The antiepistemology of organised abuse: Ignorance, exploitation, inaction

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Abstract: Organised abuse, in which multiple adults sexually abuse multiple children, has an important role to play in the production of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) but has been relegated to the margins of criminological concern. This paper presents the findings of an international survey of 74 adults who described childhood victimisation in CSAM and organised abuse, emphasising the relationship between organised abuse and entrenched ignorance of it. The paper identifies the multiple zones, practices and structures of ignorance that render organised abuse unknowable and advocates for strategic forms of knowledge production in which ignorance features as a provocation towards information-seeking rather than as a defence mechanism against intolerable realities.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, exploitation, epistemology, ignorance, knowledge, policy

Introduction

The availability of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the internet has expanded rapidly, well beyond the capacity of law enforcement and relevant agencies to contain. Since 2008, the amount of CSAM reported to US authorities has increased by 50% per annum (Bursztein et al., 2019), with 21.7 million notifications in 2020 (NCMEC, 2021). As governments contemplate more robust regulation and policy development at the national and international level, it has become apparent that the voices and experiences of CSAM victims and survivors have been largely absent within global dialogue on responses to CSAM. Most children depicted in CSAM are never identified by authorities (ECPAT & INTERPOL, 2018) while survivors of child sexual abuse who self-identify that their abuse was recorded face systemic barriers to recognition or access to health care and the justice system (C3P, 2017; Salter, 2013). These barriers include a pervasive scepticism about the credibility of children and adults who report "organised child sexual abuse"; that is, cases of sexual abuse in which multiple adults conspire to sexually abuse multiple children (Salter, 2013). Since at least the 1970s, networks of child sexual abusers have been identified as significant producers of CSAM however research and policy responses to organised abuse stalled in the face of media and scholarly backlash (Nelson, 2016). Such entrenched scepticism persists to the present day and sits uneasily alongside the consolidation of evidence that child sexual abusers in diverse contexts have a marked propensity to collaborate in the exploitation of children and the production of CSAM (Cheit, 2014).

In this article, we examine the responses of 74 organised abuse survivors who took part in an international survey about CSAM victimisation experiences. They constituted almost half of all respondents to the survey. By examining their accounts of abuse, the obstacles they experienced to disclosure and their descriptions of criminal justice intervention, we situate

their experiences of CSAM production within a broader milieu of entrenched ignorance of organised abuse. The pervasiveness of ignorance about organised abuse evident in our analysis calls attention to what Galison (2004: 237) has termed "antiepistemology"; the processes by which knowledge is obscured, deferred or simply never produced. The paper theorises the antiepistemology of organised abuse, arguing that inaction over organised abuse is maintained by zones, practices and structures of ignorance that have obfuscated the central role of organised abuse in the production of CSAM. We conclude that the goal of reducing CSAM and identifying victims is unlikely to be achieved without reconsideration of the status of organised abuse as a legitimate child protection concern. The article advocates for a stance of epistemic humility in responses to child sexual abuse, in which ignorance acts as a provocation towards information-seeking and clarification rather than as a defence mechanism against intolerable realities.

The production of ignorance of organised abuse

Ignorance, silence and disbelief have well recognised roles in facilitating the abuse of children. Child sexual abusers themselves are prolific producers of ignorance about their own offending. They not only deny the abuse that they commit, but they often engage in what Sykes and Matza (1957) have called "techniques of neutralisation" in an effort to rationalise their abuse. Child abusers may seek to mask their offending by denying any harm to the child, by projecting responsibility onto the child, or by seeking to discredit those who have accused them, and in the process reframing their abuse as something else entirely (Spraitz and Bowen, 2016). These deformations of knowledge are amplified by institutions and communities who employ a variety of techniques to minimise and rationalise child sexual abuse. For example, Keenan's (2011) study of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy examines how the Catholic Church denied and normalised clergy abuse within social and political structures

that were amenable to such manipulations of knowledge. These forms of denial may be reflective of a desire to protect a particular organisation or community while providing a "defence mechanism for coping with guilt, anxiety and other disturbing emotions aroused by reality" (Cohen, 2001, p 5).

In his seminal paper on the sociology of ignorance, Smithson (1985, p 152) describes the ways in which social and political forces can influence, pressure or coerce people not to pay attention to particular issues, not to acquire certain kinds of information, and not to process information in particular ways. In an effort to destabilise structures of ignorance of child sexual abuse, feminism and allied social movements emphasised the importance of "breaking the silence" (Whittier, 2009), while child protection advocates engaged in a range of knowledge production processes, including victimisation surveys and clinical studies, designed to correct the history of scientific inattention to the harms of child sexual abuse. Opposition to these efforts have taken the form of a range of what Smithson (1985) called "ignorance games", or strategies to project ignorance, including epistemic, ontological and informational challenges to the claims of child abuse survivors, advocates and researchers. Children and adults complaining of sexual abuse have been accused of suffering from "false memories", effectively delegitimising their capacity to remember or testify accurately to their experiences (Campbell, 2003). The expertise of child protection workers and mental health workers who support sexual abuse victims has been challenged by theories of "moral panic", which allege that members of the caring professions are vectors of hysteria and social contagion (Pilgrim, 2018). The very nature of "child sexual abuse" itself has been contested by post-structural theorists who have argued that the concept and harms of abuse are mostly or entirely relative to the historical moment (Alcoff, 1996). The accumulation of data indicating that child sexual abuse is prevalent and harmful has been contradicted by those

claiming that abuse is less common, not necessarily harmful and can even be beneficial (Dallam, 2002).

