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**Childhood Sexual Abuse Disclosure: The Victim-Perpetrator
Relationship and Victim Counseling Centers as Disclosure
Institutions**

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Abstract

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a major global phenomenon with profound health implications for the victims. Disclosure of the experience is one important way to deal with the aftermath of the abuse and to potentially reduce its negative effects. This thesis reviews 16 studies that investigated the association between the victim-perpetrator relationship and the victim's disclosure behavior. The victim-perpetrator relationship seems to have an effect on two out of three aspects of the victim's disclosure behavior: delay of disclosure and choice of recipient. As for the third aspect, disclosure pattern, the findings are inconsistent. In addition, interviews with five victim counseling centers (VCCs) in Germany yielded that these institutions might constitute an advantageous disclosure setting. The analysis of the interview data indicates that especially victims of CSA by relative or familiar offenders can benefit from this disclosure opportunity.

Keywords: childhood sexual abuse; disclosure; victim-perpetrator relationship; victim counseling centers

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1. Introduction

CSA is a traumatic event that a child will probably carry into adulthood and further (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2000). Unfortunately, this type of abuse is a widespread phenomenon that has become the reality of many children worldwide. Determining the exact prevalence rate for victims of CSA, however, is hard to impossible for a variety of reasons. These include the research method and sample used (Briere & Elliott, 2003) as well as the absence of a single-valid definition of CSA (Violato & Genius, 1993). Notwithstanding, a study by Finkelhor et al. (2014) indicates that the worldwide rate of victims sexually abused before the age of 17 settles at around 26.6% for females and 5.1% for males. This illustrates the alarmingly high number of children being sexually abused.

Survivors of CSA often suffer short-term as well as long-lasting social, psychological, and somatic problems as a result of the abuse (Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001). A meta-analysis of 559 studies conducted by Hailes et al. (2019) found an association between CSA and negative psychological and physical health outcomes. Furthermore, victims generally feel guilty, ashamed, and embarrassed about the experience (Jensen et al., 2005; Roesler & Wind, 1994). As a potential consequence of this, survivors of CSA have higher rates of depression, obesity, autoimmune disorders, eating disorders, and addictions, compared to non-victims (Wilson, 2010).

Owing to the psychological seriousness, a considerable amount of research on victims' coping strategies for the abuse experience has been done. This thesis will focus on one important coping strategy: self-disclosure, or short disclosure. In the context of CSA, disclosure refers to the victim telling another person that it has been sexually abused (Ullman, 2003). Several investigations suggest beneficial effects of disclosure for the victim (e.g., Fuller-Thomson et al., 2019; Hanson et al., 1999; Ullman & Filipas, 2005). Therefore, part of this thesis will be devoted to identifying ways to encourage victims of CSA to disclose.

On the contrary, disclosure is not always beneficial and can also be maladaptive or destructive under certain circumstances (e.g., Ullman, 2003; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). In certain situations, a disclosure can, for instance, lead to secondary victimization of the victim that is independent of the abusive experience itself. Secondary victimization describes further traumatization caused by "victim-blaming" attitudes or negative reactions of community service providers and criminal justice personnel following a disclosure (Campbell & Raja,

1999; Campbell et al., 2001). However, secondary victimization is not restricted to this setting and can also result from disclosures outside the legal or community service system.

The reactions to and the outcome of the disclosure are, among other things, related to the disclosure behavior or disclosure process of the victim. In other words, certain disclosure behaviors can lead to certain reactions by the confidant (Ullman, 2007). The disclosure behavior consists of several aspects of which three important ones have received a substantial amount of attention in research: (1) the delay in disclosure, (2) the choice of confidant, and (3) the pattern of disclosure, or how the victim is reporting the incident(s) (e.g., Malloy et al., 2013; Olafson & Lederman, 2006; Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001).

First, the influence of a disclosure delay on the disclosure outcome is related to a CSA misconception. Especially within the justice system, it is presumed that long delays of disclosure imply that the person is lying about the occurrence of the abuse (Smith et al., 2000). This, in turn, can lead to secondary victimization of true victims. This connection between disclosure delay and decreased credibility is important because research is in agreement that most victims of CSA delay disclosure or do not disclose at all (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hébert et al., 2009; Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Smith et al., 2000; Ullman & Filipas, 2005). For instance, in a Canadian telephone survey conducted with a representative sample of 804 adults, 20% of the respondents that were sexually abused as children indicated that they never told anyone about their sexual abuse experiences prior to the survey and more than half of the participants delayed the disclosure for at least five years after the first incident (Hébert et al., 2009).

Second, the choice of confidant is an important factor for the outcome of the disclosure. This relation is based on two premises. First, the choice of disclosure recipient affects the responses experienced by the victim (Ullman, 2007). Second, negative reactions of the confidant are associated with several negative psychological outcomes (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 2003; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019).

Last, the pattern of disclosure varies from victim to victim and is influenced by different factors (Leander, 2010). It can have implications for several outcomes, such as the credibility of the victim (Gonzalez et al., 1993). In cases of CSA, the victim's statement is crucial because often it is the only evidence available (Myers et al., 1999). In comparison to other types of crime, sexual abuse usually misses physical evidence to prove the accusation (Gonzalez et al., 1993; Myers, 1992). However, even in other contexts, such as disclosure to parents, the statements of the victim is often the only indication the confidant can rely on. Disbelief is

associated with secondary victimization which has negative implications for the psychological adjustment of the victim (Elliott & Carnes, 2001).

With respect to the victim's disclosure behavior, one frequently identified factor is the relationship between victim and perpetrator (e.g., Arata, 1998; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Sauzier, 1989; Ullman, 2007). However, these studies tend to exclusively incorporate single aspects of disclosure behavior. This thesis aims to contribute to the state of literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the victim-perpetrator relationship effect on all three aspects of disclosure behavior (delay, recipient, and pattern). Research found that in the vast majority of CSA cases, the victim has had some sort of relationship or bond with the offender prior to the abuse and rarely is the offender a stranger (Hébert et al, 2009; López et al., 2017; Russell, 1983).

There are several ways for victims to disclose their experience(s). They can talk to family members, friends, contact support or advice institutions, or go to the police. Hence, for the purpose of this thesis disclosure covers any confidant that victims might disclose to, including formal (e.g., reporting to the police) and informal settings (e.g., family, friends, and advice institutions). As mentioned earlier, the confidant or setting of the disclosure is associated with the outcome of the disclosure (Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). Many studies on CSA disclosure focus on formal settings (McElvaney & Culhane, 2017). While disclosure rates among CSA survivors are generally low, the numbers of formal disclosures are even less promising (Hanson et al., 1999). Even victims that already told someone else about the abuse informally are reluctant to disclose to the police (Olafson & Lederman, 2006). Relating to this, research found prior disclosure to be the most significant predictor for a formal disclosure (Bradley & Wood, 1996; Gries et al., 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; London et al., 2008).

The reluctance of victims to disclose to the police (Hanson et al., 1999) emphasizes the importance of research regarding informal disclosure, such as talking to friends, family, school counselors, or specialized victim counselors. While disclosing to friends and family is associated with several drawbacks such as the risk of negative reactions, not being listened to, or not being believed (Arata, 1998; Roesler & Wind, 1994), VCCs represent a promising alternative for victims.

VCCs are institutions that offer free and specialized counseling to victims of different types of crime as well as their relatives and other relevant actors. Furthermore, most VCCs offer prevention and education programs for institutions and professionals that deal with children as well as for children themselves (victim counselor, personal communication, January 2020). VCCs operate as independent and unrelated institutions with the goal to offer victims a safe

space to disclose and to receive support and help tailored to their needs. Furthermore, the policies and laws that employees in these institutions are bound by differ from those in other institutions, such as the police (Unabhängiger Beauftragter für Fragen des sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs [UBSKM], n.d.). These characteristics distinguish VCCs from other formal as well as informal disclosure settings. Thus, making them a unique disclosure opportunity for victims of CSA. Yet, VCCs have not been investigated exhaustively as a contact point for victims. Therefore, the second goal of this thesis is to provide a better understanding of the work and concept of this largely unexplored disclosure institution. Laws and regulations in these centers will be identified and examined in terms of their facilitating effect on the disclosure decision for victims.

1.1. Research Questions

The general research goal of this thesis is to shed more light on the disclosure dilemma of victims of CSA. This overall topic is divided into two major components and research questions that will be analyzed separately:

- 1) The victim-perpetrator relationship as a determinant of the disclosure process. Therefore, the first research question is:

“How does the relationship between victim and offender in cases of CSA influence the disclosure behavior of the victim?”

- 2) VCCs as disclosure institutions and the prevailing regulations and laws in these institutions. Consequently, the second research question is:

“Which laws and regulations concerning the counseling of victims of CSA apply to VCCs in Germany?”

Because of the potential benefits of disclosure, measures and circumstances that encourage victims to disclose will be investigated. Thus, the following sub-question is incorporated:

“How can victims of CSA be encouraged to disclose their experiences?”

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. CSA

2.1.1. Definition of CSA

There is no universally valid definition for CSA. In fact, different studies use different definitions. There are discrepancies in the types of activities or acts employed, the age gap between victim and perpetrator that or the length and severity of the abuse to define CSA.

However, in this thesis, an exact (legal) definition of CSA is less relevant. In legal settings, such as the police or court, a clear definition of what legally constitutes CSA as a crime is important. That is because the main purpose in these settings is the establishment of the truthfulness of the victim's testimony as well as determining whether the claimed act constitutes a criminal offense or not. However, this thesis does not look at the outcome of police investigations, instead, it focuses on the disclosure behavior of victims across different settings. Thus, whether the experience of the victim legally constitutes CSA or not is relevant as long as the victim *thinks* that a boundary has been crossed and it has been sexually abused. Central to the research is the victim's motivation to disclose this *believed* CSA. Thus, for the purpose of this thesis CSA will be defined as any experience or believed experience that involves some kind of sexual contact between the offender and the underaged (18 years or younger) victim.

A concept closely related to CSA is that of giving consent. It has been argued by several researchers that children are not able to give consent or make a choice about wanting to participate or not (e.g., Feinauer, 1989; Finkelhor, 1979). This inability is based on children's lack of knowledge and understanding of the meaning of sex and sexuality due to their age and developmental stage. In addition, children do not have the freedom to say yes or no in a sexual encounter with an adult because they are under the authority and control of the adult. The second argument for children's inability to give consent is especially true when the adult is a parent or parent figure (Finkelhor, 1979). Consequently, it is important to understand that consent by a child does not indicate that the child *wants* to take part in the sexual activities and more importantly it does not imply that these cases should not be considered CSA.

