected to the child through their position in the community. Further, Coburn et al. (2019) found that compared with other complainant-accused relationships, cases involving community connections resulted in longer delays to court, particularly for male complainants.

The notion of community connections is closely related to institutional CSA (i.e., CSA that occurs in an institutional setting or by an institutional official; Blakemore et al., 2017), although our conceptualization of community connections is not limited to institutional settings. Regardless, the institutional CSA literature can provide some guidance for understanding how those connected to the child through their position in the community might differ from other extrafamilial perpetrators. Between 2013 and 2017, the Australian Royal Commission conducted one of the most comprehensive inquiries into institutional CSA (Wright et al., 2017). Based on this investigation, it was estimated that the institutional CSA accounts for approximately 5% of the known reports of CSA (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b). Generally, institutional CSA involves high rates of male victimization (especially by religious figures), long delays to disclosure, and repeated abuse (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b; Sullivan & Beech, 2004). With increasing attention on institutional CSA as a result of several high-profile cases and inquiries, it is important to examine whether researchers are capturing accused individuals with a community connection to the child as a unique complainant-accused relationship category.

Review of complainant-accused relationship categories in field and archival studies

The results from Coburn et al. (2019) suggest that those who are known to the child through their status in the community have characteristics that differentiate them from accused individuals belonging to other non-relative relationship categories. Therefore, we conducted a review of the literature to understand how researchers are typically categorizing complainant-accused relationships and if other researchers have found additional characteristics unique to community connections when comparing these relationships to other groups. We located 20 articles describing a field or archival study with real child complainants that defined and compared various complainant-

accused relationships (see **Table 1**). **Table 1** lists the relationship categories for each study, highlighting the categories which would contain individuals who are known to the child through their position in the community.

As can be seen in **Table 1**, there were seven different categories into which community-connection accused individuals were placed, with acquaintance as the most common relationship category ($n = 10$). Coburn et al. (2019) was the only study reviewed to have a relationship category specifically for community connections; however, it is worth noting that they used the same database as the present paper. Our review indicated researchers often combine accused individuals who are known to the child through their position in the community with other familiar, but unrelated accused individuals to create a broad extrafamilial acquaintance category. However, it is unclear if this methodological approach is appropriate.

Table 1. Categorization of complainant-accused relationship in field and archival studies.

Journal Article	Categorization of Complainant-Accused Relationships
Anderson (2016)	Related (biologically or through marriage), Unrelated
Bourke et al. (2014)	Relative, Acquaintance , Stranger, Other
Bradshaw and Marks (1990)	Parent or Sibling, Step-parent, Member of Extended Family, Known but Unrelated , Stranger
Chopin and Caneppele (2019)	Acquaintance , Stranger
Coburn et al. (2019)	Parent, Other Relative, Non-relative Family Connection, Community Connection , Stranger
Coffey et al. (1996)	Father or Stepfather, Other Relative, Acquaintance , Stranger
Dubowitz et al. (1993)	Biological or Step-parent, Other Relative or Sibling, Other
Hassan et al. (2015)	Family Member, Acquaintance , Unmentioned Acquaintance, Stranger
Hazzard et al. (1995)	Family Members, Acquaintances , Strangers
Hershkowitz et al. (2007)	Familiar , Stranger
Kleban et al. (2013)	Family Members, Acquaintances , Strangers
Pipe et al. (2007)	Immediate family, Other Family, Familiar Nonfamily , Unfamiliar
Lamb et al. (2009)	Immediate Family, Other Family, Familiar , Unfamiliar
Lippert et al. (2009)	Intrafamilial, Extrafamilial
Mohler-Kuo et al. (2014)	Family Member, Boyfriend or Girlfriend, Acquaintance , Stranger
Mwangi et al. (2015)	Family, Partner, Neighbor, Friend, Stranger, Other
Rudin et al. (1995)	Familial Relationships, Friends, Acquaintances , Caretakers, Strangers
Stroud et al. (2000)	Parent or Step-parent, Family Member, Acquaintance , Stranger
Sperry and Gilbert (2005)	Child Peer, Adolescent, Adult Intrafamilial, Adult Extrafamilial
Tremblay et al. (1999)	Immediate family, Extended family, Acquaintances/Friends of Family , Strangers

Note. Bolded terms represent categories that capture community-connection relationships.