As expanding professional and public acknowledgement of child sexual abuse has been contested through the active production of doubt and ignorance, a full accounting of the forces that shape knowledge of child sexual abuse should address both epistemological and *anti*epistemological structures. Antiepistemology recognises that gaps in knowledge and silences within discourses are not mere absences but rather the product of power relations (McGoey, 2012). In the case of child sexual abuse, Nelson (2016) identifies how some forms of child sexual abuse have become knowable as objects of inquiry, while other forms remain submerged and subject to intensive processes of delegitimation and ignorance production. She specifically identifies organised abuse as a longstanding gap in criminological policy, practice and research, linked to the widespread promulgation of scepticism about reports of organised abuse by child victims, adult survivors, social workers and therapists. Organised abuse[1] was first identified as a specific category of child maltreatment from the early 1970s under the now-outdated rubric of "sex rings", as law enforcement investigations in the United States and the United Kingdom began uncovering networks of perpetrators who produced CSAM (Berenbaum et al., 1984). These cases prompted widespread concern in the community amidst the proliferation of CSAM both "under" and "over" the counter (McCarthy & Moodie, 1981). CSAM was criminalised as a specific category of illegal content in many jurisdictions by the late 1970s and early 1980s, coinciding with increasing

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[1] The concept of organised abuse is related to but distinct from notions of "child sexual exploitation" and "trafficking". Legislative definitions of child sexual exploitation emphasise the presence of payment or inducements in sexual abuse. Such definitions have been subject to long-standing criticism because they can exclude familial perpetrators of organised abuse despite the evidence that parents are over-represented in the sexual exploitation of prepubescent children (Kelly & Regan, 2000). Definitions of "trafficking" vary between jurisdictions with significant implications for the investigation and prosecution of organised abuse (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021) but the term tends to emphasise payment or inducement with similar limitations to those outlined above regarding child sexual exploitation.

public awareness and broader reforms of child protection and criminal justice responses to child abuse and neglect.

As child abuse notifications escalated in the 1980s, child protection authorities in the United States, United Kingdom and other Anglo-European countries began encountering organised abuse cases with increasing frequency, alongside complaints of CSAM production (Bibby, 1996; Hechler, 1988). The investigation and prosecution of organised abuse presented common challenges across jurisdictions. Organised abuse cases were typically detected inadvertently and accidentally, and in some cases, a lack of preparedness, and the absence of specialist protocols or inter-agency agreements on organised abuse resulted in procedural errors that compromised investigations (Cheit, 2014). Organised abuse cases were characterised by staggered disclosures over a period of time by children reporting interlinked experiences of abuse, and agencies were frequently unable to identify all the victims and perpetrators believed to be involved in a case (Gallagher, 1998). So called "bizarre" practices including sadistic abuse (involving the torture of children) and ritual abuse (in which offenders abuse children in the context of ritualistic ordeals) were particularly troubling features (Cheit, 2014; Nelson, 2016). In organised abuse cases, it was typical that children would disclose the recording of the abuse, although the physical media (that is, photos and video tapes) were not always recovered by investigators. Gallagher (1998) recognised the seizure of CSAM as an acute problem in organised abuse investigations, due to "the ability and propensity of perpetrators to conceal, remove or destroy child pornography once they learn of police inquiries" (p 29).

Academic and media commentary has generally failed to engage with the complexity of organised abuse investigations. To the contrary, a hegemonic discourse emerged in the 1990s,

spanning the mass media and academy, in which organised abuse allegations became emblematic of a child abuse "witch hunt" (Cheit, 2014). Media content analyses in the United States and United Kingdom have found that media attention on "false allegations" in the 1990s came to eclipse coverage of child abuse as a whole, with a particular focus on organised abuse allegations (Beckett, 1996; Kitzinger, 2004). Sociologists and criminologists alike concluded that such allegations are indicative of "moral panic" (Jenkins, 1992) since "[t]here are, after all, no paedophile rings" (Pratt, 2009, p. 70). This framing of organised abuse as indicative of social hysteria and confabulation has persisted to the present day in the media and academy (Nelson, 2016). A key challenge is that organised sexual abuse is, fundamentally, irrational. Child victims and adult survivors are often disclosing sexual and sadistic behaviours that do not make sense either to victims or bystanders, and they may not disclose in a linear and coherent fashion (Gallagher, 1998). In that sense, knowledge of organised abuse involves knowledge of the irrational. However, knowledge is often conflated with rationality, such that irrationality suggests non-knowledge or worthless knowledge (Bernstein, 2009). When conflated with "bizarreness", as it so often has been in criminological and other scholarly literature (Cheit, 2014), knowledge of organised abuse is easily confused with its opposite: a form of non-knowledge, such as a fraud, hoax or confabulation.

