

SIMONE EELMAA

The social categorization
of sexual abuse



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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This doctoral thesis is based on the following original publications referenced in the text by their respective Roman numerals.

- I. **Eelmaa, S., & Murumaa-Mengel, M.** (2020). “Kui ongi tõsi, siis ise süüdi!” Seksuaalvägivallaga seonduvad stereotüübid ühe Eesti laste ja noorte veebifoorumi teemalgatustes ja vastustes [“If it is true, then it is your own fault”: Recurring stereotypes about sexual violence in an Estonian children’s online forum]. *Mäetagused*, 76, 29–62.
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- II. **Eelmaa, S.** (2021). “My daughter is not like that”: A qualitative study of parental perception on child sexual abuse risk. *Discourse*, 7(2), 56–80.
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- III. **Eelmaa, S., & Murumaa-Mengel, M.** (2022). Who is worthy of help? Constructing the stereotype of the “ideal victim” of child sexual abuse. In Stelzmann, D., & Ischebeck, J. (Eds.), *Child sexual abuse and the media* (pp. 261–278). Baden-Baden: NOMOS.
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- IV. **Eelmaa, S.** (2022). Sexualization of children in deepfakes and hentai. *Trames Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 26(76/71, 2), 229–248.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/6wuhj>
- V. **Eelmaa, S.** (2023). Exploring parental perspectives on online sexual risks and harm. *Trames Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 27(77/72, 2), 91–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2023.2.01>

AUTHOR’S CONTRIBUTION

The author was solely responsible for researching and writing the second, fourth, and fifth publications. For the first and third publications, the author was responsible for research design, data collection, and data analysis and held a primary role in writing the articles. The co-author of these studies provided methodological guidance for the ethical fabrication method, final stages of analysis, and writing the manuscripts.

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*

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*

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*

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*

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INTRODUCTION

I would start the conversation with a question:
If the world deems you unworthy of help, would you still pursue it?

While the question may seem dramatic, it is only intended to be thought-provoking. We have probably all heard the saying, “it does not matter what others think,” at some point in our lives. But that does not seem to be the case. It does matter what others think; furthermore, even what we perceive others to think impacts our decisions and behavior (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016). Four years ago, I started researching how children who were victims of sexual abuse sought help *via* anonymous online forums and what responses they received from others (**Study I**). Though it is clear to most of us that these children need unprejudiced and supportive messages, reality gave them the opposite. The central theme framing their help-seeking process was the “if it is true... it is your own fault” trope. Most children were not even believed to begin with because, for some reason, it was held that “gang-rapes don’t happen to children,” “rape doesn’t usually last for more than five minutes,” or “your peer cannot be that much bigger and stronger than you.” Victims’ experiences were relentlessly mitigated, normalized, and redefined by others, almost as if the people who were not present during the incident decide whether you are a victim or not and what kind of treatment you deserve. Thus, it prompted a question – why is it that some sexual abuse victims are treated as “more deserving” of help than others? That study and other questions arising formed the basis for this thesis and the studies that followed. It captured the issue at hand and narrowed the focus to the role of the discourses surrounding child sexual abuse, more specifically the way these discourses influence societal and individual perceptions and the consequential impact these have on people’s behavior and treatment of victims. To set the problem, I will outline five central postulations that underpin this thesis.

First, **child sexual abuse (CSA) is a serious problem**. What makes it serious is best explained by two levels of consideration – the prevalence of it and its individual-level impact. From the prevalence aspect, we know that sexual abuse is a widespread concern (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013). According to the World Health Organization (2022), one in five women and one in 13 men report being sexually abused as a child. A worldwide meta-analysis suggested that 24% of women had experienced sexual abuse in childhood (Pan et al., 2021). A study of 42 000 women in 22 European countries found some 12% of women indicate that they have experienced some form of sexual abuse or incident by an adult before the age of 15, which corresponds to about 21 million women in the EU (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). These statistics, while indicative of the widespread and severe nature of sexual abuse, do not fully capture its extent due to underreporting and variations in definitions and methodologies across studies. The number of reported cases is estimated to be significantly lower than the actual victimization rate (Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Soo et al., 2015b; Ullman,

2002). The other level of consideration pertains to the serious nature of CSA. Above all, sexual abuse is a grave violation of human rights, most often considered a traumatic experience. The consequences can be significant and manifest in a variety of ways, including physical injuries, psychological trauma, and increased risk of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Coyle, 1995; Maniglio, 2009; Romano & De Luca, 2001; Walsh et al., 2010). Research on the impact of sexual abuse has exponentially increased over the past two decades, with varying conclusions on the relationship between sexual abuse and adverse outcomes. However, there is no consensus on the causal relationship between victimization and the development of severe adverse effects (Maniglio, 2009), meaning it cannot be assumed that certain outcomes or reactions are intrinsically linked to sexual abuse victimization, or even more so, proof of abuse.

The second postulation states that **we have a duty to protect children**. As a society, we have a moral obligation to protect our children and provide them with a safe and nurturing environment to grow and thrive. Children are inherently vulnerable and rely on adults to ensure their physical and emotional well-being. This responsibility extends beyond individual parents or caregivers and encompasses the broader community. Society's duty to protect children from abuse is mainly reflected in laws and policies designed to prevent and punish such abuse. One of the great commitments to fulfill this duty is the mandatory reporting laws, which require certain professionals to report their suspicions to the authorities. The criminalization of sexual abuse, as another mechanism to combat it, also varies across the world, although as new methods of perpetration emerge, regulations do not always keep pace with these developments. The implementation of such measures is dependent on various institutional factors, including the availability of resources and the knowledge and skills of the stakeholders. At the same time, the duty to protect needs to be grounded in reason and scientific evidence rather than relying on moral panic or fearmongering. For instance, the long fixation on the notion of "stranger danger" originated from the social anxieties about crime and safety in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the increased media coverage of high-profile cases of child abductions and murders during that time (Wodda, 2018), yet it has well persisted to this day as a common approach to sexual abuse prevention by parents (AlRammah et al., 2019; Babatsikos, 2011; Chen & Chen, 2005; **Study II**). What is more, areas intersecting with sexual abuse (e.g., online sexual risks that do not amount to sexual abuse) may receive an undue level of exaggeration and heightened public anxiety. This can lead to unhelpful measures such as restricting children's internet use instead of teaching them the relevant skills to navigate the online realm with confidence and responsibility (Staksrud, 2016: 159–163; Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). Successful protection of children hinges on informed responses.

Third, **our perceptions and understandings drive our actions**. Our perception refers to the way we interpret and make sense of the world around us, while our understanding is a more conscious and deliberate interpretation of information. Our knowledge of sexual abuse and the way we perceive victims and

perpetrators often impacts the decisions we make and the responses we give. The literature suggests that people who perceive victims who were raped at a party as partially to blame are more likely to act less empathetic toward them (**Studies I and III**); jurors are more likely to consider the sexual assault perpetrator guilty when the victim was sober during the assault (Schuller & Wall, 1998); grooming by a female teacher is less likely considered a crime compared to grooming by male teachers (Knoll, 2010); child victims are more likely believed when the offender is a stranger compared to an offender known to the child such as a parent or a family friend (Davies & Rogers, 2009). Similarly, victims who feel supported and believed are more likely to come forward and seek justice, while those who fear stigma or blame are more likely to remain silent (Gemara & Katz, 2023; **Studies I and III**). Cohen & Mannarino (2000) found parental support of the child and the child's abuse-related attributions and perceptions to be strong predictors of treatment outcomes. Furthermore, a common parental approach to CSA prevention is teaching children to wear appropriate clothing (AlRammah et al., 2019). Such an approach has little bearing on the nature of sexual abuse and the context in which it most often happens. Studies show that, in most cases, sexual abuse is perpetrated by someone the child knows and trusts (Finkelhor, 1994; Smallbone & Wortley, 2001; Tammiste, 2022; Uisk, 2023). Besides, some children are abused from an early age, meaning there is no logical correlation to the clothes the child is wearing. Parents also tend to judge sexual abuse as a low risk to their children and, due to such beliefs, do not engage in CSA prevention activities or discussions with their children (Chen & Chen, 2005; Collins, 1994; Collins, 1996; **Study II**). Overall, understanding CSA-related perceptions can give us the tools and knowledge we need to recognize, prevent, and respond to sexual abuse.

Following the previous point, **the sociocultural framing of sexual abuse matters**. Our perceptions are strongly informed by wider sociocultural determinants. The effects of the framings are observable on all levels of the society. On the macro level, we can see the ways in which social attitudes and cultural norms shape how sexual abuse is perceived, discussed, and addressed. On this level, we would look at the wider discourse and the factors that influence it. The dependence on the sociocultural context is perhaps best seen in the significant variation in the age of consent laws worldwide, where the average age is between 16 and 18 (Clough, 2012), but it can be as low as twelve (UNICEF, 2019). According to Robertson (2016), the age of consent law has seen constant changes and inconsistencies in its sociocultural framing for over 800 years since its first recorded instance. As a result, laws around the world define the socially appropriate age of consent as anywhere from 12 to 18, while there has also been a differentiation between homosexual and heterosexual acts or gender-specific applications, such as regulations only applying to girls. On the mesolevel, we look at the societal beliefs and attitudes about CSA at the level of intermediate social structures, such as families, peer groups, and organizations. For instance, the sociocultural framing of CSA as a private matter can cause a kindergarten to disregard information about possible abuse, as they may believe it is not their place to intervene (Alazri

& Hanna, 2020). On the micro level, we look at the individual level understandings and perceptions of sexual abuse. For example, offenders of homophobic rape (also known as corrective rape)¹ find justifications for their actions from the tenets of their social and cultural ethos. At the same time, victims face additional barriers to help in their communities (Doan-Minh, 2019) as the practice is used to punish perceived abnormal behavior and reinforce societal norms. Ultimately, the interactions of different levels do not operate in isolation. Individual perspectives stem from the macro- and mesolevel framings, either in opposition to or in support of the general discourses. Likewise, the individual framings and experiences can feed back into and shape the wider sociocultural narratives. Babatsikos (2010) identified a need for more current and country-specific research to better understand how parents perceive and manage the risk of sexual abuse. The specific sociocultural context is relevant for understanding how people (besides parents) perceive and respond to CSA, as cultural norms and values may shape their understanding and reporting of such incidents.

While previous postulations were based on empirical and theoretical research, the last is meant to provide a brief explanation of the epistemological stance of the thesis. The postulation posits that studying **language is a powerful tool for understanding societal and cultural framings**. It is rooted in the idea that language is a social activity (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 9) and that individuals and groups use language to construct and communicate their beliefs, values, and attitudes on any issue. By examining the language used to discuss sexual abuse, we can gain insights into how the issue is framed, defined, and understood by different individuals and groups. For example, the language used in media coverage of sexual abuse can reflect broader cultural attitudes toward victims and perpetrators (Greer, 2007; Wodda, 2018; Woodiwiss, 2023). Similarly, legal language and policy documents can reveal how sexual abuse is conceptualized within a particular legal system and the values and priorities that underpin it (Wisamayanti et al., 2021). The language used by victims provides insight into how victims themselves understand and cope with the aftermath of abuse (**Studies I and III**) or with identity positioning (see, e.g., Healicon, 2016). While these are just a few examples, they illustrate the central role that language plays in this thesis.

Despite extensive research on CSA prevalence and effects, there remains a substantial gap in understanding how sexual abuse-related perceptions shape and are shaped by societal, legal, and psychological frameworks. The impact of these perceptions on disclosure, crime reporting, and prevention strategies is poorly understood, often leading to ineffective or even counterproductive measures (see, e.g., Fix et al., 2023; Socia et al., 2019). This gap hinders the development of

¹ The United Nations (2015) UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines recommend using the term “homophobic rape” instead. This is because the term “corrective rape” implies that the assault is an attempt to correct or rectify a perceived deviance in the victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity, which is not only inaccurate but also reinforces harmful stereotypes and prejudices. The term “homophobic rape” was also said to more accurately reflect the motivation behind this type of violence.

targeted and effective responses. With that in mind, this thesis is about child sexual abuse-related perceptions. **It aims to conceptualize and explain perceptions of child sexual abuse and the risk thereof across various publics – namely victims, parents, and segments of the general public – to create more efficient prevention and intervention efforts.** This thesis introduces novel perspectives on the societal perception of sexual abuse through an interdisciplinary lens, advancing our understanding of the nuances and complexities in how CSA is conceptualized and addressed. This was approached with a multifaceted analytical framework that combines sociology, law, victimology, criminology, and psychology. This cross-disciplinary approach unveiled new dimensions of public perception, risk identification, and attitudes toward victims and offenders.

The aim was approached using the following **research questions**:

- **RQ1:** What is considered sexual abuse, and what is not? (**Studies I–V**)
- **RQ2:** How people characterize child sexual abuse victims and offenders? (**Studies I, II, III, IV**)
- **RQ3:** How people understand and describe the risk of child sexual abuse? (**Studies I, II, V**)
- **RQ4:** What are the reported or observed implications of sexual abuse perceptions? (**Studies I, II, III**)

Adopting a social constructionist lens, I explored the sociocultural constructs of sexual abuse perceptions through a **qualitative methodology**. I focused on studying three populations: the victims, the parents, and segments of the general public. The corpus of this thesis includes five published articles, four of which explore how sexual abuse is perceived within the Estonian population. The choice of the Estonian context serves as a deliberate strategic point of inquiry, given that the sociocultural narratives of post-Soviet societies about sexual abuse have been rather underexplored and undertheorized in the existing literature. Correspondingly, this thesis makes significant **contributions** to multiple domains of the study of sexual abuse. Empirically, it provides insights into the conceptualization of CSA, specifically how participants perceive the incidents, victims, and offenders, and risks related to it, as well as the “visible”² implications of these perceptions, both from Estonian and global perspectives. Theoretical contributions include further development of the concepts of *defensive othering effect* to explain risk perception-related reactions, *conditional harmfulness* for explaining perceptions of predetermined extent of harm, and the *conceptual model of social*

² In the present context, “visible” refers to the implications observed in participant’s behaviors and interactions (such as victim blaming), and those articulated by participants (such as reports of disclosing abuse to parents or police). Implications not evident in the empirical data were excluded from the analysis. This denotes that I did not pursue additional inquiries into unreported implications, and such omissions were beyond the scope of the current study’s analytical boundaries. This delimitation is further discussed in Chapter 2.3, “Limitations of studies.”

categorization of sexual abuse, including the key elements relevant to the categorization. Methodologically, this thesis explores suitable methods for sensitive research and the ethical and practical challenges researchers may face. Finally, the thesis proposes practical recommendations for addressing issues related to CSA. Overall, this thesis offers new perspectives on child sexual abuse-related perceptions and provides valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

The thesis cover article is **structured** as follows. Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature comprising both empirical and theoretical studies about sexual abuse and other concepts relevant to the thesis. Specifically, it discusses the relevant definitions, definitional issues, sociocultural framing, risk-associated terms and concepts, and other key conceptualizations. The last subchapter introduces the Estonian context of the thesis, which is relevant for the interpretation of findings from **Studies I–III** and **V**. Chapter 2 describes and justifies the research materials and methods, the ethical and methodological considerations relevant to the thesis, and the limitations of the studies. It further includes a subchapter about some additional methodological considerations related to role enactment as a data collection method. Chapter 3 presents the research findings. It details the social categorization of sexual abuse, victim- and offender-related perceptions, conceptualizations of sexual abuse risk, and the observable and reported implications of these societal and personal perceptions. Chapter 4 provides an analysis and interpretation of the findings, placing them in the context of the literature. The thesis concludes with a section providing answers to the research questions, recommendations for practice, and directions for future research.

I would like to make two final introductory notes about this thesis. First, the use of “we” throughout this thesis is meant in a broad sense (“we” as a society or “we” as researchers). “We” does not refer to me in collaboration with another researcher or any other specific individual. Second, in terms of the common style of writing in sociology, it may seem a bit unusual. Stemming from my legal background, I have quite a predilection for footnotes as a means to provide additional information or explore certain questions. Though these add depth, for those who may not share the same enthusiasm, I have ensured the main text remains comprehensible even without delving into the occasional “footnote discussions.” Thus, the most important information will be in the main text, while the footnotes provide some side discussions, additional remarks, or information that is relevant but not necessarily in its primary importance.

Terminological dilemma

The terms we use reflect and influence our perception of the world, establishing a shared language and framework for discussions (Foucault, 1972). The choice of one term over another can influence how a concept is interpreted or understood. Terms may also hold varying meanings across disciplines; for instance, the term “risk” holds a slightly different meaning in economics than in sociology (cf. Aven & Renn, 2009; Livingstone, 2010). The chosen language can further cultivate a sense of community or reveal ideological alignment. Selection of terms, thus, carries weight and, therefore, the conscious use of language should be an integral part of academic practice.³ By conscious, I suggest we must not simply echo the phrases and terminologies of prevailing discourses, ideologies, or social movements without consideration. Instead, we should strive to actively engage in the discourse. A widely contested terminological distinction in public discourse is **the choice between the terms “victims” and “survivors.”** The discussion is not new or recently emerging; it has been a contested issue at least since the 1980s (see, e.g., Gondolf & Fisher, 1988; Kelly et al., 1996; Spry, 1995). The preference for “survivors” over “victims” is usually driven by a narrative that emphasizes resilience and recovery and aims to avoid the stigma often attached to the term “victims.” It is viewed as empowering those who have undergone traumatic experiences by highlighting their ability to cope and overcome (Healicon, 2016: 33ff.; Thompson, 2000). However, the term “survivor” may inadvertently trivialize the severity of the harm experienced by shifting focus toward strength and recovery, thereby imposing an expectation thereof, which may not necessarily align with all experiences. For instance, Lyra (in Healicon, 2016: 34–35) talks about the pressure she felt to transform from victim to survivor and, thus, to “move on.” I observe similar implications with the term. It does focus on the agency, but it also leaves the victim standing alone as it shifts the focus away from the offender.

The term “victim” underlines the harm suffered as well as keeps a spotlight on the wrongdoer and on society’s responsibility to provide justice. Not to say that the expectation of harm does not categorize the victim into a pathologized victimhood: it likely does, but having to pick between two terms of which neither is ideal, there is no universally satisfactory choice here. The dilemma itself is a losing case as neither of the terms is free from contentious discursive formations... and the expectations thereof. Nonetheless, for the sake of a coherent discussion, we must lean on some descriptors. To avoid the inherent prescriptions of potential identity positioning, we would need to adopt an entirely different term. Yet, any alternatives that I have observed in use⁴ are not only less familiar and wordier, making them cumbersome in frequent discussions, but also introduce a form of

³ Let it be said that my stance on current discussion is limited to the academic practices in social sciences.