2.1.2. Perpetrator Strategies to Engage in the Sexual Activities

To understand how perpetrators are able to undertake sexual activities with children, studies investigated the strategies employed by perpetrators. A common strategy is to manipulate or seduce the child into participation (Niederberger, 2002). Perpetrators make their victims believe that they *want* to take part in the acts or make them tolerate the abuse by means of making compliments to the victims or assuring them that they will like it and that it is a normal thing (Niederberger, 2002). This is important in consideration of the above-mentioned inability of children to give consent (Finkelhor, 1979). In other cases, perpetrators manipulate the child to such an extent that the child does not even recognize the situation as abusive (Paine & Hansen, 2002).

In addition to this, children are inferior in size and strength, have a lack of knowledge, experience and self-control, and crimes against children generally have weaker norms and sanctions than crimes against adults. Together with the above-mentioned manipulation aspect, this offers an explanation of why children are “easy targets” (Finkelhor, 2008).

2.1.3. Types of CSA

One way to classify types of CSA is based on the relationship between victim and perpetrator prior to the abuse, distinguishing between CSA within the family and outside the family. The former case is called intra-familial CSA with the perpetrator being part of the victim’s family, e.g., a parent, sibling, or cousin. The latter is called extra-familial CSA and includes strangers or perpetrators that are known but unrelated to the victim, such as neighbors or teachers.

Yet, another way of classification is based on a distinction between known offenders (including family perpetrators and known but unrelated perpetrators) and strangers. However, it is important to note that the lines between these types are not always clear and researchers sometimes classify one perpetrator identity into different categories. For example, step-parents or -siblings are assigned intra-familial in some cases and extra-familial CSA in other cases.

Research indicates that the identity of the perpetrator has an effect on the aftermath of the abuse. It is important to explain the distinctiveness of CSA by a known person (especially perpetrators from the family) as opposed to CSA by a stranger.

First, there seems to be a connection between intra-familial CSA and the severity and duration of the abuse (e.g., Cantón et al., 2012; Ketring & Feinauer; 1999). For instance, a study by Cantón et al. (2012) found that, compared to abuse by strangers, intra-familial abuse is more

severe. Severity is represented by a combination of invasiveness and continuity with the former classified as “no contact”, “touching”, and “(oral) penetration” and the latter as “single incident”, “various incidents”, and “continued”. The researchers found that sexual abuse by a family member was more likely to include physical contact and oral sex and to be continuous, of longer duration and with an earlier onset.

Secondly, children cannot choose whom they live with and who takes care of them, instead, they are reliant on the provision of accommodation, food, and emotional support from the parents or caretakers to survive (Finkelhor, 2008). Therefore, CSA by a family member or someone with a similar role in the child’s life is often characterized by an exploitation of the child’s dependency status.

Thirdly, victims abused by someone familiar often have an emotional bond with the perpetrator prior to the abuse. In most of these cases, the abuse entails ambivalent feelings of the victim toward the offender. This means that hate because of what the perpetrator did to the victim is often accompanied by feelings of love and liking (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Victims of emotionally close perpetrators usually cannot contemplate the experience of the sexual abuse in isolation without considering all the beautiful moments they associate with the abuser. In a study by Berliner and Conte (1990), victims of CSA by known perpetrators described their feelings toward the offender as positive. Participants indicated that the offender made them feel important, that the offenders cared about them, and that they did nice activities together. The ambivalent feelings as well the dependency make it particularly difficult for the victim to deal with the abuse because the victim is not able to, or does not want to escape the abusive situation (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

2.2. Disclosure

2.2.1. Definition and Forms of Disclosure

Disclosure describes the conscious process of talking to another person about some personal information that the disclosure recipient otherwise would not have known and that is so sensitive and private that it is not disclosed to anybody (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). Disclosure can take several forms. The victim might tell someone voluntarily, meaning that the victim made a conscious decision to disclose, or accidentally, that is, cases in which someone else detected the abuse (Alaggia, 2004; Ullman, 2003). The disclosure can be partial or complete, depending on how much information is revealed by the victim (Royal Commission

into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). Furthermore, the disclosure can be verbal or non-verbal. Non-verbal disclosure, also called behavioral telling, describes giving indirect verbal hints or communicating non-verbally and not explicitly. Finally, as mentioned before, disclosure can be formal or informal (Ullman, 2003). This thesis will take all forms of disclosure into account.

2.2.2. Benefits and Dangers of Disclosure

Benefits. Disclosure has the potential to help victims cope with the negative consequences of the abuse. Talking to someone about what happened can be relieving for the victim, facilitate the emotional processing, improve the well-being of the victim, initiate help-seeking, and eventually stop the ongoing abuse (Crisma et al., 2004; Fuller-Thomson et al., 2019; Hanson et al., 1999; Meinck, 2017; Pennebaker, 1997)

According to a model by Pennebaker (1997), traumatized people who express their emotions by writing about their trauma can reduce the internal stress that is responsible for their health problems. Other studies testing Pennebaker's model confirm that expressing one's feelings about trauma can have a positive effect on the well-being of the traumatized person.

For example, a study by Hanson et al. (1999) suggests that giving victims the opportunity to disclose may evoke a feeling of empowerment and a sense of control which in turn reduces the adverse effects of the abuse.

Furthermore, Fuller-Thomson et al. (2019) show that disclosing CSA has a positive effect on the victim's well-being. The analysis of the reports of 651 female CSA victims showed that having a confidant was among the strongest determinants for achieving complete mental health. This means that the victim does not have any mental illnesses, has a general social and psychological well-being together with almost daily happiness and/or life satisfaction.

The positive link between disclosure and seeking help has been found in a South African study of underaged victims of physical, emotional, and child sexual abuse conducted by Meinck (2017). A high number of the abused victims from the sample (85,6%) did not receive help, however, it has not been specified whether this was understood as receiving help during an ongoing abuse or after the abuse has ended. The absence of receiving help was the result of either the victim not disclosing the abuse or services denying to take any actions (for those that did disclose). Disclosure is not only associated with receiving help but is also a crucial step for stopping an ongoing abuse. A study by Crisma et al. (2004) found exactly this link, however only for victims that told a family member, not those that told a professional. Thus, many

studies investigating the effect of trauma disclosure and disclosure of CSA, in particular, suggest that talking about one's experiences can be an adaptive way to cope with the aftermath of the traumatic experience and potentially stop an ongoing abuse.

Dangers. On the other hand, disclosure may not always be positive for the victim. As mentioned earlier, the outcome of disclosure is influenced by the reactions the victim receives from the confidant (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 2003; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). Watkins-Kagebein et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QUIMS) to get an understanding of the disclosure process of CSA victims. The researchers found that there is healthy as well as destructive disclosure. The former is characterized by victims being believed, receiving help, and the victim looking forward. In destructive disclosure, victims experience harmful reactions to their disclosure. Relating to this, a study by Ullman (2003) found that (1) the kind of reaction a CSA victim receives depends on several factors, including the disclosure recipient and (2) receiving a negative reaction can have negative implications for the well-being of the victim. Consequently, one can assume the outcome of the disclosure and whether disclosing is beneficial or not seems to be related to the choice of recipient and its reaction.

2.3. Laws and Regulations in VCCs in Germany

This chapter will start with a short introduction of national and international instruments that regulate the rights of children. Specifically, a child's right to be protected from sexual abuse, legal codes that stipulate CSA in Germany, measures for the prevention of CSA and obligations for institutions to ensure the safety and protection of victims will be reviewed.

In general, children and adolescents have rights, just like adults. On the international level, there is one important instrument that needs to be mentioned with regard to the current research. In 1992, Germany ratified to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCHR, 1989). This Convention is a legally binding instrument, meaning that states who have ratified to the Convention must respect, protect, and fulfill the rights laid down in the instrument. As Germany is a State Party to the 1989 UN Convention, it is obliged to implement the articles laid down in the Convention. An article that is particularly relevant for children who have been sexually abused is article 34. According to it, State Parties to the Convention have to introduce measures to prevent and protect children from sexual abuse. The article states that:

“State Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:

- (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
- (b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
- (c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.”

On the national level, the German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch [StGB], 1871) sets down laws with reference to child and adolescent sexual abuse. Art. 176 of the StGB states that a person that undertakes any sexual activity with a person under the age of 14 or coerces the child into performing any sexual act with a third person will be faced with a detention of at least six months and up to ten years. If certain circumstances are met, it is also illegal to perform sexual acts with persons under the age of 16 (StGB art. 174) or under the age of 18 (StGB art. 182).

Furthermore, the German Code of Social Law (Sozialgesetzbuch VIII, [SGG VIII], 1990) stipulates rights and laws surrounding the child and youth welfare. An important institution within this code is the youth welfare office. Its function is to act upon any threat or supposed threat of a child’s or youth’s welfare (SGG VIII art. 8(a)). In case of a threat, the youth welfare officer has the obligation to ensure the protection of the endangered child. CSA counts as one of the dangers that would imply an obligated action of the youth welfare officer. Consequently, if a child discloses an incident of sexual abuse to an authority of the youth welfare office or a youth welfare officer comes to know about the incident actions to promote the safety of the child will have to follow.

Furthermore, SGG VIII art. 11(3) sets down that within the framework of youth work in Germany, providers of the youthwork, among other things, have to offer consulting options for the youth. These offers have to be accessible to people beyond the age of 27, as well.

In sum, several national and international legal codes set down rights and obligations of the state aiming at the protection of children from sexual abuse and ensuring consulting and support opportunities in cases of a failed prevention for them. In addition to these legal codes, there are other sources for policies, guidelines, and standards that have to be adhered to by certain professionals and employees, especially those working with children and victims of CSA.

Legal questions and support options surrounding CSA in Germany are handled by an independent agency of the federal government called Unabhängiger Beauftragter für Fragen des sexuellen Kindesmissbrauchs (UBSKM) (translated to “independent commissioner for child sexual abuse issues”). It is part of the 2010 established round table “Runder Tisch Sexueller

Kindesmissbrauch” (translated to “round table for childhood sexual abuse) (Hörnle et al., 2015). The UBSKM is staffed with experts from the fields of law, psychology, education, politics, history, and communication to handle concerns and requests of victims of CSA and their families. Tasks of the agency include the provision of information, sexual abuse education, support and protection of victims, identification and research in the field, identification of needs of victims and responding to CSA in Germany (UBSKM, n.d.). On the website of the UBSKM people can find, for instance, information about rights of and support options for CSA victims.

There is no *general* obligation to report sexual abuse in Germany. The motivation behind this is to offer victims the possibility to tell someone about the abuse without having to fear that the person reports it (UBSKM, n.d.). Despite the non-existence of a *general* report obligation, there are some exceptions to this regulation. For instance, a police officer is obligated to report any CSA that s/he learned about while on duty (UBSKM, n.d.).