Somewhat paradoxically, the sceptical position on organised abuse was cemented in the 1990s even as the popularisation of the internet made visible the scale of demand for CSAM, and the propensity of child abusers to network with one another (Jenkins, 2001). One of the first Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) operations into the use of technology in CSAM was the investigation of online criminal networks in 1994 called "Operation Innocent Images". They found that organised child exploitation groups had moved their activities

online to message boards and chat rooms, both to share CSAM and groom victims. The FBI concluded that they had uncovered an '...alarming new trend: sexual exploitation of children via computers' (FBI History, n. d.). Today, contemporary research into CSAM reveals dynamics that are remarkably similar to organised abuse allegations: a preponderance of pre-pubescent victims, often exploited by parents or family members connected to larger networks of abusers, and the presence of "bizarre" and torturous abuse (C3P, 2017; Seto, Buckman, Dwyer, & Quayle, 2018). Even ritual abuse, undoubtedly the most controversial element of organised abuse disclosures, has been substantiated in prosecuted child abuse cases that include the manufacture of CSAM (e.g. Morris, 2011). A review of United States arrest data for multi-perpetrator, technology-facilitated sexual abuse cases involving multiple perpetrators has highlighted the persistence of family-based and community-based organised abuse into the internet age, as well as the emergence of abuse networks that form through online connections (Wolak, 2015). However, evidence of organised abuse has yet to be thematized as a legitimate subject of criminological inquiry. Rather, adjacent areas of knowledge continue to grow - for example, online exploitation or street-based "grooming" has attracted considerable attention – addressing particular dimensions of organised abuse, but rarely drawing the evidence together into a holistic picture that encompasses the entirety of the phenomenon.

In the absence of information about organised abuse – or perhaps more accurately, in the presence of ignorance of organised abuse – responses to the proliferation of CSAM and sexual exploitation more generally lack relevant information about an important pattern of child sexual abuse. The aim of this paper s to examine the specific CSAM production scenarios identified by the 74 organised abuse victims in the C3P survey (C3P, 2017), with a focus on their experiences of abuse, disclosure, help-seeking and criminal investigation. In

doing so, the paper develops an antiepistemology of organised abuse, recognising the impact of ignorance and doubt upon the experiences of survey respondents, and outlining epistemic strategies to acknowledge and address the multiple forms of ignorance that impact upon organised abuse scholarship and investigations.

Methodology

The report is based on quantitative and qualitative data drawn from 74 organised abuse survivor survey responses (C3P, 2017). C3P is a registered charity dedicated to child protection and safety who run Cybertip.ca, Canada's official tipline for reporting online sexual exploitation and unlawful images and videos of children. C3P designed and distributed the survey online through social media and emails to key international non-government organisations and stakeholders in the response to CSAM. The survey was available online from January 2016 and 150 responses had been received by July 2017. C3P published an extensive analysis of this data in a publicly available research report (C3P, 2017). The 74 organised abuse survivors were identified through an analysis of their open text responses to survey questions. In their report, C3P (2017, p 74) explained that "the theme [of organised abuse] naturally emerged from the responses received". The first author was approached by C3P who requested that he undertake a secondary analysis of this data.

Institutional approval for this study was received from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee (HC190490), and the first author undertook an analysis of the organised abuse data while a resident scholar at C3P in 2019. The survey was designed to gather simple demographic data (nationality, age) and inclusion criteria (specifically, being over the age of 18, and having experienced the recording of child sexual abuse), before going to ask a range of optional questions about abuse experiences, disclosure, any involvement with child protection, police and criminal or civil prosecution, experiences of mental health

care and the ongoing impacts of CSAM and child sexual abuse. While some questions required only a yes/no response and some provided multiple choice options, most questions allowed the respondent to answer the question in her/his own words and language. The survey was made available in English, French, Dutch and German, and responses were translated into English for analysis.

The C3P analyst team undertook statistical analysis of key questions, which are presented below as simple frequencies. The first author imported the text of the 74 organised abuse survey responses into NVivo, a software program for the analysis of qualitative data, which enables researchers to assign 'codes' to lines of text. The survey responses were then subject to a thematic analysis which aimed to identify similarities and differences between participant experiences and descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a focus on the scenarios and incidents of CSAM production and organised abuse, perpetrator behaviour and strategies, patterns of disclosure and non-disclosure, and experiences of intervention (including police investigation and prosecution). After a brief overview of the demographics of participants, these themes are drawn out below, with a focus on their implications for criminal justice policy and practice and victim support. Survey participants are identified according to gender identity, age range and country of residence, however care has been taken to ensure that participants are not identifiable.

Findings

The majority of organised abuse participants (87%) identified as female, with 9% identifying as male while 4% did not respond to the question about gender. 49% of participants lived in the Netherlands at the time of abuse, 24% lived in Germany, 10% identified more than one European country, 8% lived in the United States and the remainder identified other

countries.[2] 28% were aged between 18 - 29, 30% between 30-39, 31% between 40-49 and the remaining 11% aged 50 or older. On the whole, survey participants reported very serious abuse that began at an early age and persisted over a long period of time. 82% of the organised abuse cohort reported the initiation of sexual abuse prior to four years of age and 47% reported that their sexual abuse continued after the age of 18. 8% of respondents indicated that their abuse was ongoing at the time of the survey.[3] Survey respondents lived with a significant level of psychiatric illness and distress, with 68% (n=50) reported experiencing or receiving a diagnosis of a dissociative condition, most often dissociative identity disorder.[4] 60 participants answered an optional question about their participation in paid employment, with 50% reporting they were too unwell to work and 22% reporting that they had difficulty holding down a job.

Scenarios of organised abuse

Familial organized abuse

82% of participants described organized abuse originating in their family. Most often, they described the involvement of their father, or their father and mother, within a network of perpetrators that typically included the extended family, family 'friends' and other abusers. For some participants, it appears that the production of CSAM and the trafficking of children was a significant source of family income. They recounted how their father and/or both parents were emotionally uninvolved and disinterested in their children beyond their role in the production of abuse material. The following quote was typical of such an arrangement:

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[2] The geographic distribution of participants likely reflects the differential success of survey recruitment strategies across jurisdictions rather than a specific concentration of organised abuse activity in one country.
[3] Ongoing abuse into adulthood by the same or similar group of perpetrators is a common report amongst adults disclosing organised sexual abuse (Saltel, 2017).
[4] Dissociation refers to the separation of psychological processes that are normally related, and is understood as a psychological adaptation to childhood circumstances of disorganised attachment and trauma. Dissociative identity disorder is a common outcome of early, extreme child abuse and neglect, and is characterised by two or more distinct personality states that recurrently exert control over an individual's behaviour, as well as amnesia for life events that cannot be explained by ordinary forgetting (ISSTD, 2011).