Present study

Research comparing complainant-accused relationship groups appears to often combine data related to accused individuals who are connected to the child through their position in the community (e.g., teacher) and other adults who are not related to the child yet are familiar because they are introduced to the child through a family member (e.g., family friend). However, there are reasons to question whether an accused with a community connection to the child might differ from other non-relative accused individuals. For instance,

with a community connection, both the family and the community have placed implicit trust in the accused, which may leave the child with fewer options for disclosure. Such a situation might require different interventions than when the community is independent from the perpetrator. Similarly, community organizations will, or should, have processes in place for prevention, detection, and reporting of abusive behavior that must be navigated. The increasingly targeted attention on institutional CSA provides further justification for the need to examine the role of trusted community organizations in CSA. All of these differences set the stage for exploring whether those who are connected to the child through their position in the community are distinct from other non-relative accused individuals.

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether accused individuals who are unrelated to the child but are familiar due to a connection through the child's family differ from accused individuals who are familiar to the child through their position in the community and if so, whether these differences warrant their separation in the future research when comparing complainant-accused relationships. Identifying and understanding any differences between these two extrafamilial relationship groups is not only important to guide future research but also to better understand where and how sexual abuse is taking place and to assist in the clinical evaluation and treatment of victims and offenders. Given that with community-connection relationships there is a unique power imbalance between the accused and the child, we expected that there would be differences in characteristics related to the complainant, the accused, and the case itself, when compared to cases in which the relationship was a non-relative family connection. However, because much of the research focusing on complainant-accused relationships where the accused is known to the child through a non-relative family or community connection has focused on targeting specific subgroups of these categories (e.g., priests and babysitters) rather than examining these relationship categories as a whole, this study is largely exploratory in nature. As such, no specific hypotheses with regard to the direction or strength of differences were developed.

Method

A total of 4,237 written judicial decisions in Canadian criminal CSA cases in which a legal remedy was sought were obtained from the online Canadian legal database *Quicklaw*. *Quicklaw* contained a large number (approximately 1,858,150 as of October 30th, 2012, when the current data collection was completed; LexisNexis, personal communication, October 30th, 2012) of full-text written judicial decisions when the data were collected. Cases at the Supreme Court of Canada and most provincial appeal courts are published.

Cases from provincial superior and provincial courts are published at the discretion of the judge. While *Quicklaw* does not contain all criminal CSA cases in Canada, the number of published judicial decisions is substantial. It is important to note that some data from the larger dataset of 4,237 Canadian judicial decisions have been published elsewhere. Specifically, some publications have focused on data from court proceedings that took place between the years of 1986 and 2002 and involved only cases of historic CSA (i.e., minimum delay of 2 years between the termination of abuse and the date of the legal proceeding; e.g., Connolly & Read, 2006, 2007; Read et al., 2006). Other publications have used the dataset of 4,237 judicial decisions to analyze some data from both CSA and historic CSA court proceedings that were held between the years 1986 and 2012 (e.g., Coburn et al., 2019; Connolly et al., 2017; Giroux et al., 2018; Vargen et al., 2018).

As our primary variable of interest was the complainant-accused relationship, cases that did not include this information were removed for analyses, leaving 3,752 judicial outcomes. Court proceedings for the present research took place between 1986 and 2012. Cases included pre-trial hearings, trials, appeals, and sentencing decisions. To find cases for the present research, a key-word search containing the words “child” (and variations) and the following: “sexual offense(s),” “sexual assault,” “indecent assault,” “incest,” “rape,” “bestiality,” “buggery” was conducted. Cases meeting our criteria were then coded. For those complainants who had multiple proceedings, the decision made at the highest court level was coded and information from each proceeding was combined to ensure each case appeared only once. In cases involving more than one complainant, each complainant was coded separately.

Coding

Three waves of data collection were undertaken to create the present dataset. In Wave 1, coders reviewed judicial decisions dated from 1986 to 1998 ($N_{complainants} = 1605$), while coders in Wave 2 reviewed judicial decisions dated from 1999 to 2002 ($N_{complainants} = 691$), and coders in Wave 3 reviewed judicial decisions dated from 2003 to 2012 ($N_{complainants} = 1941$). In each wave, the intercoder agreement was calculated on 10% of the cases as a percentage agreement. Disagreements were discussed and agreed upon. Interrater agreement ranged from 83% to 100%. Wave 1 was completed by the last author of this paper, who subsequently trained all coders.