⁴ Such as a “victimized person” which essentially is an elongated version of “victim,” or alternatives like “people subjected to sexual abuse,” “those who endured sexual abuse,” “individuals affected by such acts,” or “persons with lived experience,” and so forth.

detachment. In striving for neutrality, we risk obscuring the very essence of the issue, making it sound more abstract and removed than it should be. I find little merit in hiding behind euphemisms. Personally, I do not view the term “victim” as a sign of weakness but as a testimony of resilience in itself. Besides, the term is significantly tethered to the domain of criminal law, preserving some essential subtleties. As a lawyer, I am a stranger to the term “survivors.” The law does not recognize survivors, but the law does recognize victims. Does it set an expectation of harm? Yes, it does. But it does more than just that. It also sets an expectation of the harm-doer serving as a link to the offender, thus drawing much-needed attention to the party responsible. Apart from that, the term holds substantial legal merit, which includes the ability to file a civil claim, granting specific rights within criminal proceedings, and providing access to government-funded services for victims. Not to mention, avoiding a term for its potentially contentious implications when it finds extensive application and relevance in certain contexts would inadvertently contribute to the further stigmatization of victims and victimhood.

While I recognize the term’s potential implications, the choice of terminology ultimately hinges on its intended purpose. My aim in this thesis is not to define or prescribe victims’ identities or position them somewhere,⁵ particularly as I believe neither of the opposing terms (as prescripts) does justice to anyone who suffered from sexual violence, as the constraints of these opposing terms would suggest that there are only two prescribed ways of identifying oneself. However, I do need to reference the people I am studying, and simply calling them “participants” would be even more euphemistic than the other options discussed above. Misleading, too, as I studied other populations as well. A central consideration for me is the certainty and continuity of terms. First, this thesis is predominantly centered on the field of victimology and focuses on phenomena commonly denoted by the term “victim,” making it a more accurate descriptor from that perspective. Second, the term “victim” does have a long-standing history of use in both law and academia. By using the term “victim,” the terminology remains rooted in the domain of a specific act or incident (and the harm suffered), providing certainty in its description. The term “survivor” overextends into the realm of emotional or psychological aftermath and has less to do with the bounds of the abusive incident. Therefore, it just does not make a whole lot of sense to even use the term “survivors” in this thesis. Thus, for the reasons presented, I choose to rely on the term “victims.” To be clear, my views on the matter are limited to the academic discourse and are not meant to impose any label or narrative on any person or extend to interpersonal contexts, where we should respect the labels people use to describe their experiences.

⁵ For further discussion on the identity positioning in the context of victims’ experiences with both terms under consideration, see Healicon, 2016: 16ff.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Conceptualizing child sexual abuse

Defining⁶ sexual abuse may appear deceptively simple at first glance. However, a closer examination of the topic reveals the complexity and nuances that make it far from straightforward. Different disciplines tend to approach defining the concept from different perspectives. The problems in defining CSA and the need to do so have been repeatedly noted since the 1970s and renewed calls have been made for a conceptually robust definition (see, e.g., Coyle, 1995; Greenberg, 1979; La Fontaine, 1990; Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019; Stelzmann & Ischebeck, 2022: 15; Wyatt & Peters, 1986). Different concepts, including child sexual assault, victimization, and exploitation, have been used synonymously, but these terms are rather different forms of sexual abuse than those that have equivalent meanings. Similarly, inaccurate and euphemistic terms like molestation, sex with children, or sexual relations (or even worse – an affair) with a minor are far from being eradicated from the conversation. Those phrases are still present in news stories (see, e.g., Weatherred, 2015) and even in scientific studies.⁷ Defining a concept is not always a formal act of providing a definition; the meaning can be inferred from the context, and the understanding of the meaning then develops in a backward manner. Take, for example, news articles, which rarely provide a definition while covering the stories, yet these stories still influence the public discourse on what is considered sexual abuse (Weatherred, 2015; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999) and what is not.

The lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes child sexual abuse brings about many issues. One of the most pressing concerns is how it affects the legal framework, determining who receives protection, who is held accountable, and who falls through the cracks. Similarly, it impacts the development and implementation of policies and prevention measures, including the scope of their objectives and the targeted groups they aim to assist. Not to mention the relevance of the shared understanding from the media's perspective, given its instrumental role in raising awareness and shaping public discourse on the matter, though the media's portrayal of the issue has been known to perpetuate unhelpful and harmful stereotypes (American Psychological Association, 2007; Greer, 2007;

⁶ To clarify, I do not use the terms “definition” and “conceptualization” interchangeably or consider these to be synonymous. Definitions serve to establish clear boundaries and precise meanings for specific terms, while conceptualizations provide more depth and context but do not aim for such specificity and clarity as definitions do. A great example would be the term “child,” which is usually defined with specific age ranges, while the conceptualization of a “child” might involve a deeper exploration into the developmental stages, social roles, etc.

⁷ A brief Google Scholar search of the term “child molestation” gave over 103 000 results. I was curious to see if that term is still used now, so I searched only from 2022, and there were 7310 results. Most papers on the first page of the search results included the term “child molestation” or “child molester” in their title.

Weatherred, 2015; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999). The media's impact has crystallized in the portrayal of sexual abuse in the context of violent strangers kidnapping children or the stereotypical representation of pedophiles as "creepy middle-aged guys with a mustache" (**Study II**). What people directly impacted by CSA, such as victims and their families, consider as sexual abuse can determine what measures, if any, are taken in case of abuse (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020). Furthermore, the broader understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse among the general public can greatly influence their actions and attitudes toward such incidents. On a conceptual level, the social definition of sexual abuse should be equivalent to the legal definition. Nonetheless, societal attitudes toward certain forms of abuse, such as female teacher-male student sexual abuse, do not always align with legal definitions or the experiences of the victims (Knoll, 2010; **Study II**). Such disparities can create barriers to effective prevention and intervention efforts.

The legal conceptualization of sexual abuse is often jurisdiction-specific and generally encompasses any criminal sexual activity with a child, such as sexual assault, incest, or rape, while the definitions of all those specific crimes can greatly vary. To the best of my knowledge, no jurisdiction has one all-encompassing legal definition of child sexual abuse itself, but typically, there are different types of crimes of sexual nature against children that are criminalized, and CSA itself is not defined under national laws. We have some international and regional legal (and policy) documents that provide a definition and sometimes even make it mandatory for countries to ensure necessary criminalization and victim protection. However, the specifics of these measures remain at the discretion of individual nations. Article 34 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁸ states that "States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse," adding that for those purposes, States Parties need to take all appropriate measures against the exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices; the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials; and, the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity. The key here is to focus on the phrase unlawful sexual activity. Despite the Convention's assertion that children must be protected from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation, it does not provide a definitive explication of either, meaning what constitutes "unlawful sexual activity" is not universally accepted or unilateral but defined

⁸ United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Treaty Series, 1577, 3.

and decided nationally. A similar approach is seen in other international instruments as well.^{9, 10, 11}

The doctrine of the age of consent is central to this discussion as it is the demarcation between lawful and unlawful sexual activities. Regrettably, international frameworks do not prescribe a specific age, thus leaving it up to individual nations to determine what is deemed permissible. This means that what is (by law) considered child sexual abuse in Nigeria (age of consent is 11) or Angola (age of consent is 12) is rather different from what constitutes sexual abuse in countries like Peru (age of consent 14), Japan or Estonia (age of consent is 16).¹² Although I acknowledge the cultural dependence of approaches to crime and sexual conduct, it is difficult to justify unequal legal protection against sexual abuse based on geography. The key considerations for establishing the age of consent are neurobiological and related to children's cognitive and social development, which are universal human experiences and should not drastically vary between countries. While the age of consent doctrine negotiates between legal, historical, sociocultural, and developmental markers (Moore & Reynolds,

⁹ The Lanzarote Convention does provide us with a definition for criminalization purposes. According to Article 18(1), the following acts are considered sexual abuse: (a) engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities; (b) engaging in sexual activities with a child where: use is made of coercion, force or threats; or abuse is made of a recognized position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family; or abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child. Article 18(3) specifies that the provisions are not intended to govern consensual sexual activities between minors, meaning the main focus is on prohibiting adults from engaging in sexual activities with children and children with other children only when coercion, force, threats, or exploitation (of e.g., vulnerability) is present.

¹⁰ Though the European Union's directive 2011/92/EU does not provide an *expressis verbis* definition of child sexual abuse, Article 3 of the Directive lists offenses concerning sexual abuse. The enumerated offenses are rather similar to that of the Lanzarote Convention. The majority of offenses introduced there are connected to the age of sexual consent, though abuse from a recognized position of trust, authority, or influence over the child and the use of coercion, force, or threats are deemed punishable regardless of the age of consent. Besides engaging in sexual activities with a child, the Directive further deems it necessary to criminalize causing children, for sexual purposes, to witness sexual activities or sexual abuse, and coercing, forcing, or threatening a child into sexual activities with a third party.

¹¹ Based on the Lanzarote Convention and directive 2011/92/EU it would be possible to create the following definition: "Child sexual abuse refers to any sexual activity involving a child who has not reached the legal age of sexual activities, or who is subjected to sexual activities through coercion, force, threats, abuse of trust, authority, influence, or a particularly vulnerable situation, as well as causing a child to witness sexual activities for sexual purposes." In a sense, it would be an excellent definition as it covers both contact and non-contact abuse (including technology-facilitated sexual abuse) along with situations where children are forced or coerced into sexual activities regardless of their age, or when children are exploited, e.g., due to specific vulnerabilities. The definition is gender-neutral and does not include any presumed outcome or consequences. The only issue is the lack of clarity on the age of consent.

¹² The data were sourced from the World Population Review and subsequently verified using various online publications, including recent reports and news articles, as of July 2023.

2018), the crux of consent – knowledge, capacity, and voluntariness – points to the developmental factor as being foundational. Though some, for instance, Moore & Reynolds (2018), have argued that the quantification of maturity is itself questionable, it remains necessary. Without any quantification, we would not be able to distinguish children from adults or any other maturity thresholds, such as the legal age for alcohol consumption, criminal responsibility, or marriage. The fundamental objective of age of consent laws is to protect children. Given developmental variances and sociocultural differences, a universal age of consent may be unattainable, but the wide discrepancies observed lack a reasonable justification. It is puzzling that a 13-year-old in Angola is legally deemed capable of consenting to sex with an adult, whereas most other countries set higher age thresholds. Marginal differences of a year or two might be explicable, but a four or five-year gap defies logic, suggesting that children mature differently across nations. If a universal age of consent is untenable, we should at least strive for an international agreement on a minimum age, say, 14 years. This would ensure meaningful implementation of regulations such as Article 34 of the CRC and a more universally applicable standard for the protection of children.

Continuing the discussion on definitional parameters, it is essential to stress the inherent difference between the aims of legal and research definitions. Legal definitions are about enforceability and interpretation within legal systems, while operational definitions are about measurability and replicability in research contexts. While legal definitions can allow enough flexibility for interpretation on the application of the law, operational definitions (within any study) cannot.¹³ Therefore, a singular definition satisfying legal and research needs is not only unfeasible but potentially counterproductive. Acknowledging the distinct aims of legal and scientific contexts and considering definitions in their separate frameworks is presumably more pragmatic; as such, the following discussion aims to outline the issues particularly relevant to research. For instance, differing definitions of sexual abuse often lead to disparate and incomparable results (Finkelhor, 1986). Wyatt & Peters (1986) demonstrated how alterations in definitions significantly influence prevalence-based results, with variation in factors such as the upper age limit for CSA, criteria defining abusive experiences, the inclusion

¹³ That is not to say that legal norms, by nature, can be vague. While laws and regulations must embody the doctrine of legal certainty – meaning they should be clear, precise, and predictable to inform people of expected conduct and safeguard against authority abuse – this does not necessitate extreme specificity. Overly specific legal norms can inadvertently offer a safety net for offenders under the maxim of *nulla pœna sine lege* (no penalty without a law). For example, if legislation restricts the definition of rape to vaginal penetration, this could exclude other forms of the crime and limit the recognition of victims based on gender. Thus, legal norms should strike a balance, offering clarity about what is deemed unlawful yet maintaining a broad enough scope to account for varied methods of criminal conduct. This is especially pertinent to sex crimes against children, where legislation should unequivocally criminalize such offenses, irrespective of how these are perpetrated. Operational definitions, however, cannot allow for such interpretive flexibility, as it would limit replicability and increase subjectivity.

or exclusion of peer offenders, and criteria for adolescent incidents. Other researchers have reported similar findings (e.g., see Finkelhor, 1986; Pereda et al., 2009; Wurtele & Miller-Perrin, 1993: 3–5). Furthermore, Finkelhor (1986: 23) found that some early prevalence studies did not provide any definition while reporting their findings. Examining the history of sexual abuse definitions in research and science revealed an absence of uniformity and precision, dictated largely by discipline-specific boundaries and a pronounced tendency toward unreasonable limitations in definitional elements. Such definitions seem to limit sexual abuse to certain offenders, specific mechanical acts, or victims with specific characteristics.¹⁴

¹⁴ For instance, Schechter & Roberge (1976) defined CSA as “The involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexually abusive activities they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent or which violate social taboos of family roles.” The definition only includes dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents as potential victims, which first is too limiting as children who are not dependent or developmentally immature can also be sexually abused, and second, the term developmentally immature is too vague to avoid inconsistencies in identifying CSA. Furthermore, defining sexual abuse as sexually abusive activities is an example of circular reasoning, meaning a concept is defined with the same concept without any clarification. Also, the phrasing of the incestuous acts as such that violate social taboos of family roles is unnecessarily euphemistic and unreasonably socioculturally dependent. Does it mean that in a community where child marriage is internalized as a cultural norm, sexual acts with children are then not sexual abuse? Schetky & Green (1988: xi) provided the following definition: “Child sexual abuse involves the exploitation of a child for the sexual gratification of an adult.” The problem with this definition is that it excludes abuse from peers. From a legal standpoint, the sexual gratification aim can be incredibly difficult to establish and would also provide a simple defense for the perpetrator. Although it is not a great definition, its vague nature makes it perhaps more suitable for a legal definition than an academic one. If such a definition were used for a prevalence study, the results would provide us with data on CSA committed by adults against children. Then again, the measure of what is considered exploitation and how the sexual gratification aim was established would also need to be provided in the study to ensure replicability. The interdependence and distinctions between disciplines become apparent in Sgroi’s medical/clinical psychology definition (1982:9): “Child sexual abuse is a sexual act imposed on a child who lacks emotional, maturational, and cognitive development.” As a lawyer, I immediately notice (if this would be a legal definition) the conjunctive elements necessary to determine criminal liability as the terms emotional, maturational, and cognitive development are connected with the conjunction AND but not with OR. This means that according to that definition, an act can be considered sexual abuse only when the lack of all three (emotional, maturational, and cognitive development) elements are established and proven. Luckily it is not a legal definition, but even in research, operating on such specifications seems unnecessarily limiting. All in all, according to that definition, it would be sexual abuse if the child is unable to comprehend the act or consent to it. Many early definitions were also rather mechanical by narrowing CSA to specific acts such as penetration, oral-genital contact, etc. For instance, Andrews et al. (2004) defined sexual abuse as follows: “Child sexual abuse (CSA) typically includes unwanted and inappropriate sexual solicitation of, or exposure to, a child by an older person; genital touching or fondling; or penetration in terms of oral, anal or vaginal intercourse or attempted intercourse.” Firstly, the term “inappropriate” is too vague and subjective to help us understand exactly what type of sexual solicitation or exposure falls under sexual abuse. Then, here too, the conjunction between unwanted and inappropriate

In academia, the current understanding of sexual abuse is progressing toward a more inclusive classification, broadly defined as “any sexual activity perpetrated against a minor by means of threat, force, intimidation, or manipulation” (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013). This definition covers a variety of sexual activities, including fondling, exhibitionism, inviting a child to touch or be touched sexually, intercourse, rape, incest, sodomy, involving a child in the production of sexual abuse material (CSAM), online sexual solicitation, and so forth. Though it cannot be considered a universally agreed definition, it has some apparent advantages over some other definitions used in academia. The definition does not assume or limit the victim’s gender or the offender’s age. It manages to avoid the mechanical approach of defining abuse through specific body parts or limiting it only to contact abuse. The latter point is significant, as the constant technological advancements have led to the emergence of new forms of sexual abuse, such as sextortion, live-stream sexual abuse, deepfake CSAM, etc. These CSA forms have seen a considerable surge in prevalence in recent years (IICSA, 2022). The digital transformation of CSA underscores the necessity to expand our understanding beyond the phenomenon’s conventional, often physical, parameters. Haugaard and Reppucci (1988: 13) argued that the notion of a shared meaning of sexual abuse is a myth and suggested that professionals working in the field develop a shared understanding of what constitutes CSA grounded in empirical research and clinical experience. Perhaps instead of a shared meaning in the form of a definition, it might be helpful to start from the conceptual level. Finkelhor (1994) provided two main criteria for a conceptualization of what constitutes sexual abuse – the involvement of a child in sexual activities and the *abusive condition*.¹⁵ If those conditions are met, we are dealing with sexual abuse. Comparing the early definitions (see f.n. 14) against Finkelhor’s conceptualization indicates that many unduly restrict both conceptual elements, often stating that only certain types of children by certain types of offenders and in certain specific ways can be abused, which, in a sense, already points to biased assumptions about what sexual abuse is. Mathews & Collin-Vézina (2019) expanded

demands that exposure or solicitation must be both unwanted and inappropriate. Again, unnecessarily limiting, as solicitation or exposure can be appropriate, yet unwanted – is it not sexual abuse then? Or, vice versa, wanted but inappropriate (e.g., due to the child’s age) – is it not sexual abuse then? That definition also has a rather limited scope as it does not cover most online forms of sexual abuse and includes an age bias as the perpetrator must be an older person. Such a definition ignores the common sexual abuse dynamics by merely focusing on describing certain specific mechanical acts.