There was no traditional family life. Contact with our parents was mainly characterized by violence or otherwise, we were left alone while the parents did some other work. In principle, the entire family life was influenced by violence. The abuse acts were planned at the kitchen table such as other families plan a family excursion. We got instructions on what we had to do. (Woman, mid 30s, Germany)

Other participants described more ad hoc arrangements in which their fathers would abuse them at home and routinely made them available for abuse in other contexts. Such arrangements were sometimes camouflaged from their mothers who were otherwise unaware of the abuse and exploitation of their child.

My father simply at home when he put me to bed, he raped me then, that happened almost as long as I know. And occasionally, early in the morning, he took me with him in his work van to places where there were other men. I was abused there. When I was 11, I was very occasionally taken to an attic and put under blazing lights (floodlights) and then men advanced on me. All kinds of things were flashing, photos, films. And then they made me do all kinds of things like a whore. There is so much shame, deep anguish in me. Staying silent. (Woman, late 40s, Netherlands)

A subset (n=4) indicated that the primary perpetrator was an uncle (three participants) or a brother (one participant) in which abuse took place unbeknownst to their parents. For example, a woman from the Netherlands in her 20s described how her uncle abused her as a child under the guise of taking her on excursions or picking her up before and after school. As she got older, she said "my parents both worked full-time and it was easier for him to come and collect me or come to my place because my parents worked". She went on to explain:

I was introduced/passed on to male strangers. Couldn't exactly place that as a child perhaps but as an adult, I suspect that those were contacts from the paedophilia world

who took me away or were allowed to use me perhaps in exchange for payment … at his place, my place, his garage, an improvised space a few kilometres from his home, in houses of various different men (contacts of my uncle), in the car.

In her survey responses, this participant stated that her mother has since told her that she suspected the abuse but was uncertain as to how to confront her own brother. Families emerged consistently in survivor reports as sites of organised and often sadistic exploitation, embedded within broader criminal economies in which significant profit and other gains could be made from CSAM production.

Extrafamilial organised abuse

A smaller group of survivors (n=9) described extra-familial organised abuse by men in the neighbourhood (n=3), a babysitter (n=2) a family friend (n=2) and a priest (n=1). These survivors reported being opportunistically targeted by an offender who, once he was confident that the abuse would not be uncovered, trafficked the child to a larger group of men. For example, a woman from the Netherlands, now in her 30s, described being sexually abused by a local priest and his friends from the ages of six to thirteen. Given the priest's status in the community, "it was an honour to be chosen by him to go on little trips" and she was taken to a local villa for abuse and CSAM production. She was given specific instructions by the priest as to how to pose and act during CSAM recording, which included being shown adult pornography. She concluded that the abuse material was being made to order:

He made money off it, but I understood that only later. That he sold it. I had to smile nicely and "pretend I liked it just like those women in the movie" because that was what the men who would get it, wanted to see. Sometimes they did not want it at all as an adult girl, but wanted as much crying as possible. So I just had to deliver what

was asked from me. And that was the reason I quite soon understood it was meant for other people. (Woman, early 30s, Netherlands)

Survey responses suggested that, in some cases, prior trauma increased their risk of being subjected to organised abuse. For instance, a male survivor described multiple incidents of childhood abuse, including opportunistic offending by a babysitter and a family friend, prior to organised abuse. As a teenager, he was introduced to another offender by a school friend. They would go to the offender's home to play computer games, smoke marijuana and drink alcohol. The abuse took place in the offender's home, including naked photography. The survivor said that "the offender was friends with other pedophiles who visited in his home, and he visited them at their home, and sometimes I was taken there". He described how the offender network maintained his silence:

> They played with my emotions and my guilt feelings; that I must not tell it to anybody, or the offender would run into problems. And that is something you don't want on your conscience as a young boy because after all, he is your friend who gives you food, money and trips. And who became a friend of our family and extended family. It was an emotional trap, a chokehold. I was so manipulated that I thought: what he wants (the abuse) is good and talking about it is bad... because it will lead to problems. (Male, late 40s, Netherlands)

Family circumstances could also contribute to a child's vulnerability to extra-familial exploitation. For instance, one survivor described how her mother fell ill when she was seven, and her family arranged for a neighbour to pick her up from school. He would then take her to a local park where he sexually abused her. This initial period of abuse persisted for the duration of her mother's illness and did not involve other perpetrators. However, at the age of twelve, she struck up what she described as a "boyfriend" relationship with a local boy, who was being used to recruit other children for a paedophile ring. She described seven

years of sexual exploitation that included the production of CSAM, becoming alienated from her family who did not detect her abuse at the time.

The challenges of disclosure as a child

Of the sample who completed an optional question about disclosure (n=60), almost one third (31%) reported disclosing their abuse as a minor. However, abuse only ceased for one-third of the disclosing group. In open-ended questions, survivors expanded on their reluctance to disclose as children, and failures to protect them when they did.