Furthermore, every German citizen is obligated to help and support victims of sexual abuse (UBSKM, n.d.). Beyond that, people with a protection function, such as parents, teachers, or trainers, do have an obligation to prevent sexual abuse for the children in their institution. This means that if a child confides the experience of sexual abuse to them they have the obligation to avert it. People that do not intervene render themselves liable to prosecution. This, however, does not necessarily imply an obligation to report the abuse (UBSKM, n.d.).

In some cases, actions intending to protect the child are not desired by victims and can even harm them. Cases in which children need help and want to talk about the incident but want to avoid further steps to be taken, VCCs offer victims the option to confidentially talk to someone. The purpose of these centers is to support and consult victims, as well as their relatives. These centers are important because the consequences of sexual abuse can be reduced when victims receive early support, counseling, and therapeutic help. VCCs function as additional or supplementing disclosure institutions. Moreover, most VCCs also offer educational counseling to professionals in pedagogic and educational institutions.

Counselors in these centers need to follow certain laws, regulations, and guidelines that distinguish these VCCs from other institutions. Some of the obligations are laws that are laid down in legal codes and others are general regulations employees need to adhere to.

In the following the four most important ones (confidentiality, anonymity, no reporting obligation, and service at no charge) (UBSKM, n.d.) will be presented:

1) Confidentiality

This regulation is in place to make sure that any disclosure made in these centers does not leave the center. A victim that contacts a victim counselor can be sure that anything said during a counseling session will not be passed on to anyone, including the victim's parents. This law is set down in the StGB art. 203 (1)(5) and determines that members or employees of a recognized helpdesk who retell private information of clients will be faced with a detention of up to one year or a monetary penalty.

2) Anonymity (if wanted)

Victims that contact a VCC always have the opportunity to receive help and counseling anonymously to the extent desired by them. They are not obligated to give their age, gender, certain information about the abuse, or any other information they do not want to share.

3) No Reporting Obligation to Law Enforcement Authorities or the Youth Welfare Office

Importantly, employees of a VCC have no obligation to report a case or alleged case of CSA that they learn about at work to law enforcement authorities or the youth welfare office. Quite the contrary, in connection with the right to confidentiality, the counselor is prohibited from reporting the incident.

4) Free of Charge

Counseling in a VCC is usually free of charge. In some cases, it might be based on a voluntary donation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Literature Review

The main research question (“How does the relationship between victim and offender in cases of CSA influence the disclosure behavior of the victim?”) will be investigated utilizing a review of existing literature that examined the relationship between victim and perpetrator in cases of CSA on different aspects of the disclosure process.

The studies included in the review use participants of different ages, meaning that all of the samples include victims of CSA but the age at the time of disclosure varies. Furthermore, the setting of disclosure differs between the studies. Some studies investigate the disclosure in police settings, that is victims who formally report the abuse, while others define the disclosure as informal, more general, or do not specify the setting further. No specific restriction has been made on the publication date or place of conduct in order to give a more accurate and valid review of the existing literature in the field.

The material was mostly derived from the internet via the Tilburg University Online Library, Google Scholar, and the Library of Tilburg University. Different combinations of search terms related to the keywords “childhood sexual abuse”, “disclosure” and “victim-perpetrator relationship” were used to identify relevant material. Search terms for the first keyword included “childhood sexual abuse”, “child sexual abuse” and “child rape”. Search terms for the second key term included “disclosure”, “self-disclosure”, “reporting”. For the last keyword, the search terms “victim-perpetrator relationship”, “extra-familial/intra-familial” and “perpetrator identity” were used.

3.2. Interviews with VCCs in Germany

3.2.1. Sampling and Recruitment

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with counselors from VCCs in Hamburg, Germany. In order to best possibly represent VCCs, institutions differ in the services that their institution offers. Several VCCs in Hamburg, Germany, were contacted via E-Mail. The E-Mails included an introduction of the researcher as well as an explanation of the purpose of the request. Five institutions responded positively to the E-Mails and appointments were arranged

by either E-Mail or phone. Three face-to-face interviews took place between January 21st and 22nd 2020 and two more interviews took place on March 19th and 25th 2020 via telephone due to external and inevitable circumstances.

3.2.2. Materials

The goal of this second part of the thesis was to get an understanding of the work of VCCs as a disclosure opportunity for victims of CSA. Thus, what services are offered and how do counselors deal with victims' disclosures. In line with this, laws and regulations that affect the counselor's work with the victims were identified. Furthermore, counselors' opinions and ideas on how to facilitate disclosure were described. With this goal in mind, conducting interviews with counselors themselves is the most useful way to gather the relevant information. The counselors in these centers know how the VCC is operating and should know the regulations they are bound by. Because they work directly with the victims, they can deliver first-hand information and give valuable opinions and ideas about ways to encourage victims to disclose.

3.2.3. Participants

In total, five interviews with counselors from different VCCs in Hamburg, Germany, were interviewed. The five institutions have victims of CSA as a target group, one of them also deals with victims of other delicts. All institutions have slightly different target groups in terms of age and gender of the clients.

3.2.4. Procedure

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes to ensure that the most important topics are covered. At the same time, it was supposed to prevent fatigue of the interviewee to reduce the quality of the data. The interviews were audio-recorded after participants were asked for consent and interviewees signed an informed consent form (Meadows, 2003a). The informed consent form has been reviewed by the supervisor of this Master's Thesis. To prevent language barriers from diminishing the quality of the interview data, interviews were conducted in the interviewees' native language, German, which is also the native language of the researcher, who conducted the interviews.

In the Interviews included some pre-determined questions concerning demographic information and others that focus specifically on the regulations in force as well as own opinions

about how to improve victim disclosure. The guideline for the interviews consisted of the following framework of questions:

- Demographic questions about background and work experience
- How the interviewee is dealing with CSA disclosure; what is a typical course of a counseling session
- What regulations and laws regarding the counseling of victims (of CSA) do counselors in the centers need to adhere to
- Opinions about the influence of the regulations on the disclosure behavior of the victim
- How can victims be further encouraged to disclose their experiences

The questions are mainly open-ended and serve as a topic guide to ensure that all relevant topics and themes are covered. This means that the interviews, although guided by the pre-determined questions and set topics, might follow slightly different paths. The main goal of the interviews is not to achieve generalized findings but rather a more in-depth understanding of the participant's work, experiences, views as well as the policies that apply to their institution.

3.2.5. Analysis

After the interviews took place, the recordings were verbatim transcribed to be able to have easier access to the data for the analysis (Meadows, 2003b). Data from the five interviews were cross-referenced and the content was analyzed on a descriptive level to identify relevant information for the current research questions. The analysis from the interview data was used to get a better understanding of the services that these VCCs offer CSA victims, what distinguishes them from other institutions of disclosure and to supplement the analysis about the policies, laws, and guidelines relating to contact with victims that exist in VCCs in Germany. Furthermore, the reporting of the analysis finding will be discussed in the broader context of this paper's topic. This means that other relevant data will be incorporated and a connection to the first research question will be made. Since the interviews have been conducted and transcribed in German, quotes and parts of the transcript that will be used for the reporting of the results will be translated into English by the researcher.

3.2.6. Ethical Clearance

As for the conduct of the interviews, a complete ethical clearance from the TLS Ethics Board was not necessary because qualitative interviews with professionals do not imply any risk of harm to the participants. However, clearance on the data protection and management was submitted and accepted by the TLS Ethics Board.

4. Results of the Literature Review

This chapter contains a review of studies that investigate the effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the disclosure behavior of CSA victims. An overview of the included studies sorted by publication date can be found in Table 1. The review is divided into three parts, each one of them relating to one of the three aspects of the disclosure behavior (disclosure delay, disclosure recipients, and disclosure pattern). The most important findings and methods used in the study will be summarized, critically analyzed and evaluated in the broader context of the corresponding disclosure behavior. Finally, the findings from all three sections will be concluded.

4.1. Delay of Disclosure

The delay in disclosure by victims of CSA is the most studied behavior aspect in the field. First of all, it is very important to note that there is a general consensus that most victims of CSA delay the disclosure and only a few victims tell someone about their abuse immediately (e.g., Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019). Furthermore, the current state of research on this delay has furthermore taken notice of the victim-perpetrator relationship as a potential influencing factor. However, as mentioned earlier, the setting of disclosure is a factor that needs to be considered in this regard. Therefore, this section will start with the review of studies that investigated the effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the delay of disclosure in informal settings including studies that did not specify the disclosure setting. Thereafter, a review of literature in formal settings of the police will be presented.

4.1.1. Informal (and Unspecified) Disclosure

Although victims of all types of perpetrator identities are reluctant to disclose their abuse (e.g., Fergusson & Mullen, 1999; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004; Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2019), it seems that the relationship between victim and perpetrator moderates this reluctance. The literature in this review predominantly indicates that being abused by someone you have a relationship with can even *increase* the latency between the event and disclosure (Hébert et al., 2009; Kogan, 2004; Smith et al., 2000, Ullman, 2007). Yet, the findings of these studies diverge in their importance of the type of relationship. Some scholars highlight *any kind of relationship* prior to the abuse as a barrier for the victim to disclose while others emphasize *family membership* in particular.

For example, Smith et al. (2000) indicate that any form of relationship or bond prior to the abuse can hamper the victim in their disclosure seeking process. Findings from the study show that victims being related to the perpetrator are more likely to delay disclosure than those that are not (48% of intra-familial CSA victims delaying disclosure compared to 24% of extra-familial CSA victims). Furthermore, abuse by a stranger increases the probability to tell someone about it within one month after the abuse by 3.69 times, compared to abuse by known perpetrators, that is family members but also people from outside the family such as acquaintances. Thus, the authors conclude that kinship is not the only type of relationship associated with a disclosure delay. However, the findings need to be interpreted with caution.

First, Smith et al. (2000) employed a retrospective design that is always connected with the possibility of the participants' memory distortion. Secondly, the sample was female-only, which challenges the generalizability of the findings. Lastly, Smith et al. (2000) did not ensure that the disclosures did not include any fabricated stories. However, due to the nature of the phenomenon being studied, these limitations are customary in CSA research, especially the retrospective design and female-only sample. These limitations will also be inherent to several following studies (see Table 1) and will thus not be specifically mentioned again. Due to the observed frequency of these limitations in research, they do not render the findings irrelevant, and thus Smith et al.'s (2000) findings still constitute an important contribution to the state of CSA literature.