¹⁵ Finkelhor explained that the definitional criteria for sexual abuse in legal and research contexts typically include two elements: (1) **the involvement of a child in sexual activities** and (2) **an abusive condition**, such as different forms of coercion or power imbalances that indicate a lack of consent. On a conceptual level, this is exactly what we need to look at – a child’s involvement in sexual activities, meaning any involvement in all sexual activities, not just related to specific body parts or specific activities. And the abusive condition element as that can clearly take many forms, such as physical force, threats, manipulation, or taking advantage of a child’s vulnerabilities.

upon this with a more elaborate four-factor conceptual model. Though it does not include any novel elements *per se*, it further details the conditions and provides a roadmap for better classification.¹⁶ Their model proves especially beneficial for addressing the so-called “complex cases” where categorization is not straightforward. Comparing the two conceptualizations: while definitions have substantially differed, the wider conceptual understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse has remained consistent over the past decades. Therefore, Finkelhor’s (1994) conceptual model, for its clarity and simplicity, serves as the foundational premise for all subsequent deliberations of this thesis.

¹⁶ **The first condition asks whether the person is developmentally or legally considered a child.** They define a “core case” as someone who is both developmentally a child and below the legal age of adulthood. A “clearly excluded case” involves a person who is not developmentally a child and is above the legal age. A “complex case” could include an underage person with advanced psychosocial development in a society where the legal age of adulthood is higher than their age. The condition emphasizes that a child, by definition, cannot provide true consent due to their developmental stage and limited capacity to comprehend the nature and consequences of the act. **The second condition asks whether the child is unable to provide true consent** to the act or whether they had the capacity but did not give true consent. In most cases, a child lacks the necessary capacity to give true consent. Even when a child has the capacity to consent due to advanced psychosocial development, true consent might be absent due to coercion, force, or pressure. Conversely, clearly excluded cases involve situations where a child has the ability to give consent and does so freely. Complex cases arise where factors like coercion and social or economic pressure might influence child’s consent, such as transactional sex for survival or a coercive relationship in extreme circumstances. **The third condition asks whether the act is sexual.** The act must be inherently sexual in nature, which can involve contact and non-contact activities. Mathews & Collin-Vézina acknowledge non-contact acts such as voyeurism, exposure, and filming as potentially abusive. They argue that sexual gratification, whether immediate or deferred, mental or physical, is a clear marker of a sexual act. This gratification can also extend to acts that are not inherently sexual but are performed with the intention of sexual engagement, including certain forms of grooming. The sexual act is defined by three categories: 1) an act where the abuser seeks or obtains any level of mental or physical sexual gratification, 2) an act where the person seeks sexual gratification for another person, and 3) an act that the child experiences as a sexual act even if it does not fit within the two previous categories. This includes but is not limited to acts of sexual intercourse, grooming behaviors, non-contact verbal, or written requests, and sharing of sexual imagery. **The fourth and last condition asks if the act is abusive.** The abusive nature of the act separates it from assault, emphasizing the broader and more distinctive nature of abuse, which does not necessarily require physical contact or harm to the child. While an assault focuses on physical force, abuse involves the improper use, misuse, or taking advantage of a child, thereby including a wider range of experiences such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, and sharing pornographic images. In their model, core cases of abuse would include any sexual act, involving physical contact or not, by an adult or any authority figures such as teachers or coaches. Nonconsensual sexual acts committed by children who are in a superior position in a relationship marked by power and inequality are also included. Conversely, cases are explicitly excluded when a nonconsensual yet playful and nonserious sexual act is committed by a peer who does not hold a superior position in any kind of power dynamic with the victim. Additionally, the model excludes cases in which the victim neither holds a meaningful position of inequality nor is exploited.

1.2. The sociocultural framing¹⁷

Frames, in essence, provide simplifying structures that allow individuals and communities to perceive and interpret the world around them (Fisher, 1997) and, as such, encapsulate myths, narratives, analogies, and generalizations to simplify complex and often abstract information. In this thesis, sociocultural framing does not emanate from the narrow definition of frames as semi-structured elements of discourse but rather, more loosely, as socioculturally and cognitively generated patterns (Fisher, 1997) that form the predominant societal representation of any given topic. Sociocultural framing is reliant on the cognitive processes and the sociocultural context (Fisher, 1997), which consists of a variety of factors, including the political and legal systems, language, cultural norms, values and traditions, historical background, technology and media landscape, and other social structures. All these elements influence how frames are formulated and, subsequently, how the world is perceived, understood, and interpreted. Frames are not static; they are socially constructed and continually reshaped through the constant interplay of sociocultural discourses among media, social networks, and the influences of institutions, activists, and other actors (Fisher, 1997). Within this perspective, **sociocultural discourses** refer to particular ways of engaging, behaving, and producing meaning in a given (sociocultural) context. Foucault (1972: 49) explained discourses to represent “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” Foucault talks about the order of discourse as something that guides the production and reproduction of knowledge and power within a society by setting discursive boundaries within a given social context. The selected discourse does not merely dictate the linguistic structures and lexical possibilities but also the rules of construction, formation, and legitimation (Foucault, 1972) – thereby directing the trajectory of discussion and shaping our understanding of what is considered valid and legitimate in any given context.

¹⁷ In what follows, I will primarily discuss the macro-level considerations of the sociocultural construction of sexual violence. Sexual violence is an umbrella term that includes a spectrum of coercive or nonconsensual sexual acts (Gavey, 2014), covering many forms of sexualized violence, such as rape, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, etc. The relationship between the concepts of sexual violence and child sexual abuse hinges on CSA representing a specific form of sexual violence, distinguished by the age of the victim and the inherent power imbalance with the perpetrator. The decision to discuss the framing of sexual violence rather than solely focusing on the framing of sexual abuse lies in the underlying assumptions and the similar nature of these phenomena. The sociocultural framing of sexual abuse is strongly influenced and developed by the same factors as the framing of sexual violence. Though some discourses pertain specifically to child sexual abuse, the core assumptions and interpretations overlap considerably, highlighting their shared domain (**Studies I and IV**). Therefore, the sociocultural framing is presented from this wider lens of sexual violence as it provides a better understanding of whether and what in the framing and discourses come from the general overarching themes related to sexual violence and what are distinctive to child sexual abuse.

This means that the discourse fundamentally influences our perception and construction of knowledge and our interpretation and navigation of the social and cultural landscapes.

While sociocultural framing and discourses share similarities, they remain distinct constructs. In this thesis, sociocultural framing serves as a more foundational paradigm, constituting the overarching lens through which societies understand and approach different issues. Discourse, on the other hand, centers on the active expression, communication, and propagation of ideas, perspectives, and knowledge within the sociocultural frame. As such, the sociocultural frame of sexual violence often comprises many different, often conflicting, discourses. These discourses can either reinforce the existing sociocultural framing or challenge and potentially even transform it (Fisher, 1997). For example, two distinct and contrasting discursive practices (or discursive representations) can be used to describe female teacher-male student sexual abuse, characterizing it either as “sexual abuse” or “sexual relations.” The discourse framing the interaction as sexual relations is rather commonly seen in a media discourse of sexual violence, and it operates within a context that tends to downplay the severity of female teacher-male student sexual encounters, often in a sensationalized way. This viewpoint characterizes these situations more as “taboo relationships” rather than instances of abuse (or crime). Such representations include narratives that downplay the severity of abuse when the perpetrator is female and the victim male, predicated upon the assumption that men cannot be victims of sexual violence (Call, 2021; Cohen, 2018; **Study II**). Sexual abuse representation can be, for instance, part of the legal discourse that criminalizes these acts or a feminist discourse that also emphasizes power imbalances and the breach of trust occurring when an authority figure, such as a teacher, engages in sexual acts with a student. From this perspective, regardless of societal perceptions of masculinity or the supposed sexual desires of young males, the underlying assumption is that sexual acts between a teacher and student constitute abuse due to the inherent power imbalance. Another example of a discursive practice would be the maxim “boys will be boys,” which represents a gender normative discourse and is used to trivialize aggressive sexual behaviors from men. And as expressed before, the discursive boundaries are set within a discourse, meaning any given discourse determines the rules for the production and reproduction of knowledge.

Discourses surrounding sexual violence are commonly burdened by myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions (Anderson & Doherty, 2007: 20–22; Burt, 1980; **Studies I, II, and IV**), which represent the cognitive schemas that guide our assumptions, interpretations, and responses. Specifically, **rape myths** refer to social constructs of prejudice, misinformation, and stereotypes about such acts (Burt, 1980). They encompass an array of misguided notions, like the belief that a “true” victim should always resist, that rape is perpetrated by strangers in dark alleys, or that certain attire or behaviors “invite” rape (Adolfsson, 2018; Burt, 1980; Doherty & Anderson, 1998; for meta-narratives regarding same-sex relations see, e.g., Øverlien, 2023). When discussing this topic, it is crucial to recognize that myths and what are claimed as “realities of sexual violence” are not

contrasting truths but rather competing versions of events within the same discourse, and what matters is which version takes precedence. Rape myths also bear significant consequences for victims, discouraging them from reporting the crime due to fear of disbelief or derogatory treatment (Adolfsson, 2018; **Studies I and III**). Furthermore, they can impact the actions of law enforcement and the judicial system, potentially leading to unjust outcomes (Ehrlich, 2007; Mooney, 2007). Within discussions on sexual violence, the terms “myths” and “**misconceptions**” are often used interchangeably, even though they imply slightly different meanings. Myths are more collective or widely held societal beliefs, while misconceptions can be individual misunderstandings. As the difference is generally subtle and not always relevant, these terms will be used interchangeably in this thesis.

Stereotypes are oversimplified and generalized perceptions about certain groups of people, typically reducing complex individual identities or situations to a limited set of characteristics or into an idiosyncratic attribute (Blum, 2004; Pickering, 2007). Stereotypes are relatively resistant to new information or counterevidence, making them fairly immune to change (Blum, 2004). Stereotypes contribute to myths and misconceptions that shape the social understanding of sexual violence by reinforcing overarching stories with generalized, often erroneous assumptions. Gender stereotypes, such as men being assertive and women being submissive, can distort views of victimhood and perpetration. Stereotypes of the typical perpetrator as visibly deviant or evil obstruct the recognition of abusers who defy this stereotype (Gray, 2011). Equally, victim stereotypes can fuel blaming and limit empathy for victims who do not fit stereotypical notions of victimhood (Christie, 1986; **Studies I–V**). Stereotyping also functions as a distancing mechanism between the stereotyped and those perpetuating the stereotypes (Blum, 2004; Pickering, 2007; **Studies I and II**). Some of the most well-known stereotypes related to this topic are the sexual predator stereotype – representing sex offenders as violent strangers who look and act monstrous, misrepresenting them as somehow more recognizable than they actually are; or the strongly evoked and reproduced pop-culture-presented pedophile stereotype – typically represented as a middle-aged man of lower socioeconomic status, unmarried, socially inept, and looking repulsive or evil, also misrepresenting them as somehow recognizable (Gray, 2011; **Studies II and IV**). These stereotypes come attached to the concept of stranger danger, a widely held myth that strangers are the most common offenders of sexual abuse. Such assertion stands in contrast to empirical evidence, which indicates that most child sexual abuse is committed by individuals known to the victim, such as family members, friends, or acquaintances (Finkelhor, 1994).

Another stereotype relevant to our conversation is that of the “**ideal victim**.” The concept, introduced by Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie (1986), refers to the stereotypical image of a victim most readily afforded sympathy and legal protection by society. Certain individuals, like elderly women and younger children, are exemplars of the “ideal victims.” Younger males, homeless individuals,

substance abusers, and other marginalized groups may struggle to gain recognition as legitimate victims. The concept positions victims in a hierarchical order, where some victims are perceived as more legitimate or authentic than others (Greer, 2007). Christie (1986) suggests that “ideal victims” are weak (and vulnerable and innocent), engaged in a respectable activity at the time of the crime, and have no relation with the dangerous offender.¹⁸ While inherently empathetic, this imagery can diminish both the perceived legitimacy of victims who deviate from the stereotypic construction and victims’ ability to identify with such constructions (Bosma et al., 2018; Cohen, 2018). Several elements contribute to constructing the ideal victim stereotype, such as gender stereotypes, sexual scripts, myths, and existing power hierarchies, further influenced by media representations and public discourse (American Psychological Association, 2007; Mooney, 2007; Wodda, 2018; Woodiwiss, 2023). When applied to child sexual abuse, the stereotype can present significant barriers to justice and support (**Studies I and III**). While Christie initially emphasized specific character traits of the victim and the victim-offender relationship as central to recognizing the “ideal victim,” more recent updates to this theory broaden this perspective by suggesting that the context and the observer’s motivations (e.g., belief in a just world) are equally crucial (Bosma et al., 2018). This aspect is further elaborated upon in the empirical part of this thesis.

A rather harmful product of the aforementioned myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes is **victim blaming**. In simple terms, victim blaming refers to acts attributing blame, either partially or wholly, on the victim while usually (simultaneously) serving to justify the perpetrator, perpetuating a narrative that victims somehow “invited” or “deserved” their victimization (Maes, 1994).¹⁹ Janoff-Bulman (1979) distinguished between two types of blame – behavioral and characterological. The first type is control-related, involving attributions to a modifiable source, that is, of one’s behavior, and corresponds to a belief that future undesirable consequences can be evaded. Characterological blame is tied to self-esteem, involving attributions to a relatively nonmodifiable source (one’s character), and is associated with a belief in personal deservingness for past adverse outcomes. Janoff-Bulman (1979) also found that characterological self-blame correlated more with victims’ depression. And the type of blame victims receive from others can further impact the type of self-blame they later use against themselves (**Study I**). In efforts to understand **blame attributions**, studies have

¹⁸ In short, this concept has informed our understanding of how societal biases shape the response to victims of crime. Christie (1986) illustrated the previous notion with two contrasting victims – a vulnerable elderly lady robbed by a man during daylight and a man involved in a heated altercation in a pub. The former scenario, with its distinct victim-offender dichotomy, adheres more readily to the stereotype of the ideal victim.

¹⁹ Some common examples of victim blaming include claiming that a person who was sexually assaulted at a party should not have been drinking, that a rape victim should have worn something different, that the victim should not have agreed to go to the offender’s house, that the victim should have fought back harder.

strongly leaned on two theories: the just world and the defensive attribution. According to the just world theory (Lerner, 1980), people have a fundamental need to believe in a just world where actions have predictable consequences. When confronted with instances of unjust suffering or victimization, this just world view is challenged, often resulting in cognitive dissonance. To resolve the dissonance, people may resort to victim blaming as a mechanism to restore their belief in a just world (ibid.). Thus, by attributing the cause of victimization to the victims, people can maintain their belief that the world is a fair place and that bad things would not happen to them as long as they make “right” decisions or engage in “good” behavior. Stroebe and others (2015) found that the concept of the belief in a just world is far more complex than previously thought. Their underlying assumption was that participants’ coping with major life events and their emotional well-being is determined by the sources they see as being responsible for justice. Their study distinguished five causal dimensions of the belief in a just world: God, nature, other people, self, and chance. Each dimension influences how people perceive and react to injustices, suggesting a multi-dimensional nature of belief in the just world rather than an overarching sense of justice. For example, those who perceive God as the main source of justice are more likely to engage in actions against injustice, while those who perceive self and chance as primary sources tend to be inactive (Stroebe et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, just world theory fails to explain situations where people perceive similarities between themselves and the victim (or the perpetrator), which the defensive attribution theory helps with. According to the defensive attribution theory (Shaver & Drown, 1986), people are driven to protect their sense of vulnerability to harm, and therefore, they attribute blame to victims as a psychological defense mechanism to distance themselves from acknowledging their potential for victimization, particularly when the victims are similar to them (**Study II**). Furthermore, victim blaming also occurs in cases where children are victims of sexual abuse (**Studies I, II, and IV**), and it does not seem very plausible that there is a common belief that children who fall victim to such abuse somehow “deserve” their misfortune, casting doubt on the applicability of the just world theory in these instances. Here too, more plausibility can be given to the defensive attribution theory, meaning that child victims are likely blamed due to defensive attributions (**Study II**). The main difference between these theories, though it would be a simplified summarization, is that the just world theory is based on a belief in justice (a just world) and aids our understanding of general victim blaming tendencies, while the defensive attribution theory is based on a belief in control and helps explain blame attribution motivations in cases of perceived similarities (Maes, 1994).

In sum, the sociocultural framing of sexual abuse – from macro to micro levels and *vice versa* – is a complex puzzle of social discourses, myths, misconceptions, stereotypes, and other sociocultural attributes. Predominant discourses about sexual violence (and sexual abuse) often condition societal responses (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; **Studies I and III**), which cyclically feed back into this framing, perpetuating views and norms on the subject. Moreover, an absence of societal

response to specific forms of abuse can embolden the perception that they do not constitute “real” or “serious” abuse, normalizing their invisibility (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). Sociocultural framing also impacts how victims of sexual violence, particularly children, disclose their experiences and seek help (**Studies I and III**). Misconceptions and stereotypes about abuse can create obstacles to disclosure, and victim blaming attitudes can further complicate these processes. Despite the varied influence that sociocultural framing may exert on the topic, perhaps its most potent effect lies in its restrictions. Susan Ehrlich (2007) explained the effect by referring to culturally available discourses, which means the representations of identities and experiences are not just mediated by discourses but also restricted by them. Indeed, any discourse has the potential to inadvertently establish certain cognitive boundaries, including limiting the vocabulary available for people to talk about any given issue. Consequently, these hidden cognitive boundaries make it more natural for us to presume the innocence of the wrongdoer and the guilt of the victim (**Studies I–V**).

1.3. Risk, perception, and risk perception²⁰

To survive and navigate the world around us, humans have always needed to evaluate the probability of danger and the resulting consequences (Slovic, 1987), which brings us to the concept of risk. For the purposes of this thesis, risk is loosely defined as any event or situation that could result in harm (Aven & Renn, 2009).²¹ What specifically is considered a risk is highly dependent on the culture, the context of the discussion, and the people holding the discussion (Slovic, 1987; Staksrud, 2016: 81). **Child sexual abuse risk** refers to the probability of a child experiencing sexual abuse, which can be nuanced depending on the specifics of what is considered sexual abuse within a given context. For example, risk factors for non-contact vs contact victimization can diverge substantially. Risk factors

²⁰ Building upon the macro-level perspective presented in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses more on the micro-level of the discussion. At the micro level, we examine individual-level understanding and perceptions of sexual abuse and risk.