The power of offenders

In the context of familial organized abuse, the adults that victims were closest to – their parents – were also responsible for their abuse, which presented major obstacles to disclosure. They were attached to their parents but also deeply fearful of them. Their parental abusers wielded socially legitimised authority over them in such a way as to make disclosure difficult and dangerous. In the following excerpt, a survivor suggested that she tried to disclose multiple times as a child, however she was not believed because her family convinced others she was untrustworthy:

> I was trying to tell teachers and the doctor but my family was so convincing that I was a terrible person/kid and so no one believed me. Till my breakdown after the birth of my child and the last time I tried to kill myself, my new doctor believed me and send me directly to a psychologist and she helped me. (Woman, early 40s, Netherlands)

One survivor from Germany described her trepidation as a child when her school circulated the number of a phone line for abused children. As much as she wanted to call the number, she was frightened that her sexually abusive parents might come across the number on her phone bill or electronic records. She felt unclear about how the phone line could help her

escape the organised abuse orchestrated by her parents. Ultimately, she never called the number.

> There was the child abuse hotline. In school, they said the telephone number would not be shown on the telephone bill. The whole time I asked myself about the display on the phone, if it would then be stored there under the last calls and if yes, whether and how you can delete that. I didn't have the courage to ask. Furthermore, it wasn't clear to me how people should help on the telephone. (Woman, early 20s, Germany)

Disclosure has long been an important benchmark in child protection and criminal justice investigations into child sexual abuse, however disclosure was an extremely fraught undertaking for survey participants. They not only risked the destruction of their family unit and the loss of their attachments to their parents, but they had often been subject to a campaign of terrorisation in order to prevent them from disclosing. Key themes of threats, violence and blackmail are explored further in the following sections.

Threats and violence

The survivor group was extensively threatened to maintain their silence and to coerce them into abuse. The most common threat mentioned by the survivor group was death threats, followed by threats to harm other family members or children in their stead. They mentioned witnessing the killing of pets and other animals. In the context of abuse, one survivor was shown photos of dead and mutilated children:

> If I were to not cooperate properly then measures would always ensue. I was shown pictures of horribly mutilated children. Later I figured out that those might have been pictures taken for some other purpose. But the way they told it they were children that had been with them and hadn't listened well. (Woman, early 40s, Netherlands)

Survivors described experiences of torture as children, including electric shock and deprivation of food and water if they did not comply with abuser demands. Refusal to obey could also result in another child being harmed:

> Many times, another child was also picked out and I had to watch how the child was raped and tortured and I was told that it was all my fault. They then also showed the abuse images to me later, too. Most of the time, I could not stand seeing how another child was tortured because of me and then I did everything "voluntarily". (Woman, early 20s, Germany)

Childhood horror and fear followed survivors to the present day and were an effective guarantee of their silence. As adults, participants continued to fear for their safety:

> My abuser said that he was like God and could see me wherever I went. If I told, he would kill my family, and then there would be no one left to protect me. He would be free to abuse me without any restraint … Yes, I am terrified of him to this day. (Woman, early 40s, Canada)

Such threats and violence have an instrumental function in controlling and silencing children in the context of sexual exploitation however the degree of traumatisation disclosed by survey participants suggests that offender groups were strongly motivated to hurt children. Their childhoods were characterised by overwhelming fear for their lives that followed them into adulthood, and remained acute since, in most cases, their perpetrators had not been identified or charged by police.

Shame and fear relating to abuse recordings

Survey respondents described the recording of their abuse with deep shame and fear that any individual, including a police officer, might view those images. These images captured not only sexual abuse but also forced perpetration and other acts intended to engender feelings of complicity and guilt. One survivor explained:

> If the perpetrators push you into the role of the perpetrator (that is, require you to abuse others yourself), then you're even more likely to be silent, because you ultimately feel more of a perpetrator than a victim. If they furthermore have that on film, then you go totally mute. (Female, mid 30s, Belgium)

In the excerpt below, a survivor discussed her fear that, if she disclosed her abuse, others would see abuse images in which she was forced to feign enjoyment. Sometimes, the experience of abuse was physically pleasurable. Like many other survivors, she assumed that third parties would, once exposed to her images, agree that she was as "badly depraved" as the perpetrators insisted:

> I thought everybody would then see what I was really like, badly depraved. We also had to imitate orgasms and that made me think they'd think I was to blame. That was also the confusing part it often felt good too. You learn to use your body so it will hurt the least and even give you some pleasure and then that's right there recorded on film. (Woman, early 40s, Netherlands)

Perpetrators were aware of the shame that victims felt about the images and used this shame as a fulcrum of control and manipulation. They threatened to release images if victims didn't do what they wanted, or if victims disclosed. Burdened by feelings of humiliation and the sense of being implicated in their own abuse, survivors described refusing to disclose and, in some cases, even concealing evidence of their own abuse. This survivor went so far as to delete images of her abuse after the death of her father:

> After the main perpetrator passed away and I helped packing away his things I found the abusive material on his computer - I do not understand to this day why I looked at his computer. In my panic, I deleted his hard drive but it was clear from then on what had happened and that it was recorded and distributed. (Woman, late 20s, Germany)

As previously mentioned, it can be very challenging for law enforcement to locate CSAM produced in particular cases of organised abuse, due to the propensity of perpetrators to hide or destroy evidence (Gallagher, 1998). However, these survey responses point to an additional challenge, which is that victims may be strongly motivated to conceal CSAM of their own abuse due to its deeply traumatic associations.