While Smith et al. (2000) do not repudiate the importance of the family membership, they do clearly infer from their findings that any relationship between victim and perpetrator is detrimental for a victim's decision to disclose. However, the majority of research takes up a different position and rather hints at the importance of family and kinship as an influential factor of the disclosure latency of CSA victims (e.g., Hébert et al. 2009; Kogan, 2004; Ullman, 2007).

For example, a study by Hébert et al. (2009) found that victims that were abused by someone from outside the immediate family were 6.76 times more likely to disclose abuse immediately (within one month of the abuse) than children who were abused by someone from the immediate family. Ullman (2007) came to a similar conclusion and found significant differences between three groups of perpetrators (strangers, acquaintances, or relatives) with regard to the disclosure delay. Victims were more likely to delay the disclosure when they were abused by a relative compared to a stranger and acquaintance, however, only the comparison between relatives and strangers reached statistical significance. Both of these studies used surveys as the method of data gathering which poses a challenge to the generalizability of the findings. Victims who are willing to share their experiences in a survey might differ from victims who refrain to take part in a survey. Again, this is a limitation that is inherently present in research that uses surveys to collect data. Therefore, it should be regarded when interpreting the findings, however, it does not imply invalidity of the findings. Again see Table 1 for studies that are affected by the same limitation.

Finally, Kogan (2004) found that participants who were acquainted with the perpetrator were 3.7 times more likely to delay the disclosure than to tell someone immediately. When participants were victimized by a family member, they were even more likely to delay disclosure, with victims being 5.6 times more likely to delay disclosure rather than disclosing immediately. Thus, both knowing the perpetrator and being related to the perpetrator significantly increased disclosure latency. However, the likelihood to delay was much greater for victims of family members than for victims who knew the perpetrator but were not related to them. Despite the years of research on CSA and disclosure, no complete consensus about the effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on disclosure delay has been reached. While the above-mentioned studies unanimously report an effect of the perpetrator identity on the disclosure delay, it seems that earlier studies are less indicative of such an association. For example, studies by Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994) and Arata (1998) did not find an influence of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the disclosure delay. Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994) asked 12 male and 45 female victims of childhood sexual of full age during a phone interview when they first disclosed their experiences to another person. The amount of time passed between the victimization and the first disclosure was not related to the victim's relationship to the perpetrator.

One could argue that in this study the small sample size of 57 participants might have contributed to the absence of an effect. However, a few years later, Arata (1998) gathered data of a much bigger sample and did not find a significant effect either. She evaluated the replies

of 204 anonymous questionnaires from female college students with a CSA history. Victims of stranger sexual abuse were more likely to disclose with 64% of stranger-assault victims disclosing. Abuse by acquaintances led to disclosure in 41% of the cases. Victims who were abused by relatives or step-parents disclosed in only 27% of the cases. Similarly victims of sexual abuse by a parent disclosed in 29% of the cases. Thus, Arata (1998) found a trend for victims of familiar perpetrators to be less likely to disclose compared to victims of strangers. However, the findings did not yield significance, and therefore cannot indicate an association between the victim-perpetrator relationship and the delay in disclosure. Even though the findings were insignificant, it is interesting that victims' disclosure reluctance follows a certain pattern that is in line with the findings by Ullman (2007) and Hébert et al. (2009), emphasizing kinship as a particularly important factor (the likelihood to disclose decreased from 64% for strangers to 41% for acquaintances and between 27% and 29% for relatives, step-parents, and biological parents).

To conclude, the findings of the studies investigating the delay of disclosures in informal settings predominantly, but not exclusively indicate an association between the victim-perpetrator relationship and delay. Furthermore, most of these studies additionally point at a particularly important role of kinship in these relationships.

4.1.2. Formal Disclosure

This section reviews studies that investigated the victim-perpetrator relationship and the delay in formal settings. It is important to make a separate analysis for the two settings because informal settings diverge from formal settings in several regards, and this might have implications for the disclosure behavior of victims.

In general terms, the literature on formal disclosure indicates an association between victim-perpetrator relationship and delay, just like disclosure in informal settings. All reviewed studies found a positive effect of knowing and/or being related to the perpetrator on disclosure delay in formal settings. This means that knowing and/or being related to the perpetrator decreases the likelihood to report the abuse to the police.

By means of a national telephone survey, Hanson et al. (1999) analyzed the interview data of 341 women with a history of CSA with regard to the victims' abuse experiences, including reporting behavior to authorities and the police (prior to the interviews). The researchers found that victims reporting the abuse were significantly more likely perpetrated by strangers as opposed to relatives and known non-relatives. Furthermore, cases that were not reported more

likely involved a relative or acquaintance, compared to strangers. However, this second finding did not yield statistical significance.

Beyond that, several studies (e.g., Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz, 2006; Koçtürk and Yüksel, 2019) additionally highlight the importance of kinship rather than just knowing the offender in this association. To illustrate the significance of the family in formal disclosures, Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found that children who were abused by a family member took significantly longer to tell someone about their experiences compared to victims of extra-familial CSA. This is further manifested by the findings of Hershkowitz (2006) and Koçtürk and Yüksel (2019). For instance, Hershkowitz (2006) found that while victims who suspected a parent as offender were more likely to delay the allegation (90.5%), the likelihood decreased when suspects were familiar non-relatives (69.5%) and dropped to 22.2% for stranger suspects. Koçtürk and Yüksel (2019) investigated the delay in disclosure by victims of intra-familial CSA and compared the length of delay between victims of biological relatives and sociolegal perpetrators. The former group includes the kin of the victims, such as the biological father or siblings. The latter group includes members of the family or household that are not biologically related to the victim, such as a step-father, half-brother, or boyfriend of a parent. The researchers retrospectively analyzed 216 cases of CSA and found that victims who were sexually abused by a biologically related perpetrator reported their abuse later than victims of sociolegal perpetrators. These findings suggest that kinship is a stronger influencing factor for the disclosure decision in formal settings than residential community.

To sum up, all studies reviewed in this section found a positive association between knowing and/or being related to the perpetrator and the disclosure latency. In comparison to informal disclosures, this conclusion is more unambiguous. Besides a positive effect of knowing the offender, most studies simultaneously identified kinship rather than just knowing the offender as the stronger predictor, in line with findings from informal settings.

4.2. Disclosure Recipients

Victims of CSA that decide to disclose the traumatic experience subsequently need to decide whom they want to talk to. They can choose from a variety of recipients and all of them fulfill a different role and can be categorized as either formal or informal recipients. As has been pointed out already, only a small fraction of victims ever decide to make a formal report (Hanson et al., 1999), Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the literature on disclosure

recipients of CSA victims concerns informal recipients. At this point, it seems unnecessary to divide the literature into formal and informal disclosures.

There is a lot of indication in recent as well as in earlier studies that the victim-perpetrator relationship has an influence on the choice of confidant. All studies included in this review hint at such an effect (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Kogan, 2004; Rakovec-Felser & Vidovic, 2016; Stein & Nofziger, 2008; Vincent & Daniel, 2004). However, in contrast to the delay, the disclosure recipient is a categorical variable, which means that it contains multiple specific recipient categories. While findings of disclosure latency can be directly compared by looking at the amount of time passed in one group, as opposed to the amount of time passed in another group, a comparison of different recipients is less straightforward because the categories might differ from study to study.

For instance, Kogan (2004) examined whether there is a difference between intra- and extra-familial abuse on the decision to disclose to an adult or peer. With regard to the disclosure setting, this study needs some explanation. Kogan (2004) coded “peers” as friends and siblings and “adults” as family or authority. This means that there is no explicit distinction made between formal and informal disclosures in the “adult” category. This complicates the interpretation of the findings for the purpose of a distinction between formal and informal disclosure. However, the findings are still relevant to the current research question. Kogan (2004) found a significant association between perpetrator identity and choice of confidant. In cases of sexual abuse by a family member, 78% of victims who disclosed told an adult about it, compared to 8% who told a peer. In the extra-familial cases, 39% told an adult and 31% told a peer. Thus, it seems that intra-familial sexual abuse victims tend to disclose to adults rather than to peers.

These findings are difficult to compare with or link to the remaining studies. Rather than basing the recipient categories on the age similarity to the victim, these studies focused on whether the confidant was from the victim’s family (i.e. the mother or a parent) or not, thereby exclusively focusing on disclosure in informal settings. While all included studies found an effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship, no consistent direction of this effect was revealed. Most of the studies that compared family and non-family confidants indeed indicate that being abused by a known perpetrator is associated with choosing a confidant that is not from the family and is not the mother (e.g. a friend). For instance, Hershkowitz et al. (2007), as well as Rakovec-Felser and Vidovic (2016), found that children who knew the offender were less likely to disclose the abuse to a parent or the mother in particular, compared to children who were abused by a stranger. From the sample of victims of extra-familial CSA examined by

Hershkowitz et al. (2007), victims who suspected strangers chose a parent as a confidant in 66.7% of the cases, compared to only 27.8% for victims who suspected someone familiar to have sexually abused them. Rakovec-Felser and Vidovic (2016) compared the confidant choices of victims of extra-familial and intra-familial CSA. The researchers found that victims of perpetrators from outside the family disclosed to their mother in 53.6% of the cases, whereas victims who were abused by a family member chose to tell their mother in 24.4% of the cases only.

In line with the findings by Hershkowitz et al. (2007) and Rakovec-Felser and Vidovic (2016), a study by Vincent and Daniel (2004) analyzed data from ChildLine Scotland, a confidential phoneline counseling service for children and youth. The analysis included data from victims of physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. An interesting finding of the analysis pertains to a trend identified for victims of CSA. Some of them said that they could not talk to their mothers when the perpetrator was the mother's partner. The findings of this study need to be treated with caution because there is the possibility of a selection bias in the sample. Children that call a phoneline counseling service might be more reluctant to tell a parent than other children. It is possible that these children contacted ChildLine Scotland *because* they could not talk to their parents.

In contrast to the above-mentioned findings, a study by Stein and Nofziger (2008) yielded that in most of the cases of intra-familial sexual abuse the information is being kept within the family, with often the mother being the first confidant. When children were sexually abused by a family member, almost 73% chose the mother as the disclosure recipient. When considering not just the mother as a recipient but family members in general, the percentage reached 79%. In contrast, victims that were abused by non-family members disclosed to their mother or to family members generally in only 21% and 24% of the cases, respectively. This study is the only one in this review that showed being abused by a family member increases the likelihood to tell a family member. Interestingly, Stein and Nofziger (2008) used the same data set as Kogan (2004), namely data from the 1995 National Survey of Adolescents (NSA). Because both studies employed different confidant codes (adult/peers vs. family (mother)), they appear unsuitable for comparison. Nonetheless, the studies reveal consistent suggestions.