²¹ According to Aven & Renn (2009), there are two prevailing definitions of risk in the social sciences: “(1) risk is a situation or event where something of human value (including humans themselves) is at stake and where the outcome is uncertain; (2) risk is an uncertain consequence of an event or an activity with respect to something that humans value.” The definition used for this thesis is loosely based on the conceptual elements from their examples, meaning I simplified the definition to make it easier to use and understand, especially since those examples are more applicable to risk research in its traditional sense, which current thesis obviously does not attempt to be. Their definitions are not actually connected to harm but instead to “something of human value (including humans themselves),” yet such specification is unnecessarily broad and complicated for the purposes of this thesis. Considering the topic at hand and for the sake of clarity, I chose to limit the potential outcomes with the term “harm,” as with sexual abuse risk, such can reasonably be assumed (and yes, assumed, not expected). Also, the phrase “where the outcome is uncertain” was again, for clarity and simplification reasons, replaced with the phrase “could” which already implies the uncertainty of the outcome.

are not necessarily causal factors, but simply markers of higher susceptibility, meaning that while risk factors are seen as associated with higher probabilities of an outcome, these factors do not themselves cause the outcome (see, e.g., Finkelhor & Baron, 1986a). That means sexual abuse also occurs outside the boundaries of the known risk factors. CSA risk factors cannot be seen in isolation or merely on one specific level as the vulnerabilities or conditions that increase the likelihood of abuse are influenced by factors at various levels, i.e., individual, familial, community, and societal.

On a societal level, inadequate legal and policy frameworks for child protection can contribute to the overall risk environment for child sexual abuse. At the individual level, factors such as age, gender, and disability can increase risk.²² Studies suggest that girls and children with disabilities face an elevated risk compared to their peers (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986a; Finkelhor, 1994), though the potential role of stereotypical assumptions influencing victimization suspicion and detection ought to be considered in this conversation as well (Finkelhor, 1994). Finkelhor (1994) explained that parents may supervise boys less closely, and teachers, medical professionals, or other potential reporters (of the crime) may be less likely to suspect abuse of boys, indicating the potentially far-reaching consequences people's risk perception can have. From the familial level, factors such as the presence of a stepfather, household conflict, dysfunction and violence, poor parent-child relationship, emotionally unstable parents, and parents abusing alcohol or drugs elevate the risk of CSA (Assink et al., 2019; Claussen et al., 2013; Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986a; Finkelhor, 1994). Finkelhor & Baron (1986b) proposed that familial factors heighten children's susceptibility to sexual abuse via two mechanisms: first, by diminished parental supervision and protection, and second, by making those children more emotionally deprived and therefore more vulnerable to sexual predators offering them affection and attention. The conversation on risk factors is not without its criticism. The current state of knowledge has not been able to establish reliable risk markers (Finkelhor, 1993; Finkelhor, 1994; Claussen et al., 2013), meaning risk factors are not meant to confirm or disconfirm suspicions in any specific instance (Finkelhor, 1993). Another central issue with risk factors is that they are prone to stereotypic formulations, thus raising an expectation that victims and offenders should fit certain risk factor criteria (Finkelhor, 1994; **Studies II and V**). Understanding risk is important as it helps us to inform better targeted prevention efforts and policy measures, yet the lack of risk factors is not evidence of the lack of abuse.

²² In the scientific community, there is broad consensus that risk factors such as age, gender, and disability consistently correlate with sexual abuse victimization, while other individual-level risk factors have not garnered the same level of agreement due to less robust or inconsistent empirical support. – For further discussion on this, see e.g., Collin-Vézina et al., 2013.

Before continuing the discussion, another distinction is in order – namely, between the risk of sexual abuse and **online sexual risks** (OSRs).²³ While there may be some overlap in their meanings, OSRs encompass a broader range of risks that do not necessarily constitute sexual abuse. Examples of such OSRs could be sexting and voluntary teen consumption of pornography. These situations still pose risks as they involve the probability of harm.²⁴ However, on a conceptual level, OSRs can significantly differ from sexual abuse due to the absence of an abusive condition. Only when such a condition is present, can an interaction with OSRs be considered sexual abuse. Unfortunately, the concepts are often conflated, particularly in media and public policy, where OSRs are sometimes portrayed as equivalent to CSA with equally harmful consequences. This misrepresentation distorts public perception and intensifies existing social anxieties (Tiidenberg & Van Der Nagel, 2020). Kahneman (2017: 144) suggests, policy interventions should address not just tangible threats but also the pervasive fear they engender, given its debilitating effects. Hence, distinguishing between the risks of sexual abuse and online sexual risks remains paramount for a nuanced comprehension of the overarching concerns.

Harm, as a crucial constituent of risk, refers to actual negative outcomes (Aven & Renn, 2009).²⁵ Regarding harm from sexual abuse, there is evidence of a variety of detrimental physical, emotional, psychological, and social outcomes (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Maniglio, 2009; Romano & De Luca, 2001; Walsh et al., 2010), yet it is important to stress that in any specific case, there should not be a specific expectation of harm. Expecting victims to be or look traumatized or permanently damaged is an expression of the psychological discourse of harm (O'Dell, 2003; **Studies I and III**). Another common issue with the concept of harm is that it is sometimes confused or used interchangeably with the concept of risk.²⁶ Research indicates that not all children exposed to OSRs experience harm (Byrne et al., 2016; Livingstone et al., 2014). Even if OSRs can indeed lead to

²³ Online sexual risks (OSRs) are risks accompanying online practices with a sexual component that can either happen voluntarily such as sexting or involuntarily such as sextortion.

²⁴ Though previously mentioned, it merits emphasis once more: risk categorization is not as straightforward as it may appear. Certain activities youth engage in defy easy classification (Livingstone et al., 2014). Due to the ambiguous nature, such activities are referred to as “risky online activities” (see, e.g., Kirwil & Laouris, 2012, as cited in Livingstone et al., 2014). For example, determining the impact of online exposures (such as pornography) on youth is complex, as these can present both risks and opportunities depending on the context (for further discussion, see Livingstone et al., 2014). For this thesis, a definitive classification of any specific encounter or experience as risk or opportunity is not the focal point, as the focus is on victims and the general population, rather than domain experts. So, while the discussion on specific risk categorization is not essential for interpreting the thesis findings, it is a relevant consideration for academic discussion in general.

²⁵ Harm can be physical, like injury or death, psychological, financial, or less tangible, like harm to reputation.

²⁶ Risk does not equate to harm, and exposure to risk does not automatically result in harm (Aven & Renn, 2009; Livingstone, 2010).

harm, an exaggerated reaction to potential risks can amplify perceived danger, hinder constructive discussions, and give rise to ineffective policies and misleading messages to the public. The main issue with such an approach lies in its consequences. While preventing sexual abuse is necessary, preventing OSRs that do not constitute sexual abuse may even be counterproductive. Risks, in themselves, are not inherently harmful; they can aid children in developing necessary skills. Evidence suggests that exposure to risk can build resilience (Livingstone & Görzig, 2014). Of course, I do not mean exposure to the risk of sexual abuse, as harm from sexual abuse is far more self-evident than from general OSRs. However, we should be clear about what we consider sexual abuse and, thus, the risk thereof. Applying a blanket assumption of harm to everything with a sexual element can stigmatize healthy expressions of sexuality and blur the lines between normal, problematic, and harmful sexual behavior (Kallip et al., 2022). And while what is considered a risk is highly dependent on macro-level factors, how people understand and interpret risk is also influenced by their perceptions.

While perception in a traditional sense (i.e., perception proper or apperception) is primarily studied in biology, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience, the concept is loosely applied in this thesis.²⁷ In this context, **perception**²⁸ refers not solely to specific cognitive processes but rather to an individual's inclusive understanding of a subject – an understanding shaped by the interplay of cognitive processes, sociocultural factors, personal experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. In the context of sexual abuse, perceptions manifest in many ways: how sexual abuse is understood on an individual level, how its risk and harm are evaluated or assumed, how victims and perpetrators are viewed and treated, and how societal norms and personal biases influence these understandings. To give an example, perceived victim credibility can be influenced by a host of factors, such as the victim's relationship with the perpetrator, their behavior post-disclosure, or even their demeanor and appearance (Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Schuller & Wall, 1998). Dominant discourses about CSA strongly guide our perceptions of victims and offenders and influence social reactions. Empirical evidence further supports this claim: for instance, younger victims are considered more credible than teenage victims (Davies & Rogers, 2009). This perception aligns with a tendency to attribute more blame to teenage victims as compared to younger ones, i.e., to those below the age of ten (**Study II**). Studies indicate that

²⁷ Perception in a traditional sense refers to an interactive cognitive process, relying on both the stimulus from the environment and the individual's interpretative framework based on their prior knowledge and experiences, impacting how people make sense of their surrounding environment (Dapor et al., 2023). This involves recognizing and making sense of sensory inputs, such as visuals, sounds, tastes, and smells (ibid.).

²⁸ Out of all the concepts discussed in this thesis, *perception* is by far the most complex to articulate. Explicating it from a psychological (or neuroscientific) standpoint exceeds my area of expertise. However, this distinction, though clearly in a simplified (and thus more digestible) form, is expressed to emphasize that the *perception* under investigation in this thesis deviates from its typical usage in cognitive science, thereby preempting any potential misinterpretation.

jurors perceive crying victims as more credible than calm victims which in turn leads to more guilty verdicts (Golding et al., 2003; Regan & Baker, 1998), though Golding and others (2003) found that there are specific expectations for crying also – both a calm demeanor and a hysterical demeanor led to more negative outcomes, but crying in a non-hysterical manner lead to participants perceiving victims as more honest, credible, and reliable. Besides crying, jurors expect victims to show fear and confusion when facing the defendant in court (Regan & Baker, 1998). Prior research reveals that a victim’s perception of potential reactions significantly affects their choice to either disclose or withhold disclosure (Gemara & Katz, 2023; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016; **Studies I and III**) or report it to the police (Skogan, 1984). Scoglio and colleagues (2021) found that perceived parental care had a positive effect in terms of decreasing the risk of revictimization for CSA victims. To sum up my point here – perception impacts our behavior. The area where the impact of perception upon behavior is perhaps most discernible is within the domain of risk perception. For instance, due to perceived risk, one would not leave a young child to swim in a lake without adult supervision, light up a cigarette while refueling the car at the gas station, or drink from an unknown bottle found on the street.

Risk perception is the subjective assessment or a decision-making process that people use to assess risk and uncertainty (Aven & Renn, 2010: 7; Slovic, 1987). It operates at both conscious and subconscious levels, wherein conscious risk perception often utilizes rational evaluations based on logic, reason, and acquired knowledge, whereas subconscious influences emerge from experience, emotion, affect, intuition, biases, etc. (Slovic et al., 2005). Research on risk perception has shown that various cognitive and affective factors significantly impact how individuals perceive risks (Slovic, 1987; Slovic, 2010: 26–28). While the cognitive factors are related to the evaluation of the risk characteristics (such as probability and potential harm), the affective aspect encompasses the emotional responses (i.e., one’s feelings toward the risk). As individual risk assessment can depend on one’s feelings toward risk as much as it can on cognitive aspects (which can also be influenced by inaccurate assumptions or data, cognitive biases, and so forth), distortions in decisions or conclusions can easily occur (Slovic et al., 2005). This supposes that the process of individual risk assessment is inherently susceptible to certain errors.²⁹ What is more, research suggests that perceived risk carries more weight in decision-making than actual risk (Ricciardi, 2008: 87). This can

²⁹ Human cognition exhibits some inherent susceptibility to error. For instance, Kahneman (2017: 20ff.) divides human cognition into two interrelated systems. He calls these System 1 and System 2. System 1 is characterized by rapid, intuitive judgments, relying on heuristics to simplify complex information. It inherently leans toward simplicity, occasionally at the cost of depth or accuracy. In contrast, System 2 engages in deliberate, analytical reasoning, typically utilized for more complex tasks like solving mathematical problems or evaluating nuanced decisions. Despite our capacity for deep, rational analysis *via* System 2, our default often leans toward the quicker, yet sometimes fallible, System 1. Also, heuristics are mental strategies (basically shortcuts) people use to navigate uncertainty, which can also lead to significant biases in risk assessment (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020; Slovic, 1987).

result in decisions that may not always be rational, well-informed, or consistent with the available evidence. For instance, Kahneman & Tversky (2013) found that people tend to overestimate the likelihood of low-probability events and underestimate the likelihood of high-probability events. Studies focusing on sexual abuse risk further evidence that parents tend to overestimate certain risks (e.g., kidnapping by a stranger) and take action based on those estimations (e.g., warning their children about strangers) while at the same time underestimating risks regarding their own children, which in turn leads to little or no action (Chen & Chen, 2005; Collins, 1994; Collins, 1996; **Study II**). Another facet to be considered is the gendered nature of risk perception. Research indicates that adults often perceive boys as less vulnerable to sexual abuse than girls (Chen & Chen, 2005; Tang & Yan, 2004; Xie et al., 2016). Moreover, Xie and others (2016) found that people tend to believe that boys (compared to girls) experience diminished harm or exhibit reduced susceptibility to trauma in sexual abuse cases. Perhaps those perceptions provide some explanation for why parental protective measures are skewed, with daughters typically receiving more focus and preventative guidance (Prihidko & Kenny, 2021; Livingstone et al., 2014; **Study II**). In simple terms, for our prevention efforts to succeed, we need to bridge the gap between the perceived and the actual risks.

1.4. Estonian context

In the context of Estonia, there are five key points that I deem relevant to my thesis. First, **Estonia is a relatively small country, both by land area and population.** It takes you around three hours to drive from one side of the country to the other. The small size of our country results in minimal regional fragmentation in terms of legislation, media coverage, and discourse on sensitive topics like sexual abuse. While some regional differences may exist in policy execution or service availability, the overarching framework is consistent, with a singular Penal Code encompassing crimes of child sexual abuse³⁰ and national policies guaranteeing services to all victims. Estonia's media landscape comprises four primary daily newspapers in the Estonian language, a daily business paper, two major weeklies, and approximately 15 local newspapers, all of which have an online presence. Nevertheless, news and information dissemination about CSA has been relatively uniform throughout the country.³¹ Thus, irrespective of one's media consumption

³⁰ The following crimes cover CSA in our Penal Code: rape, act of sexual nature against will, sexual intercourse with descendant (i.e., incest), sexual intercourse or other act of sexual nature with child, sexual intercourse or other act of sexual nature using influence (by an adult with a person under sixteen years of age), buying sex from minors, human trafficking with respect to minors, child pornography-related offenses, agreement of sexual purpose for meeting with child, sexual enticement of children; and sexual harassment as a misdemeanor offense.

³¹ Last year, my colleagues and I examined the media landscape of sexual abuse coverage in Estonia, leading to the creation of guidelines for ethical reporting of sexual abuse cases. Some

there has not been much variation in the dominant media discourses. Subtle changes can be seen in recent years, but before that, the harmful narratives and stereotyped representation were more of a rule than an exception. In essence, Estonia's compact nature ensures rapid news dissemination and a uniform approach to legal matters, distinguishing it from larger nations with more varied regional contexts.

My second point addresses the question of Estonia's demographic homogeneity. While some might contest this characterization, I posit that **Estonia is a relatively homogeneous country** in that sense. Our population is roughly around 1.3 million people (Statistikaamet, 2022a). To provide a global perspective, even the world's 400 largest cities (by population) each surpass Estonia's entire population.³² Geographically, half of our land is forest, leading to lower population density than many European nations. However, Tallinn, the capital, is home to nearly one-third of Estonia's population (Statistikaamet, 2022a).³³ Ethnic Estonians account for 70% of the population, with ethnic Russians making up another 25% (ibid.). Since 2015, immigration has diversified Estonia's demography to an extent (Mägi et al., 2021) and the recent census identified 211 nationalities and

of the findings of that study are worth mentioning here. In Estonia, the regional or local coverage of news stories is somewhat limited, usually restricted to specific events in distinct cities. However, sexual abuse cases consistently receive nationwide attention. Media often perpetuate myths and stereotypes, likely stemming from ingrained journalistic practices and gaps in knowledge. **One particularly notable trend is the replication of narratives.** When one newspaper disseminates a story, other outlets frequently reproduce it verbatim (e.g., they copy the introduction of the main story and then just add a reference, such as "read the full story from that newspaper"). While they might occasionally introduce additional information, a substantial number of these articles echo the original narrative, both in language and tone. This replication extends to errors or biased language in the initial article, as demonstrated in instances where terms like "rape" were mistakenly used interchangeably with "sexual harassment," or victims of sexual exploitation were labeled as "young prostitutes." Similarly, visual representations in stories, even if problematic, find parallels in the copied stories (e.g., when the main story portrayed a minor in a sexualized manner, a young girl in a short skirt, the other news outlets copying the story, used similar visuals.). Thus, media strongly affects media too. Another consideration is the prevalence of paywalls in most news outlets, limiting full article access to subscribers, which in relation to sexual abuse cases, perhaps deserves some additional consideration. However, major events still permeate the public consciousness through radio, television, and social media broadcasts. – The insights discussed are based on data from project no MSVUH21411, titled "Child sexual abuse crimes in media-coverage: Providing expertise for sustainable media support of the CSA crimes survivors in the Baltic Sea Region." For the guidelines in Estonian, please see Eelmaa, S., Kallip, K., & Tamme, A. (2022). *Juhendmaterjal seksuaalse väärkohtlemise eetiliseks kajastamiseks meedias*. [Media Guidelines on the Ethical Reporting of Sexual Abuse]. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33065.67682>.

³² See, e.g., World Population Review website: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities>.

³³ Notably, 33% of Estonians live in Tallinn, and 43% work there. Nearly half of Estonia's population is concentrated in or around the capital, with 46% living in Harju County (Statistikaamet, 2022a), despite Estonia having 15 counties in total. Essentially, from the general sociocultural perspective, Estonia could be divided into three distinct regions: the capital and its vicinity, Ida-Viru County (predominantly inhabited by ethnic Russians), and the rest of Estonia.

243 spoken languages in Estonia (Statistikaamet, 2022a), the country retains its relative homogeneity, given that other nationalities only account for around 5% of the population, and the increased diversity is mainly centered in the capital, with most other regions still predominantly inhabited by Estonians and Russians (Mägi et al., 2021; Statistikaamet, 2022a). However, whatever changes there have been in recent years or even in past decades, these have not yet translated that clearly into people's attitudes. Studies reveal both increasing acceptance and enduring prejudice toward immigrants. For instance, discomfort in working with Roma individuals has decreased from 34% in 2015 to 23% in 2019 (Eurobarometer, 2015 & 2019). Then again, non-Estonians increasingly report feeling marginalized, unheard, and facing heightened ethnic-based intolerance (Mägi et al., 2020).³⁴ While I will not delve into the potential deeper reasons for such attitudes to still persist, the aforementioned findings bear relevance in the context of study participants' potential biases and risk perception (see, e.g., **Study II**), which could stem from limited regional diversity, or to the very least, speaks to the fact that change takes time.