Variables

Only cases where the *complainant-accused relationship* was available were included in the current data. For the present study, additional variables related

to the complainant (*age, gender*), the accused (*age, gender*), and the case (*duration, frequency, number of complainants, intrusiveness, delay to court, verdict*) were coded when available as these variables often appear in the CSA literature with community connections and family connections combined within the same relationship group.

Complainant-accused relationship was first coded into 51 categories and then recoded into five categories: parent, other relative, family connection, community connection, and stranger. For the purposes of the present study, we focused solely on two categories: family connection and community connection. Family connection referred to cases in which the accused was not related to the complainant and was known to them through a connection to the child's family members (e.g., friend of the family). Community connection referred to cases in which the accused was not related to the complainant and was known to them through their position and status in the community (e.g., teacher).

Complainant and *accused age* were coded, in years, when the alleged offense began. *Complainant* and *accused gender* were coded as male and female. *Offense duration* was coded in months from when the alleged offense started until it ended. *Offense frequency* was first coded as a numeric (e.g., three times) or descriptive value (e.g., several occasions), and then recoded as once or more than once. *Number of complainants* was the number of complainants involved in a single case against a single accused and coded as one or multiple. *Offense intrusiveness* was coded, as discussed by the judge, into three levels. Level 1 consisted of fondling over clothes, fondling under clothes, or exposure. Level 2 consisted of masturbation, simulated intercourse, oral sex, digital penetration, or attempted penetration. Level 3 consisted of penile penetration of the vagina or anus. When more than one level of intrusiveness was reported, the most intrusive alleged offense was coded. *Delay to court* was coded in years from the end of the alleged offense until the case was tried at court. For cases that went to trial, *verdict* was coded as convict or acquit.

Results

Of the 1,515 judicial decisions that involved community-connection and family-connection relationships, 62.9% ($n = 953$) of accused individuals were known to the child through a connection to the child's family and 37.1% ($n = 562$) were known to the child through their position in the community. In cases with a family-connection relationship, the accused was most often a friend of the family (38.6%, $n = 268$), followed by a neighbor (13.9%, $n = 132$). In cases with a community-connection relationship, the accused was most often a teacher or principal (40.6%, $n = 228$), followed by a priest or

Table 2. Breakdown of relationship types for family connection and community connection.

		N	% of N
Family Connections		953	
	Family Friend	268	38.6%
	Neighbor	132	13.9%
	Parent of Childhood Friend	121	12.7%
	Babysitter	94	9.9%
	Mother's Boyfriend	80	8.4%
	Friend	71	7.5%
	Employer	55	5.8%
	Boarder in Home	32	3.4%
Community Connections		562	
	Teacher/Principal	228	40.6%
	Priest/Minister	151	26.9%
	Coach	65	11.6%
	Guard (e.g., Probation officer/police officer)	52	9.3%
	Doctor/Dentist	20	3.6%
	Counsellor	18	3.2%
	Psychologist/Psychiatrist	15	2.7%
	Big Brother (Organization)	13	2.3%

minister (26.9%, $n = 151$). See Table 2 for complete breakdowns for each category.

We compared all dependent variables across family and community-connection relationships. A series of *t*-tests was conducted to analyze differences in continuous dependent variables (complainant and accused age, duration of alleged offense, delay to court). A series of chi-squares was conducted to analyze categorical dependent variables (complainant and accused gender, verdict, offense frequency, number of complainants, and offense intrusiveness). All the tests were corrected using the False Discovery Rate (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) and only $ps \leq .001$ were considered statistically significant. See Table 3 for all test statistics, means, and standard deviations of both relationship groups separately and combined.

When the accused in the case was connected to the complainant through their position in the community, the average age of the complainant when the alleged offense began was older than when the accused was known to the complainant through a connection with the child's family. Additionally, there were proportionately more male complainants involved in cases where the accused was connected to the complainant through the community compared to when the accused was connected through the child's family. Compared to cases involving non-relative family connections, the duration of alleged abuse was significantly longer, the delay from end of abuse to court was significantly longer, there were proportionately more repeated abuse cases, and proportionately more cases with multiple complainants when the accused was connected to the child through their position in the community. The average age and gender of the accused did not differ across type of relationship nor did offense intrusiveness or verdict.

Table 3. Comparisons of community connection and family connection across variables related to the complainant, accused, and case.