To conclude, the literature concordantly found an effect of the perpetrator identity on the confidant choice, however, the exact nature of this effect in terms of confidant identity is not completely in agreement. The majority of studies hint at a negative effect of intra-familial abuse on the disclosure to a family member, more precisely to a parent or the mother. However, a limitation of almost all studies is the use of accounts by children, adolescents, and young

people. It has been found that there are differences between adult and child disclosures (Ullman, 2007). Hence, exclusively focusing on one group poses a challenge on the generalizability of the findings. Only the study by Rakovec-Felser and Vidovic (2016) included victims of all ages at the time of disclosure. The drawback in this study, however, concerns the sample which was female only.

4.3. Disclosure Pattern

Just like the disclosure recipients, the disclosure pattern as an outcome variable is difficult to compare between studies. The approaches to conceptualize the disclosure pattern vary greatly, ranging from the detail level, the phenomenon of recantation to the types of information of the abuse given by the victim. In general, the literature on disclosure pattern as a function of the victim-perpetrator relationship indicates an effect on some aspects but not on others. This shows how divergent and individual a victim's way of disclosure is.

Starting with the detail level of accounts by victims of CSA, Ullman (2007) analyzed the disclosure pattern in terms of detail level of college students by comparing three types of CSA: sexual abuse by strangers, acquaintances, and relatives. However, Ullman (2007) did not find the perpetrator identity as a significant determinant of the detail level during disclosure. Only slightly fewer details were given in accounts by victims of known perpetrators which includes relatives and acquaintances but not strangers. This finding needs to be treated with caution since Ullman (2007) did not differentiate between formal and informal disclosures.

In contrast to Ullman (2007), other researchers used children as participants and investigated different aspects of the disclosure pattern. For example, a study by Malloy et al. (2007) investigated prevalence rates as well as predictors for recantation in formal and informal interviews. Recantation is a phenomenon that is increasingly observed in CSA research and describes the denial of abuse post-disclosure. That is, a child confirmed the sexual abuse at one point and denied the allegation at a later point. The analysis of the data indicates that 23.1% of the disclosures made by children involved a recantation of the child, most of them made during formal interviews. Most importantly, the child-perpetrator relationship, dichotomously coded as parent figure or non-parent figure, has been identified as a significant predictor for recantation among these children. This means that children who were abused by a parent figure were more likely to recant compared to victims of CSA by a non-parent figure. The possibility for these cases to display false allegation has been excluded.

A second study that used children as participants has been conducted by Leander (2010). The researcher investigated the kind of information given by victims of CSA exclusively in the context of police interviews. The researcher found that the relationship between the victim and perpetrator had no significant effect on the amount of sexual information given by the victim. This means that the type of relationship is not associated with the amount of sexual information given by the victim. However, the victim-perpetrator relationship had a significant effect on the provision of neutral information. When a victim was sexually abused by a father, either a biological father or a step-father, less neutral information was reported, when compared to victims who were abused by a stranger. However, the amount of neutral information given did not differ between sexual abuse by someone familiar and a father or a stranger. Furthermore, the study also examined the avoidance and denial of reporting abuse-related information during police interviews. This means that a victim either failed to answer abuse-related questions because they “do not know”, “do not want to talk about it” or “cannot remember” (coded as avoidance), or the victim denied abuse-related information that was, however, verified by the documentation (coded as denial). For both of these variables, the victim-perpetrator relationship had no significant effect, meaning that the identity of the perpetrator neither influenced the avoidance behavior nor the number of denials.

While the study of Ullman (2007) needs to be interpreted with caution because the disclosure setting has not been differentiated, the same caution is required when interpreting the results of Leander (2010). By focusing on police interviews only, the findings from the study cannot be transferred to informal settings challenging their generalizability.

This review illustrates that no “specific pattern of disclosure” is related to the different perpetrator identities. While some of the findings suggest an effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on certain disclosure patterns, others do not. This implies that one should be careful with drawing conclusions, for example, about the truthfulness of the statement from the pattern of disclosure of the victim (Gonzalez et al., 1993). Furthermore, the setting of disclosure is an important factor, too. Only one study specifically used data from both formal and informal settings (Malloy et al., 2007), therefore, the interpretation of the other studies needs to be handled against this background.

Table 1 Overview of studies included in the review

Authors (Year)	Country	Setting	Sample	Perpetrators	Methodology	Delay	Recipient	Pattern
Lamb & Edgar-Smith (1994)	USA	Informal	57 (male & female) adult survivors	Family, known	Telephone survey	Delay of disclosure was not related to perpetrator relationship		
Arata (1998)	USA	Informal & Formal	204 (female) college students with CSA history	Parent, relative/step-parent, acquaintance, stranger	Anonymous questionnaires in groups of 25	No significant result but trend for victims of abuse by relatives to disclose less likely		
Hanson et al. (1999).	USA	Formal	437 (female) adult survivors	(Step-) father, husband/boyfriend, other relative, other non-relative, stranger	Telephone interview	Non-significant effect of perpetrator identity on decision to report the abuse or not		
Smith et al. (2000)	USA	Informal & Formal	288 (female) adult survivors	(Step-) father/brother / relative, (boy-)friend, acquaintance, stranger	Telephone survey	Intra-familial victims took significantly longer to disclose than victims of extra-familial child sexual abuse		
Goodman-Brown et al. (2003)	USA	Formal	218 (male & female) children victims	Intrafamilial, extrafamilial	File analysis & interviews with caretaker & children	Intra-familial victims took significantly longer to disclose than victims of extra-familial child sexual abuse		
Kogan (2004)	USA	Informal	263 (female) adolescent victims of unwanted sexual experiences	Family, non-family perpetrator	1995 National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) data analysis	Victims of a family perpetrator were significantly more likely to delay disclosure than victims of non-family members	Victims of a family perpetrator were significantly more likely to disclose to an adult compared to victims of non-family members	
Vincent & Daniel (2004)	Scotland	Informal	4430 (male & female) children (40% CSA victims)	-	Analysis of calls received by ChildLine Scotland		Most victims told a friend and only 27% told a parent Victims that have been sexually abused in childhood said they could not talk to their mothers when the perpetrator was the mother's partner	
Hershowitz (2006)	Israel	Formal	11207 (male & female) children (age 3-14) victims	parents, familiar non-relatives, strangers	Interview with children	Victims of parents were more likely to delay allegation than victims of familiar non-relatives or strangers		
Hershkowitz (2007)	Israel	Informal	30 (male & female) children victims	familiar person, stranger	Interviews with children and parents		Significantly more victims of strangers disclosed to a parent	

Malloy et al. (2007)	USA	Informal & Formal	257 (male & female) children victims	parent figure, non-parent figure	Analysis of case files			Children abused by a parent figure were more likely to recant compared to those by a non-parent figure
Ullman (2007)	USA	Informal & Formal	733 (male & female) college students with CSA history	strangers, acquaintances, relatives	Self-administered surveys	Victims delayed the disclosure more when they were abused by a relatives compared to strangers and acquaintances	-	Perpetrator type did not significantly affect the detail level only slightly less details in accounts by victims of known perpetrators
Stein & Nofziger (2008)	USA	Informal	4,023 (male & female) adolescent victims	(Step-) parent, friend, child relative, other adult relative, neighbor, other adult, other child	1995 National Survey of Adolescents (NSA) data analysis		When children were sexually abused by a family member, almost 73% chose the mother as the disclosure recipient (79% a family member)	
Hébert et al. (2009)	Canada	Informal	129 (male & female) adult survivors	family member, known person, stranger	Telephone survey	Victims abused by a family member were less likely to disclose rapidly		
Leander (2010)	Sweden	Formal	27 (male & female) children victims	biological father, stepfather, relatives/ acquaintances, stranger	Police interview analysis			No effect victim-perpetrator relationship on sexual information and avoidance/denial of information but on neutral information given
Rakovec-Felser & Vidovic (2016)	Slovenia	Informal	73 (female) children victims	Extra-familial, intra-familial	Quantitative & qualitative case analysis			Significantly more victims of perpetrators outside the family disclosed to the mother compared to victims of family members
Koçtürk & Yüksel (2019)	Turkey	Formal	216 children victims	Biological relatives, sociolegal perpetrators	Forensic interview analysis	Victims that were sexually abused by a biologically related perpetrator reported their abuse later than victims of sociolegal perpetrators		

5. Results from the Interviews

This chapter presents the findings from interviews with five counselors in VCCs in Germany. The data from the interviews was cross-referenced to identify common themes. Six important topics emerged and will be described and discussed in the following sections. First, a more detailed account of the operation of VCCs will be given. This will be followed by a description of the laws, regulations, and standards in place identified during the interviews to see whether the results from the theoretical framework are complete, or whether important regulations are missing. Thereafter, the most important insights about CSA by family members or close persons will be discussed. Such considerations allow for an analysis of the benefits of VCCs as potential disclosure settings and barriers for victims to disclose. Subsequently, the chapter will display a juxtaposition of formal disclosure and informal disclosure at a VCC. And lastly, there will be a discussion of the second sub-question of this thesis, i.e., the ways to encourage victims of CSA to disclose. This discussion attempts to link the findings from the interviews to the findings from the literature review to detect possible connections between the work of VCCs and the importance of the victim-perpetrator relationship.

5.1. Operation of VCCs

First, it is important to describe the operations of a VCC in more detail to create a basis for the report of the subsequent findings. A VCC is an institution that victims of different types of crimes and victimizations can contact. The victim center can be specialized in a certain type of crime, CSA for instance, which was the case in four out of the five institutions in the current paper. The fifth victim center is a general counseling center that receives victims of various delicts, such as victims of burglary or homicide alongside CSA.

Sometimes there are also several restrictions in terms of the victim's characteristics that are accepted as clients. For instance, the victim's age, gender, or residency can be limited. However, all interviewees indicated that an unsuitable victim that contacts the center would not immediately be sent away. In such case, the counselor would get a first impression of the victim's situation and look for alternative contact points to transfer the victim to. There is no specific pattern for the process of the counseling and the meetings are individually tailored to the victim and its needs. Usually, it starts with a phone call followed by an appointment arrangement where the victim comes to the facilities of the center personally. There is no

restriction of frequency of meetings or topics of the meetings. In other words, the scope of counseling can vary greatly. Some individuals merely gather information about legal matters, while others come to talk about the experience. It is not obligatory for victims to give any (personal) information (or details of the incident); it is in their own decision how much they want to say and which scope the meeting(s) bear.

Besides the counseling of direct victims, family members of victims can also contact the institution to receive support. A third service offered by many VCCs concerns prevention programs. This means that counselors visit different relevant institutions, such as schools or day-care centers, to inform people about CSA. Such introductions aim at answering questions like what CSA is, how it can be prevented, how victims can be identified, and how the people in contact with victims could handle the situation.