The third more general point is about the digital culture in Estonia. **The integration of technology into daily life here is notable.** Our country has an e-government system that facilitates most public services online, such as tax filing, applying for social welfare or a new passport, accessing health records (and booking a doctor's appointment), voting, accessing, and managing notarial documents (e.g., related to real estate or vehicles you own), etc. Other services, like banking, parking, and school-related tasks, are also available online.³⁵ Here, the internet penetration rate is remarkably high. In 2022, approximately 92% of Estonians had home internet access, with 99% of those under the age of 44 using the internet regularly (Statistikaamet, 2022b). For the youth, internet use is almost universal. Siibak (2020) posits that social media platforms have evolved into an indispensable component of the daily lives of Estonian youth, playing a pivotal role in shaping their generational identity and self-perception. A temporary abstention from these platforms can interfere with their daily activities but more than that, induce feelings of anxiety and isolation (Siibak, 2020). While a 2018 report found that a quarter of children came across sexual content online, this marked a considerable decline when compared to the 2010 findings (Sukk & Soo,

³⁴ The study marked a prevalent sentiment among Russian-speaking residents of Narva, a city in Ida-Viru County with a majority ethnic Russian population. Many felt abandoned by the Estonian state post-independence. This perception has fostered a somewhat insular society in Narva, often described as a "state within a state." There, people have developed their coping mechanisms, social networks, and political inclinations. In the early 1990s, there was some optimism among Narva's inhabitants, but the introduction of the citizenship law brought widespread feelings of disenchantment and estrangement from the state. – see further, in Mägi et al., 2020.

³⁵ Estonia is the first country to offer E-residency, providing a platform for global citizens to establish a company online, digitally sign encrypted documents, make secure transactions in online banking, and declare taxes online.

2018). The decline in children's exposure to inappropriate content may be attributed to effective parental, educational, or technological interventions or possibly to improved coping mechanisms among children themselves. Then again, nearly half of the Estonian children had online interactions with strangers, and a third of the children later met with these people in person (Smahel et al., 2020). And though Estonian parents are frequent internet users, they are still largely unaware of the risks their children encounter online (Sukk & Soo, 2018).

Furthering the discussion of sexual abuse, the data indicates **sexual abuse incidents are not rare occurrences in Estonia**. Research conducted in 2004 revealed that approximately one-third of participants reported encountering at least one instance of sexual abuse, and 6% reported having sexually abused someone (Soo et al., 2004). Similarly, a 2015 study found that about 30% of Estonian children and young people have suffered from sexual abuse and about 10% have personally experienced sexual violence (Soo et al., 2015a). Notably, many victims did not disclose abuse due to perceptions that the incident was not that serious, feelings of shame or not wanting to make their parents sad, or not knowing who to tell (ibid.). Similar patterns of barriers to disclosure have been evident in other studies too (Hillep & Pärnamets, 2020; Soo et al., 2015b; **Studies I and III**). Intriguingly, Estonian victims of sexual violence tend to seek assistance less frequently than their counterparts in other EU nations (Soo et al., 2015b). The research also suggests a marked increase in the risk of sexual violence from the age of 12 onward. In 2022, the police received reports of 613 sexual offenses, continuing the trend observed since 2017, with annually reported incidents fluctuating between 500 and 700 (Uisk, 2023).³⁶ Alarming, the data suggests a high vulnerability of minors: 88% of the victims in 2021 and 86% in 2022 were under 18 with an average age of 11 (Tammiste, 2022; Uisk, 2023). The most recurrent offense against minors was rape and around half of the reported sex crimes occurred online (ibid.). Contrary to widespread media portrayals, offenders were typically known to the victim, with nearly half being family members (ibid.). Strangers made up only 10% of perpetrators (Uisk, 2023). Though only including 16-to-17-year-olds, the findings from the 2014 Estonian Women's Health report were largely consistent with crime stats, evidencing that in 8% of the cases, the offender was a stranger, while a significant 44% were family members or someone close to the victim (Lippus et al., 2015). Although reports of male sexual abuse are exceedingly rare and suspected to be substantially underreported, evidence shows that five percent of men in Estonia have reported at least one instance of sexual violence, with the majority of these cases (3%) occurring during childhood (Themas et al., 2015). Of course, the crime report figures represent only reported cases. Considering the figures from prevalence studies, it is evident that most incidents go unreported due to various reasons ranging from societal barriers to misinformation.

³⁶ Official stats of reported sex crimes over the past decade: 275 (2010), 308 (2011), 401 (2012), 363 (2013), 324 (2014), 500 (2015), 482 (2016), 557 (2017), 580 (2018), 643 (2019), 567 (2020), 753 (2021) and 613 (2022).

Amidst the unsettling sex crime statistics, **over the past decade, Estonia has witnessed notable legislative changes, policy revisions, and awareness campaigns addressing sexual abuse.** One of the most noteworthy legislative changes is raising the age of consent from 14 to 16 in 2022.³⁷ Illustrating the policy evolution, let us consider an example case from 2022: an 11-year-old female victim mirroring the median age and gender in reported incidents (Uisk, 2023). Prior to 2017, such victims could face multiple, potentially distressing interrogations, often handled by officers without specialized training, and be bounced around several institutions and professionals, sometimes even between different cities. Modern strategies emphasize victim-centric approaches, best exemplified by the adoption of the *Barnahus model* that led to the creation of Children’s Houses (“Lastemaja” in Estonian). Established first in Tallinn in 2017, these centers now also operate in Tartu, Jõhvi, and Pärnu.³⁸ By housing an array of specialists under one roof, these centers ensure victims need not navigate a maze of services in different places. Their mission is to aid sexually abused children through child-friendly criminal investigative procedures, minimizing added trauma. In Children’s Houses, various specialists (e.g., child protection workers, the police, doctors, psychologists, and many others) work for the well-being of the child. The paradigm shift places victims’ welfare above all while simultaneously gathering evidence for criminal proceedings. This system marks notable progress. However, its reach is limited to victims who come forward, leaving undisclosed cases still an unresolved concern. Ultimately, despite some undeniable advancements in legal and institutional frameworks, it seems that sociocultural stigmas, as well as the dominant discourses, remain persistent and resistant to transformation (**Studies I–III, and V**). Subsequent chapters will delve deeper into these dominant discourses.

³⁷ Our Penal Code incorporates the *Romeo and Juliet* clause, as outlined in § 145, which stipulates that the age difference between an adult and a person aged between fourteen and sixteen years must not exceed five years.

³⁸ For further information, see, e.g., Estonia’s Social Insurance Board website: <https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/uudised/lastemajja-poordunute-arv-aasta-aastalt-kasvanud>.

2. MATERIALS, METHODS, AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter, I outline the methodology adopted in this thesis to answer the research questions. The discussion further delves into some specific methodological considerations related to role enactment as a data collection technique, limitations of the studies, and certain ethical concerns overlooked in the articles. This thesis finds its epistemological roots in social constructionism, a theoretical framework that views knowledge as being constructed through social interactions and cultural norms (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In the context of this study, social constructionism provides a critical lens through which to examine the social and cultural factors that contribute to the construction of perceptions and beliefs about child sexual abuse and related risks. By recognizing that our understanding of this issue is shaped by broader cultural narratives, social norms, and structures, we can better understand how certain ideas and attitudes become dominant while others are marginalized or ignored. Also, researching topics like sexual abuse or the sexualization of children comes with specific complexities related to the sensitive and disconcerting nature of these matters. Qualitative methods allowed for a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of participants' descriptions and interpretations of their experiences and perspectives. Considering the exploratory nature of the thesis, flexible methods were needed to achieve the general aims and find answers to the research questions.

2.1. Materials and methods

Although the thesis is based on five published articles, it draws on three empirical studies. The data collected from these studies provided a wealth of information, and the initial analysis led to the formulation of new research questions, resulting in more than one paper being written based on the same data. Table 1 summarizes the samples and main methods used in the studies.

While the initial intent for the first study was to interview parents to explore their perspectives on sexual abuse, the prospect of investigating a delicate matter in a non-obtrusive manner led to the execution of the first study based on forum posts. This approach provided a valuable foundation in research design and data collection surrounding sensitive topics, offering some additional preparation before engaging in data collection methods that involve direct interaction with human participants.

Table 1. Overview of the samples, data collection, and analysis methods used in studies

	Sample	Data collection	Data analysis
Studies I, III	Forum posts about personally experienced sexual violence (n=28) and answers (n=361) to these posts	Manual aggregation of forum posts and comments from an unmoderated Estonian online forum for children and young people	A combination of discursive psychological approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
Studies II, V	22 parents	Focus group interviews (n=6) combined with activity-oriented questions	Thematic qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interview transcripts
Study IV	A final sample of 450 comments	Obtaining a scraped data set of 13 293 user comments from Pushshift Reddit	Thematic qualitative analysis

In summary, **Studies I** and **III** were based on the analysis of forum posts about personally experienced sexual violence. The selected posts and their responses were then analyzed using a combination of a discursive psychological approach and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Notably, **Study I** revealed the influential role of the ideal victim stereotype in shaping responses, which prompted a further exploration of this stereotype and its implications in **Study III**. The data analysis methods between those two studies mildly differed. With **Study I**, I combined the discursive psychological approach with thematic analysis throughout the data analysis process, but with **Study III**, the two methods were not combined but used separately (i.e., subsequently). Thematic qualitative text analysis was helpful for organizing the data by allowing to identify the stereotype markers and common themes in the data. The discursive psychological approach was used in the second phase of the analysis to examine how the audience negotiated different characteristics or elements in constructing the ideal victim stereotype.

Studies II and **V** focused on exploring the parents' perspectives on child sexual abuse. Data were collected using focus group interviews (with 22 participants: 16 mothers and six fathers, aged 26-to-47) combined with activity-oriented questions (Colucci, 2007) to stimulate discussion and generate rich data. Similar to previously described studies, **Study V** was built on the findings from **Study II**. In **Study II**, the aim was to explore parental beliefs on the risk of child sexual abuse, particularly victim- and offender-specific risk. The data from that study evidenced some clear and distinctive patterns in the parental conceptualization of offline sexual risks compared to online sexual risks (OSRs) which warranted

further investigation. Thus, in **Study V**, the focus was on exploring parental perceptions of online sexual risks to children and the perceived resulting harm from such risks. This means I used the same data collected with focus group interviews for **Study II** but a different focus for data analysis. For data analysis, I used a six-step thematic analysis, which included transcribing and familiarizing myself with the data, initial coding, theme searching, systematizing themes into a thematic map, defining and naming themes, and finally, analyzing and writing the article (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The collected data were rich in both **Studies I and II**. The findings led to some new or additional questions, prompting me to delve deeper into understanding perceptions surrounding sexual abuse. While doing so, I realized that my studies are strongly focused on Estonia, and though the Estonia-specific results from some studies justified a narrow focus, I felt the need to investigate the matter from a wider perspective. Consequently, **Study IV** was conducted. I relied on a scraped dataset of user comments on Reddit, and similar to previous studies, thematic qualitative analysis was used to make sense of the massive collection of user comments. Unlike the preceding studies that focused solely on Estonian perspectives, **Study IV** encompassed a global sample, although data indicated a predominant U.S. representation. This fourth study not only corroborated certain findings from prior studies but also unveiled fresh insights into the discursive frameworks prevalent, especially in online contexts, and their implications on individual rights concerning the topic. Altogether with five articles in this thesis, I focused on three different populations – the victims (**Studies I and III**), the parents (**Studies II and V**), and the general public (**Studies I and IV**).

2.2. Methodological considerations

Benefits of using role enactment for data collection

The focus group study was the only study that included direct interaction with participants. Research involving self-reported accounts, particularly on sensitive subjects, often contends with social desirability bias. In simple terms, social desirability bias refers to the tendency of participants to present themselves in a favorable light by providing socially acceptable responses rather than expressing their true opinions or beliefs (Fisher, 1993). In a qualitative study of parents' decision-making process regarding children's online gaming behavior, Nakatsui (2018) outlined the importance of immediately testing whether parents are reporting their understanding and abilities accurately. Thus, putting parents' knowledge and skills to the immediate test can be a way of receiving more accurate data, gaining some insight into the motivations for inaccuracy and the extent to which parents inaccurately self-report data. These considerations were included in the study design. For those reasons, the study about parental perceptions of

sexual abuse (**Studies II and V**) was designed in three stages.³⁹ Participants engaged sequentially in all three stages. As the first two stages were the main substance of published articles (**Studies II and V**), these stages were described in detail in their respective articles. The third phase involved a blend of case vignettes, which are brief narratives outlining specific scenarios (Alexander & Becker, 1978), and role enactments (Colucci, 2007), focusing on CSA prevention, disclosure, and help-seeking. Due to word constraints in publications and divergent research objectives, the third stage has not received much consideration thus far.

In the third phase of each focus group, participants enacted various scenarios. Each participant assumed the role of both the parent and the child at least once. The role enactment proceeded as follows. First, roles (child or parent) were allocated spontaneously, without foreknowledge of the forthcoming scenario (the case vignette). Non-active participants were designated as observers, reserving their feedback until the completion of each enactment. The enactments were relatively brief, typically lasting a few minutes. Scenarios were concisely delineated on cards, each offering a unique situation to ensure diverse problem-solving approaches. Vignettes were relatively short in text and detail. The “child” participant, after reading the content on the card, would explain the situation to the “parent” participant in their own words.⁴⁰ Subsequently, the “parent” participant advised the “child” on the potential course of action. Post-enactment, other participants shared their observations and insights. Concluding the series of enactments, I sought reflections from participants about their thoughts and feelings during the exercise. On reflection, I would mark three observations about this method. First, in the process of data collection, **two contrasting modalities of parental reactions emerged:** their verbal accounts in group discussions during the first stages and their behavioral demonstrations in role enactments. Similar to Nakatsui (2018), the effect was more visible in mothers. For instance, when

³⁹ Each stage focused on a separate topic: general knowledge of CSA, knowledge and perception of CSA risk, and prevention. Each stage began with a task to be completed alone or collaboratively, followed by a group dialogue. An exception was the second stage, which involved two tasks. In the first stage, using pen and paper, groups were instructed to identify and explain sexual risks (in their own words). In the second stage, individuals first independently drew or described potential perpetrators of CSA, then shared and discussed their perceptions in the group. Following this, the group collectively developed a profile of children perceived to be at risk.

⁴⁰ A few examples of the case vignettes: (1) You are a 14-year-old girl, and you have a boyfriend of eight months. For some time now, you have been sending nude images to each other. Two days ago, you had a terrible argument with him, and he sent all those pictures to his friends. Now his friends are writing mean and humiliating things to you. (2) You are an 11-year-old boy. One day you met an 11-year-old girl in one of your favorite games – Growtopia. The girl asked to continue communication on other platforms. You started talking daily. The girl was pretty, and you liked her. After some time, she asked for a nude picture. She sent one from herself, and you sent one from yourself. Then she asked for videos. Though you were hesitant about sending videos, you really liked her. Shortly after sending the videos, you found out that the “girl” was actually an adult male who now threatens you that if you do not provide new videos of yourself, he will publish the previously sent material on the internet.

deliberating over strategies to address their children's digital dilemmas in group discussions, mothers predominantly advocated for a child-centric mediation approach, emphasizing the importance of engaging in a dialogue with their children to comprehend the incident and explore future corrective actions. Contrastingly, in role enactment scenarios, these mothers often resorted to attributing blame to the "child" and imposing restrictions on their access to the internet as a form of punishment. The observed discrepancy aligns with prior research, which has similarly identified divergences between parents' descriptions of their mediation practices and the accounts presented by children (see, e.g., Livingstone & Bober, 2013; Sukk & Soo, 2018). Of course, differences in how parents and children describe home rules could stem from several factors, such as research methods or differing viewpoints (Livingstone & Bober, 2013). Yet, since the variations in the present study were found within the parents' own narratives, it suggests that a slight bias toward self-enhancement may be influencing their responses. Thus, at least to a certain extent, role enactment proved useful in counteracting social desirability bias.

My second observation pertains to the **divergence in confidence levels among active role enactors and observers**. Parents in the observer role exhibited greater confidence in proposing solutions to the scenarios than those actively participating in enactment. One could posit that personal involvement and the resultant sense of responsibility make it more challenging to devise solutions, as compared to being an observer free of such obligations. Drawing on Kahneman's insights on human judgment and decision-making, one observes the distinct influence of personal involvement on decisional clarity. Kahneman (2017: 417) explains it as follows: "The voice of reason may be much fainter than the loud and clear voice of an erroneous intuition, and questioning your intuitions is unpleasant when you face the stress of a big decision. More doubt is the last thing you want when you are in trouble. The upshot is that it is much easier to identify a minefield when you observe others wandering into it than when you are about to do so. Observers are less cognitively busy and more open to information than actors." This resonates with the proposition that personal involvement, accompanied by the resultant sense of responsibility, can make devising solutions more challenging.

As for the third observation, **participants overwhelmingly found the role enactment beneficial**. A predominant theme emerged from post-enactment reflections: the profound challenge of verbalizing distressing experiences. According to parents, the more severe the situation, the harder it was to find the words to describe it. Despite the hypothetical nature of these scenarios, participants deeply resonated with their roles, as corroborated through later analysis of discussions. Participants enacting the role of the child often described their experience with words like "uncomfortable" or "embarrassing." Simultaneously, those assuming the parent's role expressed stress and helplessness. Notably, some parents expressed that if discussing bothersome situations was uncomfortable for them, even during a simulated assignment, it could be even more challenging for children to find the courage and words to express themselves. As a result, many parents felt they should proactively initiate similar discussions with their children, recognizing

that these issues might be too complicated or uncomfortable for kids to bring up on their own.⁴¹

When carefully planned and pretested, role enactment can significantly enhance data collection as it provides another perspective on group dynamics, responses, and attitudes. While it does not guarantee an exact representation of how people might react in every situation, the element of surprise and immediate problem-solving responsibility offers valuable insights into participants' thought processes when confronted with difficult scenarios. In addition to being an effective method for data collection, role enactment could be useful in designing prevention activities for parents. By thoughtfully integrating role enactments into prevention activities, perhaps parents can better understand the difficulty of discussing these topics and equip themselves with invaluable experiential insights for future situations.