	Family Connection (n = 953)	Community Connection (n = 562)	Total (N = 1,515)	Test Statistic	p		
Complainant Variables							
Age when offense began (years)	<i>M</i> = 9.78 <i>SD</i> = 3.86	<i>M</i> = 12.07 <i>SD</i> = 3.22	<i>M</i> = 10.55 <i>SD</i> = 3.82	<i>t</i>(1008.32) = -11.21 <i>d</i> = .64 CI [-2.69, -1.89]*	< .001		
Gender							
Female	80.10%	43.90%	66.50%				
Male	19.9%	56.10%	33.50%				
Accused Variables							
Age when offense began (years)	<i>M</i> = 34.18 <i>SD</i> = 13.98	<i>M</i> = 35.80 <i>SD</i> = 10.76	<i>M</i> = 34.84 <i>SD</i> = 12.80	<i>t</i>(869.29) = -1.95 CI [-3.25, 0.02]*	.052		
Gender							
Female	2.50%	1.10%	2.00%				
Male	97.50%	98.90%	98.00%				
Case Variables							
Duration of abuse (months)	<i>M</i> = 17.25 <i>SD</i> = 25.11	<i>M</i> = 22.54 <i>SD</i> = 23.08	<i>M</i> = 19.23 <i>SD</i> = 24.50	<i>t</i>(1327) = -3.83 <i>d</i> = .22 CI [-8.00, - 2.58]	< .001		
Delay from end to court (years)	<i>M</i> = 9.50 <i>SD</i> = 9.75	<i>M</i> = 18.68 <i>SD</i> = 11.23	<i>M</i> = 12. 98 <i>SD</i> = 11.25	<i>t</i>(932.61) = -16.06 <i>d</i> = .87 CI [-10.38, -7.99]*	< .001		
Verdict (for cases that went to trial)							
Convict	78.90%	69.40%	75.50%				
Acquit	21.10%	30.60%	24.50%				
Offense frequency							
Once	55.20%	35.70%	48.20%				
More than once	44.80%	64.30%	51.80%				
Intrusiveness (of first offense)							
Level 1	42.20%	47.00%	44.00%				
Level 2	30.80%	33.50%	31.80%				
Level 3	27.00%	19.40%	24.20%				
Number of complainants							
One	49.70%	19.40%	38.50%				
More than one	50.30%	80.60%	61.50%				

Note. * = Equal variances not assumed. Bolded tests are significant at the *p* < .001 level. Confidence Intervals are 95%.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to determine if it is appropriate to combine those connected to the child through their position in the community and other non-relative accused individuals who are known to the child through a connection to the child's family into one broad extrafamilial relationship category or if differences across variables related to the accused, child, and case warrant the separation of these two complainant-accused relationship categories. Our results indicate that separation of these two relationship categories is important, especially when it comes to reporting complainant-specific and case-specific variables. Based on the 1,515 reviewed CSA judicial decisions, it is clear that compared to cases involving an accused who was known to the complainant through a connection to the complainant's family, cases involving accused individuals known to the child through their position in the community involve a higher percent of male complainants, older complainants, longer durations of abuse, longer delays from abuse end to court, higher frequencies of abuse, and more complainants.

Gallagher (2000) reported that more than half of known institutional CSA cases are perpetrated by individuals from community-based organizations (e.g., school) and smaller proportions of institutional CSA cases occur in foster homes and residential settings. Given that our community-connection category largely consists of community-based organizations, it seems reasonable that our findings would align with the research on institutional abuse. Furthermore, perpetrators known to the child through the community or institutions only account for a small fraction (approximately 5%) of known CSA cases (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b). As a result, patterns associated with non-relative family connections have the potential to fully mask the uniqueness of community connections when these relationship categories are combined.

There are a variety of factors that are unique to community settings, which create additional barriers for a child to disclose CSA. As demonstrated in the opening quote by Victim D, children are taught from a very young age that members of community institutions (e.g., schools and religious institutions) are to be trusted (Wolfe et al., 2003). This trust extends to the child's family and the community (McAlinden, 2006). Furthermore, while the power imbalance between a perpetrator and a child is not unique to institutional CSA, this power imbalance can be considerably larger in institutional CSA (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b). The culture of community organizations may also facilitate and enable the sexual abuse of children. Individuals in community organizations often have unsupervised access to many children. Sexually inappropriate behaviors may be overlooked or normalized if the culture of the institution is overly tolerant or values hypersexuality (Higgins & Moore, 2019). This is especially true for

sporting institutions, as children and youth are often desensitized to sexual conversations in the locker room and sexually inappropriate behaviors can be framed as legitimate coaching practices (e.g., gradual escalation of touching behaviors during the readjustment of an athlete's body position; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017a). Finally, some institutions (e.g., religious institutions) may have a culture, which prioritizes secrecy and self-preservation over the welfare of children (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017b).