5.2. Laws, Regulations, and Standards

In relation to the first sub-question, interviewees were asked about important laws and regulations they need to adhere to during their work in counseling centers. In general, the interviewees said that there were not many specific laws in place. The reason for these deficiencies in the German body of law lies in classification of such institutions, i.e., they are independent. In contrast to, for instance, youth welfare offices, these institutions do not have the duty of protection of the victims. The basic idea is to offer victims a safe space to talk rather than taking specific actions to protect the victim, except if specifically desired by the victim. Even though there are not many regulations, some important laws and standards were identified. All regulations presented in the theoretical framework were mentioned by the interviewees (professional secrecy/confidentiality, anonymous counseling, no reporting obligation of the counselors toward the youth welfare office, the police, or any other institution or person, free of charge). However, some additional information given by interviewees could not be identified in the legal analysis.

First, most of the interviewees mentioned partiality. They said that one of the main standards or norms was the focus on the well-being of the victim since the counselor's top priority was the victim. As a consequence, many VCCs focus exclusively on the victims, thereby giving no room for the offenders. On the one hand, this measure aims at offering the victim a safe and secure place, on the other hand, it prevents the counselor's bias or influence by the offender's statements or presence. Second, the interviews revealed that the professional secrecy, that is

indeed laid down in German legal codes, can be violated when there is a threat of suicide or homicide.

5.3. Sexual Abuse in the Family or Close Social Network

In general, the interviews confirmed two findings of victims of CSA that were claimed earlier: (1) most victims are abused by someone from the family or the close social network, and (2) being abused by someone from the family or someone close makes the disclosure process harder. The interviewees revealed several sources for the reluctance of these victims to disclose.

Firstly, one interviewee explained that the outlook for future contact with the perpetrator is an important factor in the disclosure decision. In other words, when the perpetrator is known or from the family, the victim most likely is confronted with him or her (regularly) after the incident(s). This is not necessarily the case with strange perpetrators. Secondly, in these cases, apart from a connection between victim and perpetrator, there are also connections between the perpetrator and other family members, for instance. Consequently, the victim fears harm from a disclosure, as has been asserted by one interviewee:

“And very often, when victims disclose that they have been abused by someone from the family... in many cases, the victim is being excluded, not the perpetrator.”

Another reason for the reluctance of CSA victims by familiar persons that have been mentioned is guilt. It has been explained by one interviewee that victims often blame themselves for ending up in the situation. This seems to be characteristic for all types of victims, irrespective of the perpetrator’s identity. Furthermore, another dimension of guilt is connected to the consequences of disclosure. An example was given by an interviewee:

“... [the victim:]” I couldn’t withstand if mom or dad would have to go to prison for that. If I destroyed the family.” So, there are huge feelings of guilt involved.”

Moreover, interviewees mentioned loyalty conflicts towards the family on multiple occasions. Usually, when the perpetrator is a family member, the victim’s inner emotional world does not only encompass feelings of hate and disgust but is very complex. Victims often

have ambivalent feelings towards the offenders and do not want to disappoint them. For the victims, the preexisting bond makes disclosure more difficult. In other cases, the familiar perpetrator adopts certain strategies to keep the victim quiet:

“... the girl or the boy told that they play weird games at home or that it is a family secret.”

Furthermore, it has frequently been reported in the interviews that many victims of intra-familial CSA or sexual abuse by a familiar person were discredited. When they tell someone about what happened, people often cannot believe or imagine how the accused perpetrator could ever do that.

A final note pertains to the disclosure pattern. When the perpetrator is emotionally close to the victim, the sequence or scheme of disclosure can be affected. Even though these victims seem to be particularly reluctant to disclose, they might still want to talk about it with someone. In these cases, victims might change their statements at different disclosure stages, for example, to protect the offender. One interviewee highlighted:

“It is possible that a victim says that it was a stranger and in the end, it turns out it was someone from the family.”

5.4. Barriers to Disclosure and Benefits of VCCs

As mentioned in the section above, many of the interviewees highlighted the occurrence of huge disclosure delays among victims of intra-familial CSA in their institution. One important topic of the interviews was the advantage of a VCC as a disclosure option for victims of CSA. In other words, why would a victim decide to contact a certain VCC rather than another institution. Relating to the regulations in these centers, some interviewees mentioned that they might play a role in a victim’s decision to contact a VCC. In principle, it seems beneficial that there are not many strict rules that need to be followed. In this manner, the counselors have a lot of leeway in the way they shape the counseling tailored to the individual needs of the victim. However, the regulations in place seem to be beneficial.

Firstly, some counselors mentioned the positive effects of the professional secrecy on the decision to disclose at a VCC. One interviewee explained:

“I do, indeed, believe that the way specialized counseling centers work is a door opener. And very often, this is alone connected with the confidentiality that we must adhere to.”

It seems to be important for some victims to know their disclosure and information is treated confidentially and no actions will be taken against their will. Connecting this to the main research question of this paper, it seems that the professional secrecy might play a particularly important role for CSA victims. If, for instance, a victim of CSA by a family member makes a disclosure and the confidant afterward makes a report to the youth welfare system or police, the victim might be removed from the family or the perpetrator will be incarcerated. Therefore, the professional secrecy and prohibition of counselors to report the cases to other institutions is an important and possibly facilitating factor for victims to contact a VCC, especially for victims of intra-familial sexual abuse.

Secondly, clients make use of the option to receive anonymized counseling. One interviewee said that victims, in some cases, want to stay anonymous in the beginning but once they feel comfortable enough they reveal more and more information about themselves. In this way, the anonymous counseling can be seen as a kind of door-opener for victims who do not dare to openly reveal themselves in the beginning and need some time to feel secure before they can disclose themselves.

Other benefits that were described by the interviewees include, for example, the neutral setting of the institution and the fact that counselors are unrelated and external disclosure recipients. While talking to friends and family always implies a certain history or connection to the victim and in some cases even to the perpetrator, an employee in a VCC is a neutral person without an emotional connection. The same reasoning is also relevant to the partiality of the counselor. One interviewee said:

“... the primary goal is that the child is protected or our partiality always refers to the affected child.”

Especially for victims who were abused by the father, it is important to know that the counselor will be there for them and believe them no matter what. In these cases, victims often experience negative reactions from the mother. One interviewee explained:

“... and they say that they [the disclosure recipients] cannot imagine that. Always then, people are running out of words or people won’t listen when victims want to talk about it.”

Another benefit that needs no further explanation is that counseling in the center is free of charge. Furthermore, there is generally no restriction on the number of counseling hours that victims can make use of, even though a counseling center should rather be viewed as a short term or interim solution.

Something that has frequently been mentioned as well is the specialization of the centers on the topic of sexual abuse. This implies two things. Firstly, the counselors are experts in trauma and sexual abuse, and this makes victims feel that they are talking to the right person, i.e., a competent professional. One interviewer explained:

“... [victims know] that there are people who do this on a daily basis, who have knowledge on this topic.”

Secondly, for many victims of (childhood) sexual abuse, it is very difficult to find the right language or find language for what happened at all. Furthermore, interviewees frequently mentioned that due to the stigmatization of the topic and the resulting shame, victims are scared to tell others about it. However, when disclosing sexual abuse to a VCC, the client does not need to find the right words to explain what happened to them, and they do not have to feel ashamed. One interviewee summarized this:

“And I think it is also important that it is a counseling center that is specialized, I do believe that. Because then, the topic is already clear so to speak.”

VCCs might provide a benefit for victims because they do not regard a legal definition of CSA and can, therefore, appraise any experience of the victim as CSA. In contrast to the police, they are not interested in the illegality of the experience and do not aim to find out the *truth*. This point has been explained by one interviewee, who said:

“In our institution, we deal with everything that the people who come here perceived as a personal boundary-crossing.”

Another important origin brought up in the interviews is guilt. It can originate from two different sources. Firstly, one interviewee explained, that victims themselves, but also the social network and society in general, blame them for what happened. Sometimes they think it is at least partly their fault which in turn hampers the disclosure process.

The second dimension of guilt, particularly relevant for victims of intra-familial CSA, is connected to the consequences of disclosure. An example was given by an interviewee:

“... [the victim:]” I couldn’t stand when mom or dad would have to go to prison because of me. When I destroy the family”. Thus, there are massive feelings of guilt involved.”

The last factor associated with the reluctance of victims to disclose that emerged in the interviews is gender, more precisely the societal view on gender roles. One interviewee explained that the barrier to disclose might be higher for male than female victims:

“For male victims topics like shame, gender roles, supposed weakness, more visible arousal or fear to be labeled gay can lead to the delay in disclosure.”

But against this backdrop, the gender of the perpetrator must be taken into account. According to one interviewee, statistical analyses suggest that 80% to 90% of perpetrators are male, however, in the remaining cases, the perpetrator is female. It has been explained that for victims of female perpetrators, particularly male victims, the decision to disclose is even more hampered because there is such a huge taboo surrounding this topic. The interviewee said:

“... the horror, for example, „how can a mother do something like that?”. And there you can see how different the evaluation of those cases is from the outside.”

Thus, the interview data indicates that the society often sees females, and mothers in particular, as innocent. The common sense assumption is that women do not sexually abuse children, which makes it even harder for these victims, male as well as female, to disclose.

5.5. Comparison to Disclosure at the Police

The process of reporting CSA to the police is very different from disclosing at VCCs. First of all, interviewees consistently clarified that the aim or work of the police is completely different compared to that of a VCC. A victim counselor works partially for the victim, prioritizes the well-being, and supports the victim irrespective of the truth of the information and the identity of the perpetrator. Because a central matter in sexual abuse is the crossing of a boundary, interviewees repeatedly highlighted that one of the priorities in their work is to avoid a repeated boundary-crossing.

As opposed to this, the police pursues the goal to identify the perpetrators and determine the truthfulness of the allegation. The police's duty is to investigate the case, hence, policemen and -women need to ask certain questions among which some can be very detailed. For some victims, this can represent a repeated boundary-crossing that induces the risk of secondary traumatization or secondary victimization on the victim. Several interviewees pointed to the code of conduct in VCCs that gives the client full control over what they want to tell while not doubting what they say to prevent boundary-crossing. A victim's role during a police investigation has been described by one interviewee as rather peripheral:

"... that you [the victim] don't appear as a prosecutor or party concerned but as a victim-witness. This means that your only task is to justify and prove what happened to you."

Furthermore, some interviewees brought up that reporting the abuse can also lead to disappointment. A report might be linked to expectations such as the detention of the perpetrator or the commencement of a legal process. However, as one interviewee asserted:

"It is a mistaken belief that making a report necessarily leads to a conviction or process, that the perpetrators will be remanded in custody immediately."