2.3. Limitations of studies

No studies come without limitations. In the context of the studies described above, five primary constraints warrant particular attention: limitations regarding representativeness, data collection limitations, questions concerning data veracity or authenticity, contextual constraints, and the potential effects of social desirability bias. Starting from the former: albeit unintentional, **Studies I** and **III** included accounts of only female victims. The findings might not encompass the experiences of male victims, who face distinct challenges and potentially even higher stigmatization (Cohen, 2018; Romano & De Luca, 2001). **Studies II** and **V** exhibited similar representational limitations, with a rather homogeneous participant pool from urban or suburban settings of comparable socioeconomic status. Moreover, with over two-thirds of participants being mothers; to that end, the insights into fathers' perspectives remain limited. Given the observed gender disparities in mothers' and fathers' attitudes in those studies, a more balanced gender representation could capture more insight into these nuances.

In data collection limitations, **Studies I** and **III** drew exclusively from forum post responses, lacking comprehensive details and opportunities for follow-up questions. The same issue was present in **Study IV**, as I relied on preexisting data, meaning I could only look for patterns already present in discussions but not test or verify people's beliefs independently or probe further with follow-up questions. While the research methodology of these studies did not differentiate

⁴¹ Parents sometimes overestimate the likelihood of their child telling them about bothersome experiences because their relationship with their child is good, and they trust their children (**Study II**). As we know from the literature, disclosing certain experiences can be extremely difficult for children (Gemara & Katz, 2023; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Ullman, 2002). Therefore, it may be prudent to factor this dynamic into the enhancement of prevention or awareness raising efforts, too. Ensuring that parents would also further help-seeking or reporting abuse given that in those acute stress scenarios, parents' capacity to devise optimal solutions might be compromised.

based on gender, socioeconomic status, or cultural background, this limitation was intrinsic to the constraints of the collected data, which often lacked comprehensive user background information. Such distinctions could have enriched the study's depth and understanding. Given the objectives of **Study IV** and the sample dimensions, the decision not to seek alternative data sets or methods that might offer supplementary details was both pragmatic and deliberate. It is only noted here to emphasize that the findings of the study provide part of the explanation and are not meant to be as definite. Addedly, as both sources for data were public online forums, users' beliefs could have potentially been influenced by prior comments within the same thread. Hence, the generalizability of these findings must be considered within the limits of each study.

Concerning the veracity and authenticity of data, **Studies I and III** relied on self-reported accounts of sexual violence within forum discussions, meaning I could only examine what was already present and visible in the discussions. Due to the nature of the source material, external validation of claims was not feasible. Consequently, within the context of these studies, the data extracted from forum posts was taken at face value, operating under the presumption of their veracity. Of course, it could be claimed that people can present themselves differently online than reality would allow (e.g., by presenting different sociodemographic characteristics), and the veracity of the stories shared cannot be verified. However, in terms of the topic at hand, emphasizing the possibility of presenting false information throughout the presentation of the findings would create significant internal and external value conflicts. By doing so, I would reinforce the pervasive history of dismissing the accounts of sexual violence victims, which would undermine the wider efforts the thesis carries. As a counterpoint, I would argue that disclosing sexual abuse can be emotionally challenging to anyone (Skogan, 1984), particularly in a face-to-face setting. Online platforms provide new opportunities for sharing experiences and seeking help, as it is often possible to remain anonymous, which is an essential nuance for this sensitive and emotionally challenging topic. In written online communication, one need not worry about immediate reactions, as one can choose their own pace and time and edit and revise their messages, which empowers participants in discussions and gives them more control over the narratives presented (Mann & Stewart, 2000). When weighing the ethical, methodological, and practical implications of using more intrusive research methods, such as direct victim interviews or surveys, the potential inveracity does not outweigh the benefits. Even if one were to question the authenticity of the accounts of personal experiences of sexual abuse, the subsequent reactions remain unaffected. That is so because forum participants, too, typically respond to posts without seeking external validation of the content.

Apart from **Study IV**, all studies focused on people living in Estonia. While certain findings might resonate with research in other regions, there were specific aspects related to the sociocultural context of Estonia that influenced the findings. Historically, Estonia has been characterized by its relative ethnic homogeneity and limited racial diversity. Intolerance and prejudices against minorities are still present in society (Eurobarometer, 2015 & 2019; Mägi et al., 2020), potentially

influencing participants' perceptions and conceptualizations. The impact of sociocultural context was markedly evident in **Studies II** and **V**, where certain categorizations had clear sociocultural roots. To give an example, in **Study V**, "gay propaganda" was categorized as an online sexual risk to children, which can be traced back to the prevailing societal attitudes toward homosexuality in Estonia around the time of data collection. Similarly, in **Study II**, the stereotype of the "foreign pervert" as the most dangerous threat to children and constructing the "exhibitionist" as rarely a threat can be traced to both participants' individual experiences and to incidents that were rather common in the 90s and 00s in Estonian society. As follows, those experiences (and the related reproduced myths) influenced the persistent survival of stereotypes that are not any more accurate or representative of the issue. That being so, caution is needed when applying these findings to other cultures and contexts. While studies that are limited to a particular geographic or sociocultural context may have limitations in terms of generalizability, such studies can still inform us about the complex interplay between sociocultural factors and behaviors and attitudes.

Lastly, some additional remarks on the social desirability bias. In **Studies II** and **V** (focus group interviews with parents), this bias could have played a role. Unfortunately, its precise influence remains indeterminable. My concerns arise from two specific observations. First, a noticeable divergence was observed between parental self-reports and their actual behaviors in enactments. This discrepancy between professed and demonstrated actions suggests the presence of this bias. Acknowledging the potential for such a bias in advance, measures to evaluate its impact were incorporated into the study design, as detailed in Chapter 2.2. Second, I observed a recurring theme wherein parents associated effective parenting with protection against sexual abuse. They often drew parallels between potential victims and their children, resulting in what I call the *defensive othering effect* (**Study II**). This phenomenon, closely linked to the defensive attribution bias, indicated parents' attempts to delineate a clear distinction between their children and those perceived at higher risk for abuse. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the discussion dynamics inherent to focus groups, it is possible parents did not always provide truthful answers. Yet presumably, the effect is limited to discussions of their children and their actions (e.g., how they raise their children, how involved they are in their child's life, etc.), not their overall views and attitudes toward the issue.

2.4. Ethical considerations⁴²

2.4.1. Informed consent

Informed consent is one of the fundamental principles of ethical research involving human subjects. This means that participants have the freedom to decide whether they wish to participate, and they should be provided with all relevant information to make an informed decision. However, in practice, its application can be more nuanced. Two questions warrant exploration in this context. First, **is informed consent needed when conducting non-obtrusive internet research?** In essence, non-obtrusive internet research entails the analysis of publicly available online content without the direct involvement of the subjects (Hine, 2011). This presents us with both unique opportunities to conduct research and unique ethical challenges, particularly regarding informed consent.⁴³ When conducting internet research, we must adhere to ethical principles, as we would with traditional research. The literature suggests that researchers should evaluate the public-private spectrum and the perceived level of privacy of the online content they plan to include in research (Burles & Bally, 2018; Clark et al., 2015 and 2019; Heilferty, 2011). Consent may be unnecessary for content that is overtly public or directed at a general audience, but it is needed for privately shared information (Burles & Bally, 2018; Eysenbach & Till, 2001, as cited in Burles & Bally, 2018). Now defining privately shared information is not that straightforward. Does privately mean something objectively identifiable such as private conversations between individuals or in private online groups? Or does the concept of private include a subjective measure signifying the topics that individuals may consider private? Some researchers believe that to include someone's personal accounts in research, we always need to inform the authors and ask for consent, given that people did not share those accounts for such purposes (see, e.g., Clark et al., 2015; Heilferty, 2011). Heilferty (2011) found that when people share their personal and sensitive accounts of illness online, that demands considering them as human subjects in research. A similar conclusion could be made about sharing personal

⁴² All studies included discussions about ethical considerations, and all the common core ethical considerations were considered during the research design phases and discussed under the methodology sections of the individual studies. However, upon retrospective reflection on the five studies, it became evident that certain considerations did not get enough (or any) attention and are hence presented here. The issues regard informed consent and privacy protection.

⁴³ In the age of the internet, online research has become increasingly prevalent in various disciplines. For a long time, the internet was conceptualized as something separate from the physical world (Markham, 2003). With its rapid expansion and increasing integration into our daily lives, this perspective has shifted. Today, the internet is not seen as a separate virtual world but rather as an extension of the real world (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Markham, 2003). This view recognizes that the internet is a complex and multifaceted environment that has the potential to both mirror and shape our physical reality in significant ways (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Markham, 2003). Realizing that the internet is not just "something separate" should inform and influence our decisions as researchers.

accounts of violent crime victimization as the information is sensitive, and there is a heightened need for protecting the rights of those (indirectly) involved.

Inversely, one could argue that analyzing online expressions or experiences does not constitute research on human subjects but rather an analysis of digital text (or other content), and therefore a simple answer would be that informed consent is not necessary (Burles & Bally, 2018). Furthermore, the logistics of obtaining consent become relevant, too. Obtaining informed consent by contacting people can be inconvenient and burdensome, especially with large datasets. This could impede scientific progress, as the difficulties involved in reaching individuals and obtaining their informed consent to use their online text or other materials can render certain studies too impractical to pursue. For example, in **Study IV**, the initial sample consisted of more than 13,000 user comments, and going through the data was labor-intensive in itself; soliciting individual consent from hundreds of people would have rendered the study impossible to conduct. Then, in **Studies I and III**, many forum posts were made anonymously, rendering informed consent largely unattainable. Beyond practical issues, we must consider the ethical implications of seeking informed consent, especially when analyzing texts detailing personal experiences of sexual violence. There may be greater ethical issues (and potential for harm) in reaching out to the authors than in utilizing their content without explicit permission. For instance, some children did not receive supportive comments from others, and reminding them of the forum post and the underlying traumatic experience could potentially retraumatize them. Such an approach would contradict with the nature of non-obtrusive studies, which seek to gather data without interfering with people's lives. Additionally, given that **Studies I and III** included mostly accounts from minors, and if obtaining informed consent is necessary, then conventional ethical guidelines would further necessitate parental consent, introducing additional ethical concerns. Thus, the act of soliciting consent can, at times, be more invasive than including people's online contributions without their permission (*ibid.*). Any intrusion into people's lives – even when just for obtaining informed consent – should be well-justified.

Sometimes obtaining informed consent is not necessary, practical, or even ethical (meaning contacting people has the potential to harm). I do not see obtaining informed consent automatically equating to ethical treatment. Obtaining consent cannot become an entirely tokenistic act but should be an informed decision after carefully considering all relevant factors. Yet, even when deciding that informed consent is not necessary, such a conclusion does not mean that there are no other considerations to ensure ethical conduct. Instead of considering the existence of consent as a hallmark of ethical research, I see more value and clarity in the approach to ethical decision-making. As ethical codes or guidelines may sometimes be too rigid or not applicable to all types of research, ethical decision-making can offer more appropriate substance (Burles & Bally, 2018). The idea behind ethical decision-making is that researchers cannot simply follow existing guidelines but must engage in an ongoing process of decision-making based on the nature of the topic and data sources they wish to study (Markham &

Buchanan, 2012). Therefore, even when consent is not necessary, and the material is publicly accessible, ethical decision-making demands us to continuously assess and balance the effect of our actions and the rights and interests of people whose content we are using in research. The sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerability of children whose views were included (**Studies I and III**) were key considerations in my decision-making process. As I mentioned, I did not obtain informed consent for any of the studies where data was gathered from the internet in a non-obtrusive way. I did not deem it practical, and with **Studies I and III**, I considered it even potentially harmful. To alleviate the effects of not obtaining-informed consent, I did not publish any identifiable information and ensured confidentiality by implementing measures like pseudonymization, ethical fabrication, and redaction of identifiable data.

The second question material to this subchapter is concerned with the nature of informed consent: **is it even possible to give actual informed consent to participate in a focus group study?**⁴⁴ According to the principle of informed consent, it is required that individuals are fully informed about a research study, its purpose and procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights before they agree to participate.⁴⁵ Specifically, group dynamics can pressure participants into an agreement to avoid seeming uncooperative (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), potentially compromising the voluntariness of consent. With a limited understanding of what to expect, participants may find withdrawing challenging or feel pressured to “perform” (ibid.). When participants inadvertently share personal information and confidentiality is breached, it could result in harm, such as shame, stigmatization, disrupted social relations, and so forth (Warwick, 1982, as cited in Sim & Wakefield, 2019). Practically, anticipating every aspect and potential risks of focus groups is a formidable task. While providing participants with a detailed overview of discussion topics and the group’s structure is beneficial, it is necessary to emphasize that the researcher cannot guarantee protection against breaches of confidentiality instigated by other participants. Thus, participants should exercise discretion when discussing sensitive matters. Correspondingly, Tolich (2009) considers focus groups as a lottery. He argues that “there are risks in taking part in focus group research, and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.” Supposing that researchers are trained in both the theoretical and practical aspects of the notion that we need to be “ready” for focus groups, there is still too much unpredictability. Expecting facilitators to be highly

⁴⁴ The focus group itself is an excellent method, and as the rationale and justifications for employing focus groups as a data collection technique are elaborated upon in **Studies II and V**, further repetition here is unnecessary.

⁴⁵ For informed consent to carry its intended moral weight, all four core elements must be present: disclosure, comprehension, competence, and voluntariness (Sim, 2010; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). The first element refers to researcher’s obligation to provide adequate information to the participant. The second element refers to the extent to which the participant understands information. Competence refers to the participant’s cognitive or emotional ability to give or withhold consent. Finally, voluntariness pertains to the absence of inducement or coercion in the decision-making. – for further discussion, see Sim & Waterfield, 2019.

skilled ignores the inherent unpredictability of the method (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 12, as cited in Tolich, 2009), and that in turn, makes it more plausible that participants are not truly informed or debriefed about the unexpectedness and potential harms of focus groups (Tolich, 2009).

One of the concerns I encountered regarded inter-participant confidentiality. Post-interview, the dissemination of information obtained during the focus group discussion remains beyond the researcher's control, a factor I initially overlooked. Although participants have reported no concerns, an incident made me reassess the situation. Two years post-data collection, I crossed paths with a mother from the focus group study in a public setting. In a brief exchange, she mentioned trying to connect with another participant on social media and asked for confirmation about her pending connection request. I was unsure if the other participant wished to be contacted or if the profile in question was indeed hers. I was caught by surprise, but more importantly, that interaction made me reevaluate the decisions I made regarding focus groups. With the benefit of hindsight, I recognize what I would do differently today. In most cases, we do not know the participants' motivations to participate in a study. As much as we, as researchers, inform participants about our intentions with the collected data, it is imperative to consider that participants also have access to this data, especially in focus group settings. As Sim & Wakefield (2019) propose, some level of anonymity can be maintained by avoiding the use of real names or identifiable information. Expanding upon this, prior to data collection, a preemptive agreement can be made, ensuring the non-use of any directly identifying information. Such precautions may prevent encounters akin to the one I described.

2.4.2. Privacy protection

Privacy, as Nissenbaum (1998) delineates, affords individuals the power to regulate access to their personal information. This involves decision-making around its collection, utilization, and distribution by others. It manifests in various forms, such as physical privacy, personal communications, and information privacy. While in the current discussion, privacy is primarily an ethical concern, it is also a fundamental human right with significant legal implications.⁴⁶ Ethical issues related to privacy do not exist or operate in isolation but are shaped by the evolving concept of privacy and the development of information technologies. This has led to the emergence of new ethical concerns and eras of privacy (Kisselburgh & Beever, 2022). Online data's traceability underscores the need for careful handling, as disclosure of identities or personal details may expose individuals to potential harm or stigma. Adding to that, violating people's privacy can damage the trust and credibility of researchers and harm the reputation of the research community.

⁴⁶ Privacy as a right is upheld by various international and national legislations, including our Constitution and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and privacy violations could give ground to fines or lawsuits.

As researchers, we aim to avoid contributing to people's digital footprint for ethical reasons; even though people do share private information in online forums and social media, sharing that information in a different or new context can result in a violation of their privacy (Markham, 2012). As the effects of privacy violations are usually rather difficult to foresee as we do not know what possible repercussions can come for a person, it is better to have a more conservative approach to privacy protection.⁴⁷

Three of my thesis studies were based on data gathered from public online forums, which meant that I did not have direct contact with the individuals posting and was not aware of their identities. Even though pseudonymization was not necessary since I did not reference specific individuals, and with **Study IV**, any identifying data was removed while preparing the data for analysis, representative quotes were essential to capture and illustrate patterns and discourses in data. Using exact extracts from forum posts could potentially allow for tracing the quotes back to their original authors *via* a simple Google search, which was a concern with the Estonian forum due to the specificity of the language and the limited volume of similar data available to search engines.⁴⁸ Then, for **Study I**, I made a deliberate decision not to use exact quotes in the presentation of the findings. Internet researcher Annette Markham (2012) introduced *ethical fabrication* as an ethical research practice whereby analyzed data is processed to represent data in a way that protects the privacy of the people researched. It involves processing and reformatting analyzed data in a way that preserves the integrity of the data all while ensuring that the identities and privacy of the people are not compromised. The ethical fabrication in **Study I** was done by reconstructing the selected illustrative text excerpts as closely as possible to the original context and meaning whilst blurring them sufficiently to increase the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. In short, the representative quotes were paraphrased with careful consideration of not changing the meaning but merely ensuring the

⁴⁷ For instance, many of my students use Estonia's public court records (in *Riigi Teataja*) to gather data for their papers due to its comprehensive nature, non-intrusiveness, and methodological flexibility. Most of Estonia's court records are public and easily accessible online; common exceptions are cases regarding family matters and children. Then, the court records are sealed (though one can still access these with the court's permission). In researching, e.g., domestic violence or stalking, one can rely on publicly available data from these court decisions, including names, dates, places, exact descriptions of the crime, and so forth. The information is often rather delicate and comes with many concerns, such as violation of privacy, stigmatization, emotional distress, etc. Thus, the sensitive nature of this information necessitates prudent ethical considerations, especially as the Ethical Board's approval is not required to collect this data, meaning its use is minimally supervised. In this context, the ethical decision-making process becomes invaluable. The guiding principle should be necessity: only indispensable information should be employed, and specific details should be included solely for contextual clarity and never for sensationalism. While my thesis did not utilize data from court records, the ethical considerations were parallel, particularly regarding privacy in internet-based studies (**Studies I, III, and IV**).