Social and institutional cultures of ignorance

Despite growing up in different countries, and of varying ages, all participants were abused in a social and legal milieu in which organised abuse was not named or understood as such. As a result, they were provided with few opportunities to meaningfully disclose the particulars of their abuse, nor did they receive proactive inquiries that might have uncovered the scale of their exploitation. Some survivors stated that they would have told someone about their abuse and its recording if someone had thought to ask. A woman in her 20s from Canada said:

> I thought about it [disclosure] everyday. If teachers or someone had been more involved with me and had a bond with me explaining early on what's right and what's not. Being a little more direct, making sure kids actually understand what you're teaching them and that they won't get into trouble. More reassurance. If I had a good relationship with someone and if they asked me directly I might have told. If I thought I would be believed. The kid seems to have to prove it to be believed instead of being believed until proven otherwise.

Such excerpts emphasise the importance of asking children directly about their safety and need for support. However, other survivors described refusing to disclose after being asked direct questions about abuse when they were children. This was partly out of fear, but also due to dissociation. When escape from abuse is impossible, the child may cope by feeling that the abuse is happening to someone else and compartmentalising her recollections of abuse so that she is able to function in her day-to-day life. In the following quote, a survivor

described the conundrum where a severely abused child can only learn at school if they "don't know" about the abuse:

> [T]here is little point in asking children direct questions. That child will deny things. Such a child has a whole lot of reasons for that. The first is that the child is at school and hence far removed from the abuse and the maltreatment. They have arithmetic or grammar on their minds and can only do that if they don't know all the other things for the moment. (Woman, early 70s, Netherlands)

It is common for survivors of organised abuse to describe their childhoods in the dissociative terms of "living in two worlds", in which they were able to function at school by "splitting off" their awareness of their organised abuse (Salter, 2013). However, Solinksi (2017) situates the dissociative adaptations of abused children within broader social matrixes of "not knowing", in which bystanders facilitate the abuse of the child through their own processes of denial and disinterest. The apparent contradictions presented by the two quotes above, in which one respondent emphasises the need for direct inquiry into child safety, and the other suggests that such inquiry might be deflected by the dissociated victim, can be resolved through the recognition that they emerge from contexts in which organised abuse was not named, recognised or prioritised. The generational and geographic differences between the two survey respondents are indicative of the persistence and wide-spread nature of institutionalised ignorance of organised abuse.

Experiences of detection and investigation

Of the 60 participants who answered an optional question about disclosure, 10% reported that their abuse was discovered by a third party, 4% reported that another victim of the same offender disclosed, and 3% of survivors reported that their images were discovered. Experiences of detection, investigation and prosecution were diverse and complicated.

Multiple perpetrators were involved in their abuse, which could oblige them to appear in court multiple times, in the knowledge that images of their abuse had been shown to the judge and sometimes to the jury. This was deeply traumatising given the overwhelmingly humiliating associations that many participants expressed regarding images of their abuse. This vulnerability was not well understood by criminal justice personnel. For example, one survivor recounted that, as a teenager, she and her mother were shown images of her own abuse by police in the course of their investigation of her father's offending:

> Viewing these and seeing my mother view them was one of the most horrible experiences of my life. It was shameful for me. I can never unseen those and neither can my mother and they will haunt us both forever. I so wish this part of the process of prosecuting my abuser had not happened. (Woman, 20s, United States)

This quote underscores the lack of structured decision-making and trauma-informed practice in the management of organised abuse and CSAM investigations, with police and other criminal justice personnel making decisions with significant consequences for victims without necessarily taking their needs and wellbeing into account. Discovery of organised abuse was a momentous and at times catastrophic moment in the life course of a young person. While criminal justice intervention could bring the exploitation to an end, it could also catalyse the unravelling of family ties and safety as the extent of the child's abuse came to light. One woman in her forties from North America described how the detection of her exploitation by her father while she was a teenager triggered the collapse of her remaining family relationships. While her mother was not directly implicated in her abuse, she described her mother as resentful of the consequences of the investigation for her life and reputation and blamed her daughter. Meanwhile, her brother was frightened and angry that his own sexual victimisation by his father might come to light. This excerpt reinforces the brittle and dysfunctional dynamics that can prevail in sexually abusive family environments:

My mother stopped speaking to me because she was sure my case was going to "be big" and make it in the news and "ruin" her "reputation" at work. My brother, upon my disclosure that the police were investigating, said: "If you tell anyone that I know anything I will beat your ass so bad you won't be able to get out of bed in the morning". Homelife only became more unstable and I was seen as the source of problems. (Woman, early 40s, United States)

Following the imprisonment of her father, this respondent described escalating family conflict over the course of her adolescence, culminating in a period of homelessness that she attributed to her mother's hostility and resentment. Her experience illustrates the serious implications and lasting consequences of criminal justice interventions for children subject to CSAM and organised abuse, with ramifications for their basic attachments to parents and family, and their education, housing and life outcomes. Nonetheless, disclosure and detection were profoundly symbolic and meaningful to survivors, and the decision *not* to proceed with charges could be damaging. In the case of one survivor, police decided not to lay charges against her father. Decades later, this decision still had a profound psychological impact on her, reinforcing the disregard and dehumanisation of her organised abuse.