One interviewee also mentioned the problem of victim-blaming in the German justice system. Even professionals in the justice system sometimes blame the victim for the victimization. Victim protection is statutory, but in reality, the justice system sets different priorities:

“... we can totally understand that many people still believe in our justice system, but unfortunately we witness again and again that there are judgments in sexualized violence, that the victims are not protected. It is not about victim protection, it is about finding criminals.”

It has been affirmed by several interviewees that victim-blaming is no issue in a VCC because the counselors partially work for the victim. A clarification of one interviewee was:

“... where it is primarily about “I am listening to you, you can leave this here, I can endure this, I am not horrified, I won’t judge you.”

5.6. Encouraging and Facilitating Victims’ Disclosure

After having discussed barriers for victims to disclose, interviewees also provided suggestions as to how victims’ decisions to disclose can be facilitated. The following paragraphs will aid the answering of the second sub-question (“How can victims of CSA be encouraged to disclose their experiences?”).

The most frequently mentioned measure to achieve this pointed to education and awareness-raising of the topic “sexual abuse” in society. One interviewee said:

“... when the topic is brought to the world. When people are dealing more with this topic. Because we can absolutely understand that people have a defense attitude, that they say they can’t imagine. We always say that it’s a good defense mechanism.”

The importance of public and societal discussions in this regard has been stressed by several interviewees. They said that public discussions can further help victims to more easily find words for their experiences, which would facilitate disclosure after all. One interviewee suggested that this can be done through campaigns, for example. The team of that particular institution, organized a campaign directed at male victims of sexual abuse. The aim was to raise awareness that males, just like females, can become victims of sexual abuse. Increased awareness about this would consequently facilitate disclosure for these victims.

Another idea that potentially disburdens disclosure relates to protection concepts. One interviewee explained that every institution that deals with children in any way, but also institutions in general, should have a clear protection concept that lays down instructions and codes of conduct for cases of sexual abuse or sexual assault. A victim should know exactly where to go and what to do. The interviewee explained the purpose and scope of protection concepts as the following:

“... protection concepts, so that I know I can feel safe, I know exactly whom to contact. External help is also indicated so that I know there exists such and such counseling center.”

Hence, these protection concepts would help to make members of the institution feel safer, but more crucially, for people, who became a victim of a sexual assault they would facilitate the disclosure process.

6. Discussion

In line with the previous structure of this thesis, the following discussion of the findings will be divided into separate parts for both the literature review and the interviews. While both parts entail separate analyses, they are still strongly connected. Thus, where possible, findings from both analyses will be linked and discussed cohesively.

6.1. Discussion of the Literature Review

First of all, the review of the literature revealed that research on CSA disclosure (especially disclosure recipients and disclosure pattern) inherits some weaknesses with respect to coherence. Studies deploy different categorizations for the variables of interest. For example, some studies compare CSA within and outside the family, while others compare CSA by strangers and known offenders. As another example, some studies examine whether victims are more likely to disclose to a family member compared to a non-family member, whereas others categories disclosure recipients as mother vs. friends. Due to these differences in coding, it is difficult to compare studies.

Notwithstanding, the presented review of literature on the victim-perpetrator relationship as an influential factor on the different aspects of the disclosure process of victims of CSA showed that the relationship seems to affect certain disclosure aspects and that the disclosure is a complex process that needs to be regarded in its context and under the consideration of the circumstances of the abuse.

The following paragraphs will discuss the findings of the three aspects of the disclosure process separately. Delay in disclosure seems to increase when victims are victimized by known and relative persons compared to strangers, in both formal and informal settings. Only the studies by Arata (1998) and Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994) did not find significant effects. Because these studies originate in the 1990s, it first seems logical to assume an effect of time in CSA disclosure research or to consider them less relevant. However, when inspecting all studies more closely, this conclusion becomes invalid.

Two realizations are important in this regard. First, the date of publication or study conduct is not necessarily equivalent to the time of the original data gathering. For example, Smith et al. (2000) and Kogan (2004) published their papers in the 2000s, however, both used data from national surveys that were conducted in the 1990s (1993 and 1995, respectively). This, in turn, makes them more comparable to the studies by Arata (1998) and Lamb and Edgar-Smith (1994) due to the synchronicity of data gathering. Secondly, the time span between the earliest study (1994) and the latest study (2009) is only 15 years, which is not much, especially when considering the huge disclosure delays that research indicates for victims of CSA. Despite that, the majority of literature still hints at an effect of the victim-perpetrator on the delay of disclosure.

There are several approaches to explain why victims of intra-familial abuse would be more reluctant to disclose in general. The first explanation traces back to the secrecy and special strategies to keep the victim quiet (Kogan, 2004; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000). The perpetrator specifically takes advantage of the bond and attachment they have with the victim to manipulate them and keep them silent. In other words, knowing the victim prior to the abuse gives the offender the opportunity to use strategies that are not available for strangers (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000). A study by Smallbone and Wortley (2000) found that the most common strategy employed by familiar perpetrators is “saying that you [the offender] would go to jail or get into trouble if they told anyone” (p. 62). This strategy was followed by “hoping that the victim would not want to lose you because you gave them so much attention” (p.62).

Secondly, disclosing abuse by family members is generally linked to higher costs for the victim (Ullman, 2007). The victim might be afraid that the disclosure conflicts with the loyalty

towards the family or perpetrator (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004), or they may fear to lose the affection of the perpetrator or to be blamed or punished (Sauzier, 1989). These fears are connected to the earlier mentioned ambivalent feeling that victims of relative or emotionally close offenders usually have towards the perpetrator. Furthermore, the victim might be afraid that the family negatively reacts to the disclosure (Leander, 2010). In line with this, it has been found that when victims accuse family members of CSA, they are more often faced with disbelief, which consequently results in more self-blame and shame (Ullman, 2007).

The last approach applies specifically to very young children. Because of young children's developmental stage and lack of understanding about sexuality, it is easier for them to identify abuse by a stranger as "wrong", while abuse by a familiar person is very confusing for them and less clearly categorized as "wrong" (Kogan, 2004).

Beyond the reluctance to disclose in general, reporting to the police seems to be additionally burdensome and preceded by long disclosure delays of intra-familial CSA victims. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is that a formal report might require some actions by the victim or entail consequences that victims of intra-familial CSA may perceive and evaluate differently than victims of stranger sexual abuse.

Firstly, especially young victims do not have the resources to seek out the police by themselves. Hence, they are dependent on the caretakers' initiation to make a report (Hanson et al., 1999). However, victims of intra-familial CSA might not want their caretakers to know (Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990), for example, because of the above-mentioned fears.

Secondly, a formal report can lead to a conviction and incarceration of the offender (Somers & Szwarcberg, 2001). This might be particularly undesired by victims of intra-familial abuse, where usually the victim (when it is still under-aged) is dependent on the perpetrator for the provision of food, accommodation, and love (Finkelhor, 2008). A conviction or incarceration may eventually lead to the child's removal from the family, and even though a family member inflicted the traumatizing experiences upon the child, often victims neither want to be removed from nor do they want the perpetrator to be punished (victim counselor, personal communication, January 2020). Thus, the child might not disclose of its own accord.

Another possibility is the use of the above-mentioned strategies. If the familiar perpetrator was aware of the child's fear, s/he could manipulate the child into remaining silent (Smallbone & Wortley, 2000).

For the choice of the disclosure recipient, there was less agreement among the studies included. While all studies found an effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the chosen confidants of the victim, the identity of the disclosure recipient was not always the same. Some

investigations found that being abused by a family member or known person is related to telling a parent, especially the mother, or adult person (e.g., Kogan, 2004; Stein & Nofziger, 2008), whereas others found that these victims were more likely to disclose to a friend or less likely to disclose to a parent (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Rakovec-Felser & Vidovic, 2016; Vincent & Daniel, 2004).

However, irrespective of the validity of the results, both findings can be explained by the expected responses from the confidant (Malloy & Lyon, 2008; Ullman, 2007). On the one hand, it is possible that victims expect unsupportive reactions and disbelief from their family members, in particular the mother, when the perpetrator is from the same family. It is likely that the existence of a relation or a bond between the offender and the disclosure recipient may bias the recipient's objective evaluation of the victim's portrayal of the incidents (Bolen, 2002). This bias is less likely to exist in cases where the offender is a stranger without a bond with the recipient. The decision of the victim to disclose the sexual abuse might be negatively influenced by the expected negative response which is mediated by this bond (Arata, 1998).

On the other hand, the opposite is also possible and victims might perceive their mother as supportive and assisting disclosure recipients. They might think that their trusted mother is able to protect them from the abuse within the family, whereas friends as confidants are less helpful in this regard. While this explanation can be applied to relative confidants in general, it seems that it applies to a lesser extent when the family member is someone other than a parent (Stein & Nofziger, 2008).

Moreover, whether a victim discloses to a peer or a family member such as a mother has also been linked to the age of the victim (Kogan, 2004). It seems that younger children are less likely to tell a peer and consequently are only left with the option to tell a family member. An increase of the victim's age correlates with an increase of the importance of peer relationships. In other words, older victims have more trusted peers available for the disclosure and are therefore more akin to tell a peer and less akin to tell a parent, compared to younger victims (Kogan, 2004). In addition to this, older children have an increased cognitive capability and are thus more likely to understand the risks of telling a family member. Hence, they may anticipate more negative reactions from family members than from peers (Arata, 1998; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994).

The results for disclosure patterns are mixed. Some findings indicate an effect of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the variable, while others do not. However, owing to the differences in the variables of investigation used, it is not surprising that the findings were mixed. Furthermore, one cannot deduct that the findings are *contradictory*. Rather, these findings show

how diverse the disclosure pattern is, for both victims of intra-familial and extra-familial abuse. This represents an important finding, too. As explained earlier, the pattern of disclosure affects the credibility of the victim (e.g., Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 1993; Myers, 1992; Myers et al., 1999), which in turn can lead to secondary victimization of the victim if it is not believed. People, including judicial and legal authorities, need to understand that certain disclosure patterns, such as a recantation, do not imply that the victim is lying.

6.2. Discussion of the interview findings

Most of the studies in the literature review did not include VCCs as a choice of confidant. In general, research on VCCs is missing to date. Apart from the study by Vincent and Daniel (2004), that analyzed data from a victim counseling phone line, no other study specifically considered victim counseling services as confidants. However, due to the risk of secondary victimization in formal disclosures as well as disclosures to family members, research on VCCs as a disclosure alternative was needed. By interviewing employees from VCCs, this thesis is an attempted move towards filling this gap. The interview data analysis yielded that VCCs are indeed a valuable disclosure alternative.