⁴⁸ A Google search of the selected quotes linked most quotes to the exact forum post these were obtained from.

exact sentence or sentences would not be directly recognizable or traceable. This was done by grammar correction, replacing jargon and abbreviations with more formal language, and using terms or passages equivalent in denotation to replace some distinctive or idiosyncratic language. With **Studies III** and **IV**, I used the same steps. It is important to note that the use of ethical fabrication methods bore no effect on data analysis, as the data were analyzed well before the fabrication process. The fabrication process was exclusively related to presenting the chosen representative quotes in the written articles, with the primary objective of safeguarding the privacy of the individuals under study. As all other privacy-specific considerations were discussed in each specific study, I will leave the conversation at that.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. The social categorization of sexual abuse

Findings from five studies revealed that the social categorization of different acts or situations in the context of sexual abuse relied on three categories of criteria: situation-related elements, victim-related elements, and offender-related elements. Based on a synthesis of those findings, a conceptual model was developed (see Figure 1). Figure 1 illustrates that the so-called “true” CSA is a negotiation between the “expected” elements of all three categories. Essentially, “true” CSA is a construction of participants’ perceptions of what was considered sexual abuse.

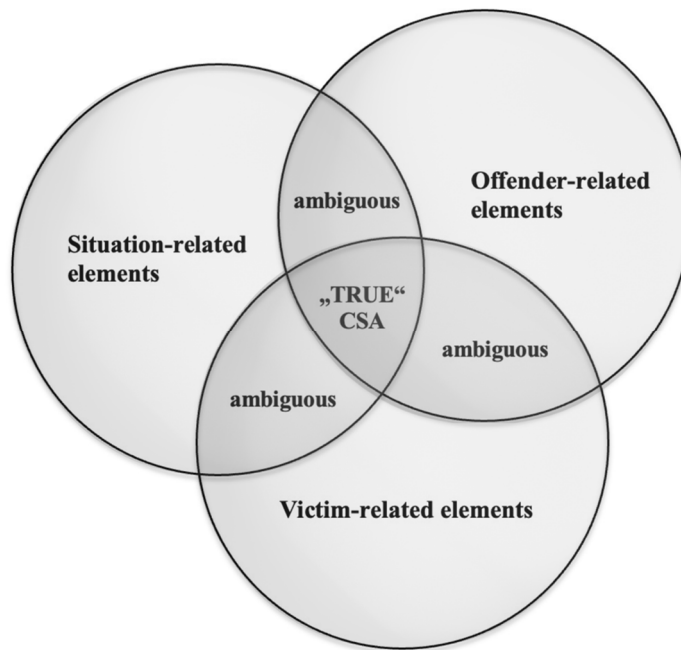


Figure 1. The nexus between the key categories for the social categorization of sexual abuse

An act was considered “true” CSA when all three expected element categories were met.⁴⁹ If only one or two were met, the act might have been viewed as ambiguous or, in some cases, not even considered sexual abuse. Most sexual abuse incidents or cases discussed did not meet the “true” CSA criteria (**Studies I–V**). As evidenced in **Studies I–III**, only the instances recognized as “true” CSA led to victims being believed, not blamed, and garnering empathetic and supportive attitudes. Participants conceptualized “true” CSA in one of two ways: either as a

⁴⁹ The “expected” signifies the social expectation derived from the views and opinions expressed by participants.

violent crime or a **clear case of exploitation**. The violent crime perspective recognized an incident as true sexual abuse when the act was committed with extreme violence, usually by a stranger and in a secluded area (**Studies I–III**). Here, the presence of physical injuries and clear resistance were also integral elements (**Studies I–III**). The clear case of exploitation assumed such power imbalance between the victim and the offender that negates (the need for) physical violence or the possibility of resisting. A clear case of exploitation demanded the victim to be either very young (below the age of 10) or aged 10–13 with additional vulnerabilities such as a disability or a dependency on the offender (**Studies I and II**).

When examining various forms of sexual abuse, there was no definitive categorization that classified certain acts always as sexual abuse. **Studies I–III** evidenced that even in rape cases, the social categorization deemed some rapes as something other than violence, abuse, or crime. The social categorization of an incident largely hinged on societal perceptions of sexual abuse rather than the actual details of the case, which led to different treatment of similar incidents (*ibid.*). A prevalent pattern suggested that the distinction between consensual interactions and sex crimes was reliant on the victim’s resistance (**Studies I and II**). Online sexual abuse was distinctly separated from offline abuse in perceived gravity, though it was acknowledged that online encounters could lead to offline abuse (**Study II and V**). Here, the onus on victims was accentuated due to a prevailing notion that “one can prevent unwanted interactions by simply blocking the individual” (**Study V**). The sexualization of minors, especially in deepfakes and similar mediums, lacked a unanimous stance (**Study IV**). Some argued against any form of sexualization of children, while others adopted a “no victim, no crime” mentality (**Study IV**). The prevailing sentiment was that if no actual child was physically involved in its creation, there was no “real” harm or a “real” victim (**Study IV**).

Studies also showed some common linguistic patterns in distinguishing or re-categorizing the incident or the victims and perpetrators. For instance, when discussing the Type Two victim⁵⁰ profile (see **Study II**: Figure 1), terms like “relations,” “relationships,” or “having sex” were commonly used (**Study II**). In contrast, discussions about the same acts but in relation to Type One victim instead employed terms like “crime,” “violence,” and “abuse” (**Study II**). In addition, Type One victims were described with words like “child” or “victim,” whereas Type Two victims were referred to as “young women” (**Study II**). As victims were often referred to as “young women,” perpetrators who were a similar age to the victim were referred to as “boys” (**Studies I–III**). Then again, male victims of female offenders were not even considered victims but as “lucky” (**Study II**). Incidents

⁵⁰ In brief, Type Two victims were teen girls (over the age of ten), who were naïve, lonely, and attention-seeking. In contrast, Type One victims were described as toddlers or young children who cannot (and are not expected to) protect themselves from abuse due to their age or other vulnerabilities. According to parents, Type Two victims “put themselves at risk” and cause victimization, while Type One victims do no such thing (**Study II**).

involving a peer partner were described as “breaches of trust” or mere “mistakes” rather than criminal acts (**Studies I–III**). Notably, some victims of intimate partner rape refrained from using terms like “rape” or “violence” and described the incident with phrases like “betrayal of trust” (**Study I**).

Delving into the key categories for the social categorization of sexual abuse, **the situation-related elements** include the unavoidability of the attack and the relational distance between the victim and the offender. The unavoidability covered both the nature (meaning how it is done) and context (where it is done) of the incident. The data suggested that an act must be unforeseeable and inevitable (i.e., the nature) to count as CSA. In some cases, the unavoidability was met with victim-related elements such as being unable to resist or avoid abuse due to the victims’ age (**Studies I and III**). In **Study I**, there were two cases where the victim was over the age of 10, but the unavoidability was situation-related (e.g., an attack by a stranger on the way home). Being assaulted at home or at a party was typically not seen as unavoidable (**Studies I–III**). According to the relational distance element, strangers make rape more “real” (ibid.). This element seemed more applicable to the cases that were conceptualized as the violent crime type of sexual abuse. In brief, the closer the victim’s relationship to the offender, the less likely they match the ideal victim stereotype. From participants’ statements, it can be inferred that their perception of sexual abuse was shaped by media representations, personal experiences, and the legal culture they adhered to (**Studies I–V**). The latter notion was particularly evident in **Study IV**. The other two categories will be detailed in the next segment.

3.2. The construction of the “ideal victim”

The victims were either categorized as the “ideal victims” or the “non-ideal victims.” The “ideal victim” is a stereotypic construction (Christie, 1986) of participants’ perceptions of victims and is not necessarily a realistic representation. Six victim-related elements were associated with the social categorization of victims (**Studies I–V**) and in turn, also the categorization of sexual abuse incidents. In no particular order, these elements were:

- **Victim’s appearance** – There was a prevalent belief that provocative attire increases the likelihood of victimization (**Studies I–V**).
- **Victim’s gender** – A victim had to be a girl since boys were considered strong enough to resist and escape violence (**Studies I–III**), though the view only pertained to adolescents but not to younger children.
- **Victim’s vulnerability** – The “ideal victim” was envisioned as weak, defenseless, and typically below the age of 10 or 14. Children older than 10 were expected to either resist or understand abuse. However, if other stereotypical attributes were present, children aged 10–13 may still fit the stereotype (**Studies I–III**).

- **Evidence of assault** – Having tangible evidence, like physical injuries or documented proof such as messages, videos, or photos, was significant for the victim’s credibility and categorization (**Studies I and III**). The level of resistance needed to fit the stereotype was bound to the level of physical violence present in the attack (**Study I**).
- **Victim’s behavior during abuse** – The underlying assumption was that resistance differentiates between consensual and nonconsensual acts. Children over the age of 10 were expected to resist. (**Studies I–III**)
- **Victims’ behavior in the aftermath of abuse** – The “ideal victim” was expected to appear visibly traumatized and openly express their emotions (**Studies I and III**). Those who did not exhibit overt emotional distress were often not taken seriously. Furthermore, the timeline of disclosure also mattered: immediate reporting was seen as more credible than delayed disclosure. Similarly, an isolated incident was taken more seriously than recurring episodes since there was an understanding that genuine victims would not tolerate repeated abuse (**Studies I–III and V**).

Victims who did not circumscribe to these elements were considered non-stereotypical victims. Participants held that such victims are sexually abused mostly due to risky, adventurous, or attention-seeking behaviors or their naïveté (**Studies I–V**). Moreover, participants perceived the harm experienced by these victims as less severe than harm faced by victims without a presumed sexual agenda (**Studies I–III and V**). However, this was not supported by victims’ statements as most victims from **Study I** were not considered “ideal victims” yet most still reported that the trauma of abuse constantly haunts them, evoking pain, fear, and confusion. Certain elements, such as alcohol consumption, automatically categorized victims as non-ideal and the reaction toward them was invariably negative (**Studies I–III**). A “child” in terms of child sexual abuse seems to be of the age and characteristics of a (young) child, such as children under the age of ten (**Studies I–V**); teenagers, in most cases, were not regarded as children (**Studies II and IV**). **Study IV** further evidenced that the sexualization of minors (SOM) over the age of ten has become so normalized in society that it must clearly be connected to a crime for it to be problematic. Otherwise, it was seen as part of the culture. The sexualization of teenagers was associated more with adult women than with children (**Study IV**).

The “**ideal offender**” is a stereotypic construction of the offender that legitimizes the victim’s experience and confirms “true” victimhood. The stereotypic offender was always male, ideally a stranger, antisocial, violent, and most importantly, clearly deviating from societal norms (**Studies I–V**). At the same time, offenders who did not meet the criteria were usually considered “unlikely

offenders.”⁵¹ Most offenders in **Study I** did not meet the “ideal offender” criteria. In these instances, there was a tendency for other participants (beyond victims) to lend more credibility to these “unlikely offenders” by justifying their actions (or to the very least – giving them the benefit of the doubt), despite offenders not being present in the discussions (**Studies I and III**). A similar pattern was observed in **Study II** as well.

3.3. The dual nature of perceived risks

The general understanding of risk seemed to be binary: risks were conceptualized either as inherent or chosen. Inherent risks denoted factors beyond a child’s control or choice, such as age, gender, disability, and family dynamics, and chosen risks were those that arose from personal behaviors and decisions and could potentially be modified or regulated (**Studies I–III and V**). Surprisingly, even with divergent perceptions and attitudes concerning “ideal victims” vs others, family-related factors consistently emerged as a common thread in assessing sexual abuse risk for all children (**Studies II and V**). These included experiences of neglect, living in dysfunctional households, absence of parental care, poverty, and foster care circumstances (**Study II**). The inherent child-related risks themselves (such as a child’s age, gender, and disability) did not make the risk more plausible. **Study II** revealed that parents linked the risk of sexual abuse specifically to two things: misbehaving and thrill-seeking adolescents and deficiencies in family-related factors. Parents’ narratives often revolved around the contrasting paradigms of “good” and “bad” parents. The archetype of a “good parent” was someone actively engaged in their child’s daily activities, both digitally and physically, who embodied stability and refrained from detrimental behaviors like addiction. **Study II** participants believed that effective parenting served as a deterrent against abuse. Many parents held the conviction that given their perceived good parenting, their children would not fall victim to such situations, and if they did, open communication would prevail (**Studies II and V**). Along with that, parents considered the risk of CSA to be low for their children since their children, in most cases, did not match the common risk factors and vulnerabilities sexual abuse victims usually have. Furthermore, parents described their children as “good children” who are reasonable, good students, and smart enough to avoid victimization (**Study II and V**).

⁵¹ In the literature, the concept of an “ideal offender” is usually contrasted with the “non-ideal offender.” However, for a more nuanced understanding, I used the term “unlikely offenders.” This distinction acknowledges that while all unlikely offenders fall into the category of non-ideal, their perceived risk varies significantly. For instance, some profiles, such as the *exhibitionist*, are considered low threats, whereas others, like the *foreign pervert*, are viewed as highly dangerous and more probable threats. This variation in perceived danger led me to adopt a more nuanced term, allowing for a clearer depiction of participants’ risk assessment of perceived offenders.

Regarding offender-related risk, four offender profiles were identified (**Study II**): **the foreign pervert**, often associated with kidnapping and seen as the most dangerous; **the pedophile**, seen as a moderate-to-high risk since they specifically target vulnerable children; **the exhibitionist**, considered a low threat; and **the spoiled rich kid**, viewed as a consequence of poor parenting and deemed as a moderate-to-low risk. Female offenders were only discussed in the context of the teacher-student type of abuse, yet they were not perceived as sex offenders or abusers (**Study II**) and were excluded from risk assessment discussions. **Studies II** and **V** elucidated a prevailing perception: offenders are often imagined as conspicuously different or distinct. The “unlikely offenders” were considered those who were either the most similar to participants (**Studies I–III** and **V**) or to participants’ children (**Studies II** and **V**). Consequently, peers and adolescents were rarely considered a threat. A common view was that people who sexually abuse children are somehow visibly deviant or recognizable (**Study II**).

3.4. How perceptions translate to behavior

Overall, the perceptions of sexual abuse and the risk thereof impact the social categorization of any particular sexual abuse incident, the victims, and the offenders (**Studies I–V**). Based on their perceptions, participants were defining or redefining what certain experiences or encounters meant in any given context and what type of reaction it “deserved.” Thus, social categorization, in turn, determined people’s attitudes and behavior across all publics studied. Victims who did not fit the ideal victim stereotype were rarely believed, their experiences were mitigated or redefined by others, they received blaming and shaming, and rarely received any further support or guidance about disclosure or reporting to police (**Studies I** and **III**). The crime of rape was often reduced to something less, sometimes even to the extent of the act being normalized as if it was somehow an inevitable or routine feature of sexual interactions. Victims were portrayed as naïve and stupid yet also flirtatious and thrill-seeking (**Studies I–III** and **V**). Then, participants’ perceptions impacted their risk assessment. The risk of sexual abuse was related to certain types of victims or family-related factors (**Studies II** and **V**), along with certain stereotypic representations such as sexual violence taking place in dark alleys (**Study I**). Participants suggested many strategies to mitigate sexual abuse risk, ranging from avoiding specific locations or circumstances and switching schools to acquiring self-defense skills. Some even advocated carrying protective items like scissors or pepper spray. Another recommendation was for children to be exemplary in behavior, epitomized by academic excellence and fostering independence (**Studies I** and **III**).

Another important finding is that in the case of any perceived similarities with perceived victims (or offenders), participants were prone to construct otherness to create distance between themselves and the victims (or offenders). The described phenomenon is called *the defensive othering effect* (**Study II**), and it was observable in **Studies I–III** and **V**. In **Studies I** and **III** the effect was visible for both

victims and other forum participants. In some cases, victims were already trying (in their initial post) to distance themselves from certain types of victims by statements along the lines of “I am not like that, I’m a good student...” (**Study I**). From other forum participants’ perspectives, it was not rare for them to bring distinct behavioral contrasts (“how I would react vs how you did”). Forum participants separated themselves from victims, attributing the event to the victim’s errors while declaring they would never behave or make decisions that they perceived leading to victimization (**Study I and III**). In **Study II**, the defensive othering effect was seen both in parents trying to distance themselves from the so-called “bad parents” as well by trying to distance their children from potential victims or offenders. The effect only worked in case of perceived similarities with inherent risk factors (such as age, gender, and disability). The othering was usually done by emphasizing their child’s moral and academic virtues, good behavior, and so forth.

Parental perceptions significantly influenced the approaches to risk assessment and prevention and mediation activities (**Studies II and V**). Typically, boys over 12 were perceived as less vulnerable to sexual abuse (or not at risk at all) and more equipped to manage potential threats independently. When parents reported addressing the topic with their child(ren), the conversation was often centered around male strangers and was predominantly directed at daughters. Similar tendencies were seen with discussions about online risks, as the foreign pervert was seen as the biggest threat to children. Only perpetrators whom parents viewed as dangerous were discussed at all. The risk from peers or partners was largely overlooked and rarely or never discussed. The main parental strategy for CSA prevention (or risk alleviation) relied on the belief that good parenting and imposed digital restrictions effectively reduce the risk of abuse (**Study II**). So, for the most part, parents rather avoided discussing sexual abuse specifically, instead preferring to focus on good parent-child relations, setting reasonable boundaries and restrictions, and being involved in their children’s lives (**Study II**).

Ultimately, regardless of the source, the perceptions worked in a similar manner: negative perceptions induced blame (including self-blame), shame, disbelief, and hindered disclosure and help-seeking (**Studies I and III**). Besides that, CSA-related perceptions affected victims’ self-categorization, too (**Studies I and III**). An important observation was that 4 cases out of 28 matched the ideal victim stereotype (**Studies I and III**). The only children who reported receiving the help they sought from the online forum were those categorized and treated as

the “ideal victims.”⁵² The “ideal victims” of **Studies I and III** received empathy, supportive attitudes, and guidance which all seemed invaluable in the help-seeking process. Others faced blame and shame, and their experience and victim status were often redefined as something else. The “non-stereotypical” victims were rarely supported or guided any further. What is more, the specific guidance given to children also matters. Usually, children adhered closely to the explicit recommendations presented to them. To give an instance, one victim, upon being advised to confide in her mother and seek psychological counseling, reported doing exactly that. In contrast, another victim, urged to retaliate, later reported retaliating. The findings indicate that victims appeared to gravitate toward recommendations that were encouraging and more comprehensively described (**Study III**). As a final point: victims in **Study I** expressed fear and distrust toward the police. Their reluctance to report stemmed from fearing public exposure and skepticism regarding the seriousness of the police response, sentiments reinforced by others. Victims often received misleading information regarding the classification of acts as crimes and criminal procedures (e.g., what evidence is needed or is there enough evidence to go to the police). The data suggested that these misconceptions may have influenced victims’ perceptions of criminality of the incident and their decision to report.