Having been abused for my entire childhood and into my early adolescence, I often felt like that was the only purpose I served...to be this sort of toy to men, this thing to be used and re-used. That this role was my only worth. The dropping of charges felt like validation of those feelings...almost like the police and district attorney had signed a permission slip, a waiver that anyone could do as they please to my body without consequence. (Woman, early 40s, United States)

Half of the sample who answered the question on disclosure first verbally disclosed in adulthood, however, no participant reported any charges being laid as a result of their reports

as adults. Some survivors described being actively dissuaded from pursuing their complaint by police, on the basis that their evidence would not likely meet the threshold for prosecution. For many survivors, this was the expected outcome. They did not feel supported or believed as children and anticipated that they would not be as adults. Indeed, the prospect of disbelief was, in and of itself, profoundly retraumatising and an obstacle to disclosure. As one woman stated:

> During the time when it happened, no one noticed it. And the ones who knew did nothing about it. I was too scared of punishment or of being killed. Later on, it seemed absurd to talk about it. I think no one would have believed me and i did not have much proof, especially because no one would have supported me.

> As an adult and right now, my fear of consequences is just as severe. In part, my memories are very clear but also quite diffuse. I am not always coherent in my statements; sometimes another part of me takes over or I dissociate. Then I only seem to tell lies because everything is so confused. And I am so scared to lose a trial and then be defamed as a liar. This would be the worst and I would not have the strength for this any more. (Woman, late 20s, Germany)

This quote draws together a number of interwoven themes through survey responses. Their abuse typically went unnoticed in childhood within a broader social context in which survivors feared – as children, and now as adults – that they would be disbelieved or held culpable for their abuse. While survivors often passionately articulated a wish for validation, recognition and justice, the threat of retaliation or further humiliation was a powerful obstacle, particularly as survivors were often seeking to marshal the strength to cope with the long-term and debilitating consequences of abuse.

Discussion

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is that, regardless of age or country of residence, survey participants described being subject to organised abuse in a social and institutional milieu in which the possibility of such abuse went unrecognised. Despite significant improvements in knowledge and responses to child sexual abuse, ignorance of organised abuse remains an entrenched global phenomenon. The ignorance that contextualised survey responses were not mere absences of knowledge. Instead, identifiable *zones* of ignorance and *practices* of ignorance production could be surmised from survivor experiences. Zones of ignorance refers to those spaces and settings of organised abuse that were exempt from external inquiry or information-seeking. The most obvious zone of ignorance evident in this study was the family: over four fifths of survey respondents identified one or both parents as the primary facilitators of organised abuse. They described the ways in which their parent/s exploited them with apparent impunity using family relations as a mode of control and camouflage, while the possibility of family-based sexual abuse and exploitation went unacknowledged by those around them.

In this sense, the zones of ignorance identified in this study map closely onto long-criticised distinctions in liberal democracies between the "public" and "private" sphere, in which the home and the family are designated as "natural" environments, relatively free from state oversight and regulation (Pateman, 1988). Resistance to the formulation to family-based sexual abuse as a policy priority has been a major feature of backlash to organised abuse allegations since they first emerged (Hechler, 1988) and appears to have created an enduring blind spot to knowledge and responses to child sexual abuse. Nonetheless, in this study, extra-familial organised abuse could also be enshrouded by zones of ignorance, such as where a religious community or family cannot countenance the possibility of clergy abuse,

where a child had a previous victimisation and trauma history, and/or where that child has an absent, incapacitated, or disinterested caregiver. Some respondents described themselves as traumatised and/or neglected children whose condition lacked social legibility to institutions such as schools, but their vulnerability was highly visible to predatory men and networks of sexual exploitation.

Zones of ignorance were reinforced by *practices* of ignorance, which were designed to prevent information about organised abuse from entering wider circulation. Survey respondents provided graphic accounts of threats, blackmail and torture to maintain their silence. Participants were routinely made to feel implicated in their own abuse in a range of ways, including through being forced to feign enjoyment or being forced to perpetrate against other children. However, victims also engaged in ignorance practices. Driven by fear and guilt, victims and survivors themselves may want to hide the existence of their own CSAM, as in the example above of a German woman who deleted the digital evidence of her abuse. In that sense, some victims may be strongly allied with their perpetrators in seeking to preserve ignorance of their abuse. These zones and practices of ignorance were maintained within macro-structures of ignorance: that is, the socially and institutionally instantiated denial and avoidance of knowledge of organised abuse. In this study, children were entrapped not only by the strategies of perpetrators and the impunity afforded to particular zones and contexts of abuse, but also by the lack of protection afforded to them by surrounding communities and institutions, where the very possibility of organised abuse and related maltreatment went unknown. Victim adaptation to such conditions of pervasive ignorance included the development of dissociation, a kind of internally enforced ignorance of organised abuse correlating with an enforced and externally imposed ignorance, such that child victims may deny the presence of organised abuse, even to themselves. The

simultaneous denial of organised abuse by victims, perpetrators and bystanders suggests that the antiepistemology of organised abuse is itself a dissociative structure, designed to delay and fragment recognition of organised abuse at the individual or collective level.

In those small percent of cases where the abuse was detected, participant responses suggested that intervention often did not take into account the unique dynamics of organised abuse and the particular vulnerabilities of this victim group. The lack of a specialist response and explicit recognition of organised abuse also impacted those survivors who disclosed and reported their abuse as adults. While a number of survivors craved recognition from the police and criminal justice system, they faced apparently insurmountable barriers linked to delayed disclosure and the significant psychological and psychosocial consequences of organised abuse. Having endured organised abuse within contexts of endemic ignorance as children, they anticipated the likelihood of disbelief and misrecognition as adults. Indeed, as previously discussed, the disciplines of criminology, sociology and psychology contain within them multiple structures and discourses through which narratives of organised abuse have been constituted as "beyond belief" and indicative of false memories, moral panic and social contagion. Given the proliferation and popularity of such discourses, participants in this survey were entirely rational in their prediction that making a formal complaint as an adult would likely act as a provocation for further ignorance production.