A general advantage for victims of all types of perpetrators is the specialization and expertise of the employees in this very sensitive topic. Research is in line with this finding and likewise suggests that knowledge about CSA by professionals is an important aspect of the work with CSA survivors (McGregor et al., 2010). The specialization of VCCs can encourage victims who feel ashamed because of the stigmatization attached to sexual abuse and who struggle to find the right words. Riordan and Verdel (1991) already discovered that victims of CSA have difficulties in verbalizing their experiences. When victims are still young, this might trace back to their lack of specific sexual knowledge. However, victims of all ages struggle to talk about the topic and research indicates that talking about things related to one's sexuality can elicit shame and uneasiness (Bosman, 2019). Linking these findings with the results from the literature review reveals an interesting indication. Reflecting on the suggested higher reluctance of intra-familial victims to disclose, VCCs centers may represent a particularly advantageous disclosure setting for these victims due to the regulations in place.

For many victims of intra-familial CSA, a formal institution as a disclosure institution is no option due to the consequences a formal report entails (e.g. incarceration of the perpetrator or removal from the family) (Somer & Szwarcberg, 2001). In these cases, the professional secrecy and prohibition of counselors to report the cases to other institutions is an important and

possibly facilitating factor for CSA victims' decision to contact a VCC, especially for victims of intra-familial sexual abuse. Other researchers have linked this to victims' perception that abuse by a family member is not severe enough or that they do not fit the stereotypical abuse victim and therefore might not be worth a report (e.g., Felson et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 2009). Thus, VCCs might provide a benefit for victims, especially those of intra-familial sexual abuse, because they are not interested in the illegality of the experience and treat everything the client brings to them as sexual abuse.

Furthermore, a victim counselor is a neutral person without a connection to either the victim or the perpetrator. In cases of intra-familial CSA or abuse by familiar perpetrators, the offender often has a bond to other people in the social network of the victim which might prevent the victim from disclosing to any person from this network because it might expect a negative response owing to this bond (Arata, 1998). When a child has been abused, for instance by its father, it is often observed that the reaction of the mother to the child's disclosure is to defend the offender rather than believing the child (Russell, 1986). This explains why, especially for CSA victims of family members or familiar offenders, the neutral and unconnected setting of VCCs might be crucial.

A second focus of the interviews was to ascertain ways to encourage victims of CSA to disclose. The interviews yielded that awareness-raising is an important and valuable measure that can be used to achieve higher rates of disclosure. Society's attitude on issues surrounding sexual abuse is one of the biggest causes of victims' reluctance to disclose. Research has indicated that in Germany, awareness-raising of sexual abuse is not sufficient yet. However, understanding and awareness-raising of the topic at the individual, institutional, and societal level are needed to help all parties involved, the victim, the perpetrator, the victim's family, professionals and everyone else in the victim's environment, to respond and react appropriately to the abuse (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2016). "The key components of awareness-building efforts should include: what child sexual abuse is; its prevalence; who experiences it, and at what ages; who inflicts it; its criminality and other legal consequences; how a child feels when and after being victimized; the serious harms and consequences caused to the child; the tendency towards non-disclosure; children's truthfulness in disclosure (even if they recant); children's typical emotional, social and behavioral responses after victimization, including ways in which they may indicate their experience without frank disclosure; and principles of consent, children's rights, and gender equality. Professionals and institutional leaders must also be aware of their legal and ethical duties to report known and suspected cases and their legal liability for breaching their duty" (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2016, p. 308).

Mathews and Collin-Vézina (2016), however, note that awareness-raising alone neither leads to a reduction in CSA nor to appropriate responses by the victim's environment or an easier disclosure process for victims. According to the researchers, empathy is a second necessary measure. What they refer to is that in order to behave and respond appropriately to the victim's needs, people need to be able to imagine and understand the victim's experience and situation and not be distressed about it. Thus, if there was more awareness about the topic and people would respond more appropriately to CSA, victims may be less concerned with negative responses and disclosure would be disburdened for them.

This point again highlights the significance of appropriate and positive reactions by confidants to help victims and to prevent secondary victimization (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 2003; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). To incorporate the victim-perpetrator relationship variable into this discussion, for victims of intra-familial CSA these measures might be particularly important. It has been found that victims by family perpetrators are more likely to receive unsupportive reactions and disbelief from non-offending caregivers more than victims of extra-familial abuse (Bolen, 2002; Malloy & Lyon, 2008; Ullman, 2007). Hence, if awareness-raising and empathy augmentation lead to more appropriate reactions of confidants, especially victims of abuse by family members can benefit from awareness-raising and education of CSA.

6.3. Strengths and Limitations

A strength of the literature review is the approach of disclosure as a multidimensional process by including three different aspects of the disclosure rather than focusing on one dimension only. Disclosure is a process that should not be reduced to one aspect, such as the delay. Doing this would neglect the entirety and complexity of the issue. A further advantage is the inclusion of both, formal and informal settings of disclosure. As indicated by the interview findings and prior research, disclosure at the police has different characteristics and implications than disclosure in informal settings. Thus, it is important to include both settings to get a complete understanding of the disclosure behavior.

A conventional rationale in research pertains to the interpretation of findings, in the context of a number of limitations. Although the literature search used several criteria and specific keywords, there was no specific and explicit search and selection guide used. This may entail two limiting consequences.

First, it is possible that relevant articles are not included in the review because they were not found with the collection strategy and the keywords employed. There might be more synonyms and formulations of the concepts used in this review. A second limitation concerns the small number of studies included. The limited extent of this thesis did not allow for the inclusion of more studies, wherefore the focus was set on the most relevant ones. However, the inclusion of more studies would increase the validation of the findings from the review.

Another limitation of the literature review is that most studies were conducted in the USA, and no study from Germany was included. The legal, social, and community service systems might differ between countries, hence findings of disclosure behavior in the USA cannot necessarily be transferred to Germany.

Likewise, the second part of the paper, the interview analysis, has several strengths and limitations. A strength of the interviews is that the target groups of the five VCCs are focused on victims of different gender and ages. Considering that the data collection included a wide range of victim identities, the generalizability in this regard should be given.

Simultaneously, the generalizability of the interview data might be limited. The interviews were only conducted with employees from VCCs in Hamburg, a big city with a population of around 1.8 million people (Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2019). It is possible that the disclosure behavior of victims in more rural areas differs from that of victims in urban areas like Hamburg.

6.4. Implications and Future Research

Most CSA happens within the family or the close social network of the victim (e.g., Hébert et al, 2009; López et al., 2017). At the same time, mostly due to media's impact on society, many people still think of the stranger rape as the typical form of CSA (Soothill, 2004). This, together with the tremendous consequences of abuse and the potentially beneficial effects of disclosure, illustrates the importance of further investigations of the influence of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the disclosure process. In doing so, the knowledge gained can be used to introduce measures and policy changes for the benefit of victims of CSA.

The current literature review showed that studies of CSA disclosure, particularly research on disclosure recipients and disclosure pattern, employ different approaches to the categorization of research variables. This obstructs comparison between studies and hence verification and confirmation of findings. Thus, future research would benefit from a more coherent approach in this regard. A more concrete suggestion would be to uniformly classify

perpetrator identities (such as step-parents) into either of the categories (e.g., intra-familial abuse).

Furthermore, none of the studies directly compared formal and informal disclosures. However, the analysis showed that the setting (formal vs. informal) might play a role in the victim's decision to disclose. Therefore, further research should examine the influence of the setting on victims' disclosure delay more directly.

Moreover, researchers should include and account for other important variables. For example, the literature indicates that the age of the victim at the time of the disclosure might be a crucial determinant for disclosure behavior, as well (e.g., Arata, 1998; Kogan, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994). Research agrees that due to the long delays in disclosure by all victims of CSA most victims reached adulthood when they decide to tell someone. However, or precisely because of that, research would benefit from more inclusive methods that combine (and contrasts) victims of different ages at the time of disclosure to develop a better understanding of differences in disclosure behavior by children and adults. Moreover, the vast majority of studies in this analysis predominantly used female samples. Even though it is recognized that the majority of CSA victims are female, the findings might not be applicable to male victims. However, the interview analysis revealed that the disclosure process of male victims might be different, thus future research should pay more attention to the disclosure process of male victims.

As for the interview analysis, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis is the first detailed investigation of VCCs as disclosure options for victims of CSA in Germany. It identified several advantages of these centers, however, further research on VCCs is needed to confirm the current findings.

Additionally, victims could benefit from societal and governmental measures that aim at spreading the knowledge around the possibility to disclose to such an institution. It is possible that victims are not aware of the existence of these centers or do not know about the regulations in place (e.g., free of charge, anonymous counseling, confidentiality) and are thus prevented from contacting a VCC.

Furthermore, the reactions and attitudes of victims' confidants are among the most important determinants of the disclosure outcome (Campbell et al., 2001; Ullman, 2003; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). The reactions can decide whether a disclosure is beneficial or destructive for a victim and whether a disclosure is initiated in the first place. Therefore, society and especially professionals and law enforcement personnel need to be educated about the particularities of CSA to be able to more appropriately respond to it.

Finally, the discussed measures to encourage victims to disclose are useful but not exhausted. Especially awareness-raising through campaigns represents a mean that is unlikely to affect children's attitudes. However, despite generally low CSA disclosure rates, among those victims that do disclose the delay is usually high and thus many already reached adulthood at the time of disclosure. Therefore, advanced research on measures to facilitate early disclosure of CSA, targeting children in particular, would be fruitful.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this thesis are twofold. Relating to the first research question, the thesis examined the role of the relationship between victim and perpetrator on the disclosure behavior (disclosure delay, disclosure recipients, disclosure pattern) of victims of CSA in formal as well as informal settings by reviewing the existing literature. The review indicates that this relationship has an effect on the disclosure delay and disclosure recipients. More precisely, knowing and/or being related to the offender seems to extend the disclosure delay and seems to decrease the likelihood of intra-familial CSA to disclose to a parent or rather a mother. However, as to the disclosure pattern, there is less agreement about such an effect.

As to the second research question, the thesis identified VCCs in Germany as a valuable disclosure setting for victims of CSA. It seems that particularly victims of intra-familial CSA can benefit from this opportunity. Counselors in these institutions are bound by only a few regulations which give them leeway to provide victims tailored counseling according to their needs. Furthermore, it seems that the few laws and regulations in place (e.g., confidentiality) might have a positive effect on the disclosure process of the victim. Given the right circumstances, a disclosure can be advantageous for the victims. Lastly, and concerning the sub-question of this thesis, it was found that awareness-raising and protection concepts might positively affect a victim's decision to disclose.

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