From a practical perspective, understanding the unique experiences of children who have been sexually abused by trusted community members compels us to create more targeted prevention and intervention programs. As indicated by the present study and Coburn et al. (2019), accused who are connected to the child through their position in the community victimize proportionally more boys than those in other relationship categories. Therefore, primary prevention programs should teach children, particularly boys, how to identify the early signs of abuse (e.g., grooming) by trusted community members. Additionally, efforts should be made to reduce the unique barriers and stigma discussed above that are associated with sexual abuse in community settings. Our results also indicate that accused individuals who are connected to the child through their position in the community are more likely to abuse multiple children than other non-relative family connections. There are unique circumstances that must be navigated when multiple children are abused by the same individual. In this context, if one child discloses it may potentially "out" other victims who were not otherwise ready to come forward. The trauma associated with being "outed" is a factor that may need to be addressed by clinicians during treatment of children abused by individuals with access to children through their standing in the community. Finally, to prevent future sexual offenses, it is critical to identify and manage offender risks and provide targeted treatment. In this paper, we identified several important differences between accused individuals in these two relationship groups (e.g., propensity to victimize males in cases involving community connections) that have the potential to impact risk assessment and should be considered during the creation of treatment plans for offenders.

Limitations

There are several limitations inherent in archival data. First, this sample only contained Canadian judicial decisions from CSA cases in which a legal remedy was sought. Therefore, these results may not be representative of cases of CSA that do not proceed to court or are never disclosed. Second, although *Quicklaw* provides information on a substantial number of legal decisions, all judges are not required to publish their decisions and the

amount of information provided by judges who do publish their decisions varies and will not always include details that researchers want to study. However, it is likely that the cases that are published were deemed important for those in the legal community and offer a good representation of Canadian CSA cases. Third, although this dataset did not include cases more recent than 2012, our findings on accused individuals who had a community-connection relationship to the complainant are consistent with the current institutional abuse literature. For instance, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017b) reported males were more likely to be victimized, abuse typically started between the ages of 10 and 14, and abuse occurred repeatedly for the majority of survivors. The overlap in case profiles suggests that the findings of our study are consistent with findings from research examining more recent cases. Finally, a limitation for many studies examining complainant-accused relationship categories is that cultural nuances may be masked by the rigid categorization system. In some cultures, the distinction between family member and community figure may not be as clear as in other cultures. In the present study, the cultural backgrounds of the child complainants were not explicitly stated in the judicial decisions and therefore could not be analyzed. However, given that the dataset consists of Canadian judicial decisions, these data can likely be interpreted in an Anglo-North American context.

Conclusion

The distinctive nature of CSA perpetrated by individuals who are connected to the child through their position and status in the community is clear. Many of these nuances are lost when this relationship category is combined with other extrafamilial relationships, such as non-relative family connections. Therefore, for those not already doing so, we strongly encourage the separation of community-connection relationships from more broadly defined relationship categories (extrafamilial, familiar, and acquaintance). We acknowledge that various barriers (e.g., small sample size and lack of access to community connection cases) may restrict some researchers from implementing our recommendation. As an alternative, those researchers could indicate that their results may not generalize to cases where the accused is known to the child through their position in the community. Combining family-connection and community-connection relationships into one broad extrafamilial category likely masks unique characteristics of each and may inhibit our ability to provide meaningful recommendations for future research, prevention efforts, assessment and treatment of offenders, and public policymaking. Thus, researchers should begin (or continue) to treat the community-connection relationship



category as distinct from others, whenever feasible. As stated by Smallbone (2017), “effective prevention . . . begins with a clear and valid concept of the problem – who is involved, and where, when, how, and why it occurs” (p.100).

Disclosure statement

The authors have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Given that this research relies only on publicly available information that is legally accessible, it was exempt from review by the Research Ethics Board. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [K.A.B.], upon reasonable request.

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