Conclusion

The study of organised abuse can be understood in Hess's (2009) terms as a form of "undone science": knowledge that would be socially useful but hasn't been generated because it has been located outside processes of knowledge production. In this study, organised abuse had been occulted by multiple zones, practices and structures of ignorance in ways that were

generalised across jurisdictions and generations. This ignorance was imposed by perpetrators, who engaged in a range of strategies designed to maintain secrecy and avoid detection, but this ignorance was also projected by victims and survivors via dissociation, non-disclosure and the active concealment of their CSAM. These manifestations of ignorance took shape and form within structures of preferred ignorance about organised abuse entrenched in social and institutional contexts. Such forms of ignorance can be, Smithson (1990, p. 208) warns, "built into our organizational technostructure", generating blind spots and biases in responses to social problems that go unspoken and unacknowledged. The costs of such preferred ignorance were clearly evident in this paper, in which children were abandoned to abject exploitation, and adults survivors reported high rates of mental illness, disability and ongoing victimisation.

Ignorance of organised abuse self-evidently benefits perpetrators at the expense of victims, but also serves the interests of other actors. In his account of the Irish history of ignorance of child sexual abuse, Keating (2018) identifies multiple beneficiaries of this ignorance, including state, religious and media institutions for whom the prevalence of child sexual was a challenge to narratives of national virtue and state beneficence. The very existence of organised abuse can also be understood as a significant challenge to state authority and ideologies of progress and civilisation, revealing instead the vulnerability of children to exploitation and commodification amidst systemic failures of safeguarding. There are a range of actors for whom denial, disavowal and preferred ignorance serves a defensive function, insulating them from distressing or inconvenient truths and indefinitely deferring a response (Cohen, 2001). In the contemporary context, these beneficiaries includes technology companies who have remained wilfully ignorant of the extent and seriousness of CSAM as it has proliferated on their services and platforms. Ignorance of organised abuse and the

consequent silencing of victims and survivors has provided a crucial context for the proliferation of online services and platforms that have facilitated child sexual exploitation on a mass scale.

However, the apparent intolerance for information about organised abuse evident in a range of knowledge systems, including criminology, suggests a systemic or structural quality to this ignorance. In her paper on the antiepistemology of sexual violence, Cunniff Gilson (2015) examines how sexual victimisation expresses and symbolises forms of human vulnerability that are incompatible with, and stigmatised by, hegemonic modes of power and authority. Vulnerability is, she argues, the unchosen but inescapable condition of human beings. In social structures where vulnerability is synonymous with weakness and impairment, she argues there is an "active interest" in denying the "nature of the vulnerabilities at play" in sexual violence (Cunniff Gilson, 2015 p 233). There is perhaps no more abject illustration of human vulnerability that the systematic sexual exploitation of a child by their parent or other adult authority figure upon whom they depend. It is telling that dominant knowledge systems have been incapable of offering stable, reparative modes of representation for the profoundly helpless and grossly betrayed condition of such a child.

When it comes to organised abuse, the field of child sexual abuse has been characterised by premature claims of definitive understanding and the foreclosure of the possibility of future knowing. This constitutes what Faber and Proops (1998, p. 117) have called "closed ignorance", where problems are neglected and relevant information, insights and methods go unaddressed (p 117). The proliferation of CSAM can be understood as a moment of rupture in this closed loop of ignorance, in which the seeding of online platforms with digital

artefacts of organised abuse have destabilised processes of ignorance production, and leant

unintended but undeniable visibility to ignored forms of child sexual exploitation.

The first step to overcoming the legacies of ignorance production is the explicit

acknowledgement of organised abuse as a legitimate object of criminological knowledge,

research and action. This acknowledgement should address "negative knowledge"; that is

knowledge of "the limits of knowing, of the mistakes we make in trying to know, of the

things that interfere with our knowing, of what we are not interested in and do not really want

to know' (Cetina, 1999, p. 63). The pursuit of "negative knowledge" includes the explicit

recognition that organised abuse has been bracketed out in the pursuit of other areas of

inquiry into child sexual abuse, and that action is necessary to repatriate organised abuse as a

knowable object of academic discourse and social concern. Such action may include new

forms of knowledge production, such as research, but also the reclamation of existing

information about organised abuse that has been suppressed or illogically ordered due to

deformations in the field of knowledge created by ignorance processes and structures.

The second step is the development of policy and practice frameworks to address the

challenges of organised abuse, recognising the multiple forms of ignorance that characterise

the problem, and the necessity of decision-making and investigation under the conditions of

partial ignorance. Such frameworks should consider not only the modes of ignorance

projected by perpetrators and victims but the collective susceptibility to motivated ignorance

of the extent to which children can be betrayed by those they depend upon the most. In this

sense, there needs to be a recalibration in research, policy and practice in which CSAM

features not only as a problem to be solved but also as a window into the complex realities of

child sexual abuse and its lingering effects. Current response to CSAM frame the issue

primarily as one of law enforcement (identifying victims and prosecuting offenders) and of

content regulation (removing illegal content from the internet), which necessarily limits available responses and solutions. A more comprehensive approach would include the incorporation of organised abuse into curricula and training for child focused personnel and law enforcement, ensuring that all professionals tasked to protect children are not ignorant of the diversity and extremity of child sexual abuse. Such a movement necessarily requires the legitimisation of voices of victims and survivors. As this paper has clearly demonstrated, people with lived experience of organised abuse can provide vital information about processes and contexts of child sexual abuse and the systemic failures that make such abuse possible.

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