⁵² **Study I** revealed that asking for help online was the first time most of the victims told anyone. Victims expressed wanting to alleviate feelings of isolation, unburden themselves, receive advice on how to tell their mother or other potential sources for help, and decide on the next steps. Essentially, going online was like a stepping stone to build up courage for further help-seeking in the physical world (i.e., outside the virtual). For victims of peer sexual abuse, there was an additional facet for turning online: to find out or gain some assurance from others about whether the incident that happened to them even qualifies as sexual violence.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The “ideals,” “reals” and “trues” in people’s perceptions

Instead of comparing the facts of the case to any definition (or even to a less formal formation), participants tend to compare the facts of the case against cultural constructs of the “ideals,” “reals” and “trues” in guiding their judgment on what constitutes sexual abuse. **The conceptual model of social categorization** (see, Figure 1) delineates how sexual abuse incidents, victims, and offenders are categorized during the process of social categorization. In essence, social categorization dictates the gravity ascribed to any sexual abuse incident and the resultant societal attitudes (Anderson & Doherty, 2007: 5–6). When society perceives some incidents as more “genuine,” it suggests that sexual abuse toward some is considered more wrong than toward others. This idea parallels Christie’s (1986) theory of the ideal victim stereotype as there are some preconditions that either legitimize or delegitimize the incident. The negotiation between the “expected” elements does not require much knowledge of the case. Often, minimal information is enough to decide whether an incident qualifies as “true” sexual abuse, particularly as some elements seem to have more significance than others (such as the victim’s intoxication which consistently dominates over other elements). The categorization elements further reveal that the conceptualization of sexual abuse is burdened by myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes, including the innocent victim, the deviant and evil offender or that rape ought to be violent or perpetrated by a stranger. These findings are also extensively echoed in the literature regarding sexual violence (Anderson & Doherty, 2007: 9ff.; Burt, 1980; Mooney, 2007). The data from the five studies indicates that society reserves the label of “true” sexual abuse for a limited number of cases. This is reinforced by the strict criteria wherein “true” sexual abuse is deemed either a violent crime or a clear case of exploitation.

The violent crime perspective recognized an incident as “true” sexual abuse when it aligned closely with stereotypical perceptions of rape – committed by a drunk stranger in a secluded area against a female victim and accompanied by intense physical violence (Burt, 1980; **Studies I–III**). The literature supports that victims of violent rape are indeed blamed less (Adolfsson, 2018) meaning the presence of physical violence legitimizes the experience. However, it seems that people’s need for sexual abuse to have a physically violent element fails to recognize that sexual abuse itself is violent (Mooney, 2007: 213), and coercion in sexual abuse is usually of a verbal and psychological nature, not physical (Soo et al., 2004). On the other hand, **the clear case of exploitation** perspective centers on the power imbalance between the victim and offender. Here, physical violence becomes secondary to the sheer vulnerability of the victim, and there are no gender constraints for victims as opposed to the violent crime perspective. However, even within this perspective, societal perceptions play a role in defining what constitutes vulnerability or who is considered a child. This is evident from the criteria wherein the victim is exceptionally young or possesses additional

vulnerabilities, such as a disability or dependence on the offender. The literature further substantiates this, denoting that younger victims are often perceived as more credible than teenagers (Davies & Rogers, 2009). Both perspectives still only account for a limited number of cases. Given that sexual abuse does not usually involve physical violence, and most acts are committed by an offender known to the victim (Finkelhor, 1994; IICSA, 2022; Tammiste, 2022; Uisk, 2023), many are already excluded. Then, the average age of sex crime victims in Estonia is 11 years (see, e.g., Tammiste, 2022; Uisk, 2023), thus excluding most already from the clear cases of exploitation, too. Notably, neither category seems to encompass online sexual abuse. While a clear case of exploitation might (if the victim is under the age of ten), parents in **Studies II** and **V** believed that online sexual abuse (and OSRs) do not pose much threat to younger children.

Online sexual abuse, although acknowledged as potentially leading to offline abuse, is perceived as less severe. This distinction raises concerns about the evolving nature of abuse in the digital age (Killean et al., 2022), especially with emerging technologies like deepfakes which afford an endless variety of *design* options for the user (Kikerpill, 2020).⁵³ The prevailing sentiment with deepfake (and other such forms) of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is that if no “real” child is physically involved, there is no crime or “real” harm. Such perspectives, as indicated in **Study IV**, fail to recognize the potential harms of sexual depictions of children, such as privacy breaches, defamation, and their use for grooming or bullying tactics, i.e., for coercion, blackmail, and harassment (Clough, 2012; IICSA, 2022).⁵⁴ And even when there is no direct or immediate harm to any

⁵³ How deepfake pornography in general works is that you can create “custom pornography” by taking any pornographic content and just changing the faces (and voices, etc.) of the people to make it whatever you want it to be. The technology can be used to create the so-called custom pornography of celebrities, but also revenge pornography of ex-partners, CSAM, etc.

⁵⁴ Clough (2012) delves into the complexities of defining “child” within the context of child pornography offenses. The article itself is a great read, particularly as an overview of the rationales for criminalization and the comparison of approaches in different jurisdictions (e.g., the US, Australia, Canada, UK). However, I wish to briefly address something. The main point Clough is making is that child pornography laws are meant to protect children from abuse and, thus, should not be used to punish children for self-produced material. Indeed, no one is arguing that, but his proposition for alignment is compelling: Clough suggests that, for instance, if the age of consent is set at 16, the criminalization threshold for child pornography should be similarly aligned. Clough’s rationale hinges on the argument that if a 16-year-old’s consensual sexual activity is lawful, the portrayal of said act should also be lawful. His points against punishing children (e.g., for sexting) are mostly valid, particularly as the aim of those laws is to protect children (i.e., prevent, punish, and deter sexual abuse), not to prosecute them. However, his argument omits some essential considerations. Firstly, engaging in consensual sexual activity is not equivalent to the depiction of the same act. The latter bears some inherent additional risks, e.g., the digital permanence and the quality of “proof,” both susceptible to misuse or unauthorized distribution. This distinction is paramount; the two are not merely disparate in form but also in consequence. I want to be clear: I am not arguing for the criminalization of sexting. Or punishing children for self-produced material. Rather I am pointing out that there is a difference. And since there is a difference, the legal status of one should not

specific child, such material may still cultivate the demand for sexual abuse material and normalize sexual depictions of children in society.⁵⁵ The perceptions regarding the digital realm recall debates in academia about the “realness” of online experiences (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Markham, 2003). In literature, it was already in the early 2000s, a little over ten years since the emergence of the internet, when the internet was viewed as something that complements other aspects of everyday life, not as a separate thing or a place (Haythornthwaite, 2001). Parents in **Study II** and **V** seemed to still consider the internet as something separate from the physical world and the experiences or encounters as “not that real.” The distinction could be partially explained by the generational gap and the varied ways different age cohorts have come to understand and integrate digital technologies into their lives (Kalmus et al., 2017). For many of those who grew up before the widespread adoption of the internet, the digital realm was an addition to their already established lifestyles, perhaps making it easier to treat online and offline somewhat as distinct entities. But herein lies the issue of such distinctions – when parents

dictate the status of the other. These are separate issues in that sense. My second point pertains to the age of consent. I do not see any reasonable justification for linking the definition of “child” in child pornography laws to the age of consent. If we were to adopt Clough’s perspective, we would inadvertently suggest that child pornography laws primarily aim to shield children from the repercussions of self-produced content rather than to safeguard them from abuse. Moreover, the age of consent is geographically determined, which in itself is problematic (see, e.g., Chapter 1.1), but understandable when considering the child’s physical location in a specific country. However, the scope and reach of child pornography is not restricted to geographical boundaries. Online content, including pornography, transcends national borders. Considering the difference in age of consent laws in the world and following Clough’s line of thought, in Nigeria, the “child” in child pornography laws would be of the age 11 or below, in Angola 12, in Peru 14, in Japan 16, etc. This would induce even more global inconsistency in laws, jeopardizing the international commitment to combat sexual abuse. Furthermore, would such an approach incentivize CSAM production in countries like Nigeria and Angola since it would then allow for more legal leeway compared to some other countries? It probably would. In sum, I see no justification for the age of the “child” in CSAM laws to match the age of consent laws in any given country. Especially when more pragmatic solutions exist. For example, our Penal Code (§ 178) classifies anyone under 18 as a “child” in the context of CSAM. However, it also explicitly exempts self-produced material by minors of lawful acts or depictions intended for personal use (i.e., not for money or such). See, problem solved.

⁵⁵ The issue is not the technology itself but its misuse for malicious purposes. Accepting deepfake CSAM, unless a real child is involved, creates moral, legal, and practical issues. The permissibility of the material should be determined by its content, i.e., whether it portrays a minor in a sexual context, rather than the method of its production. If the material is objectionable only when an actual child is involved, this would legitimize deepfakes that repurpose real child images, resulting in *de facto* child sexual abuse material. If AI-generated depictions of children, not representing any real child, are permissible, the core content remains, in essence, CSAM. Moreover, distinguishing between a real child and an AI-generated representation would present some additional challenges. I mean, how do you know if it is a real child or not? Beyond the legal ramifications, such an approach would not take away the moral and ethical wrongs of such material or stop the normalization of CSAM. Therefore, a sound and reasoned policy would prohibit material that sexually depicts any children, be they actual or AI-generated.

perceive online interactions as less significant, they might be less vigilant about the potential harms or think that nothing serious can happen to their child online since it is considered as not that real. Even more so, when their child has a negative experience online, they might dismiss or downplay the consequences as not that real. Presumably, the “not that real” view diverges from children’s own perceptions. Having to spend their formative years alongside the internet, children’s self-identity often intertwines with their digital experiences (Siibak, 2020). For them, online experiences and interactions can be just as palpable and consequential as any offline encounter. Another facet of the “not that real” view relates to the perceived difference in consequences. The online-offline distinction was mainly related to how parents view the visible and immediate outcomes between online and offline sexual abuse. As explained above, the societal metric for evaluating seriousness or harm is grounded in the visible and immediate consequences, such as those seen in physical violence (see also, Killean et al., 2022). Tangible evidence, like blood and bruises, is perceived as more real or substantial.

Another point I wish to make is about victims’ amplified responsibility in online settings due to a prevailing notion that one can prevent any unwanted interaction by simply blocking people. First, this assumes that children using the internet will know to recognize potential abuse. While it would be amazing if avoiding harm online is as straightforward as clicking a button, but the reality of online sexual abuse is more complex. The main challenge is less about the lack of online skills, identifying some “creeps” or “perverts,” or even the child’s naïveté about the internet itself. Instead, it is more about the adult-level social intricacies of the internet. The deception present in grooming often involves promises of love and romance by offenders whose intentions are primarily sexual (Wolak et al., 2008). To put it bluntly, even adults struggle to discern the underlying motives of others, thus, setting such high expectations for the young might be a bit unrealistic. To that end, simply warning children about strangers, perverts, or creeps likely falls short of useful. According to the IICSA (2022) report, children commonly expressed that they felt inadequately informed about online facilitated sexual abuse. The report included two particularly poignant statements from victims of online sexual abuse: “I didn’t know that you can be sexually abused online” and “[w]hen we were told about child sexual abuse, we always think about rape... face to face.” Second, the notion of blocking someone in case of unwanted interactions presupposes that the most significant threat comes from strangers sexually soliciting children. You cannot block revenge pornography or CSAM of yourself once it is distributed by others to resolve the issue. You can block people, but even that view seems to neglect the usual dynamics of say, grooming. Online grooming specifically capitalizes on trust-building and manipulation (see, e.g., IICSA, 2022; Wolak et al., 2008). That being so, merely advising children to block people likely falls short of useful. Perhaps it is the generational gap that does not allow parents to understand the nuances of children’s lives online and how abuse factors into that. Abuse can also manifest in those regular everyday interactions and encounters – it is not limited to some dark corners of the online world.

4.2. Who is a “child” in child sexual abuse?

It is not unreasonable to expect the social understanding of sexual abuse to be equivalent to legal definitions.⁵⁶ At least in approximations and on a conceptual level. After all, people are expected to know the law. Not by knowing each passage and provision with its meanings and interpretations, but again, on a conceptual level and in approximations. People ought to grasp the rules in their broader essence as *ignorance of the law excuses not*.⁵⁷ For instance, one is not expected to know the specific elements of crimes like tax fraud or vehicular manslaughter (e.g., operating a motor vehicle in an intoxicated state and causing the death of a person), but one is expected to know their duties in taxing and vehicular safety. The same expectation applies to sexual abuse. People are not expected to know the specifics of each crime, but in general, they should be aware of what is considered a crime. How else would they know to avoid committing one or recognize and report it when such knowledge is not present? Yet, when comparing the social and legal categorizations, we can see some clear differences in the categorization process itself. While lawyers operate within the confines of doctrinal constructs, participants seem to operate more within the confines of sociocultural constructs of sexual abuse. The differences between the two processes emerge already from the epistemological foundations of each.⁵⁸ In principle, this explains why people working in the field can recognize crime even when it does not “look like” crime, but laypeople, in most cases, recognize crime that “looks like” a crime (such as the violent crime type of sexual abuse). This suggests that social categorization is not as reliable as legal is. The premise that social categorization is built on indicates an inclination toward reductive reasoning.⁵⁹ Reductive reasoning, however, can result in oversimplification or neglecting essential nuances or the complete context. The tendency to simplify does not seem to be tied to specific issues,

⁵⁶ Not to the definition of CSA, but more to different forms of CSA that are criminalized in any given country.

⁵⁷ *Ignorantia juris non excusat* is a legal doctrine stating that a lack of knowledge about the law does not absolve one from liability. In essence, the principle presumes the knowledge of law. Given that laws are public and publicly accessible, then ignorance of the law cannot be used as a valid defense.

⁵⁸ While social constructs influence societal interpretations and perceptions, the doctrinal constructs of law are more stringent and aim to provide legal clarity, predictability, and consistency. Furthermore, doctrinal constructs are validated through legal reasoning, case law, and adherence to established legal principles, while social constructs are validated through social consensus, cultural practices, social acceptance, among other factors.

⁵⁹ As discussed above, social categorization can be done based on minimal information, with some factors given disproportionate significance without any logical rationale for that. Even more so, the elements relevant to social categorization are burdened by myths, stereotypes, and misconceptions, which all indicate reductive reasoning. This is what Kahneman (2017: 20ff.) would categorize as system 1 thinking (or *fast thinking*) which inherently leans toward simplicity, occasionally at the cost of depth or accuracy.

people, or groups but seems rooted in our innate human preference for simple answers and concrete evidence over abstract ideas (Kahneman, 2017: 199ff.). I suppose this stems from how our brains process information: abstraction is difficult and when faced with either complicated, bothersome, or an abundance of data, we naturally resort to simplification, stereotypes, and heuristics for manageable comprehension (ibid.). If so, expecting people not to simplify might be unrealistic, given it is a natural inclination of our cognitive processing. Our strategies should then focus on offering clear, easily digestible information that caters to this innate tendency.

Another difference is that the social categorization is notably victim-centered (their actions, their persona), meanwhile, the law follows the actions and characteristics of the offender. Curiously, in the social sphere, the roles of victims and offenders are reversed – it is the victim who is essentially on trial (in the court of public opinion). The observation is not unique, it aligns with the shared experiences of many victims seeking help (Gemara & Katz, 2023; IICSA, 2022; Ullman, 2002). As the social and legal categorizations evidently function differently, the more important question to inquire is: **does that lead to much difference in outcome?** More often than not, the social categorization was quite limiting: acquaintance rape was reduced to a mere breach of trust, many instances of rape were not recognized as crimes, and the online elements did not get any such consideration. The law in Estonia makes no difference between rape by a stranger or by an acquaintance or a partner. The issues regarding the proceedings and possible judicial bias are of course another matter,⁶⁰ but the law itself is inclusive of all acts that were described by victims in **Study I**. It was various publics that excluded most cases. Paradoxically, the law affords more protection to the victims than society does, and the discrepancy is not even subtle.

Moving on from legal conceptualization, when comparing participants' perceptions of sexual abuse with Finkelhor's (1994) **conceptual definition**, the general understandings of the elements are closely aligned. In the "true" sexual abuse category, participants recognized both core elements: the involvement of a child in sexual activities and the abusive condition. The problem lies in the way these elements are defined and understood by people which makes the social conceptualization diverge from the academic. For instance, a clear case of exploitation denotes the abusive condition, but participants often do not view teenagers

⁶⁰ For instance, Anderson & Doherty (2007: 18ff.) discuss the treatment of victims during criminal proceedings under the headline of "judicial rape." While I understand the intent, I find the term unsettling. Associating actions not equivalent to a sex crime with the term risks diminishing the gravity of the rape itself and may contribute to desensitization in relation to the term. Beyond this terminology, their discussion is pertinent. They illustrate the challenges victims face during proceedings, especially concerning defense tactics. It is important to note, that Estonia has had special procedures in place for sexual abuse cases for years now, aiming to protect victims' rights and interests during proceedings. Not to say we do not have such issues here; we probably do since the laws and procedures can only do so much. But... broadly speaking, our criminal procedural framework is specifically designed to minimize the pitfalls traditionally associated with the proceedings, and the potential harm to the child.

as children in such contexts, reserving that label only for younger children. In cases of extreme violence, the age threshold extends, but only if the minor is not perceived as “acting adult,” such as attending parties or consuming alcohol.⁶¹ Here, I find two points relevant to the discussion. First, as the conceptual understandings are quite similar, the difference is in detail, thus, the issue of a common understanding can perhaps be best addressed on a conceptual level. That is to say, it could be useful to raise awareness on who is a “child” and what is the “abusive condition” in child sexual abuse to expand societal understanding. Such considerations might pave the way for bridging the divide between social and legal categorizations.

My second point relates to the question of “**who is a child**” in child sexual abuse. Surprisingly, all five studies highlighted a bias against teenagers; they were often exempted from the category of “children.” The general consensus seemed to be that teenagers cannot be sexually abused unless (1) they want it or are willing to risk the consequences, both of which negate the “true” sexual abuse; or (2) it was done with extreme violence. The question itself was discussed in **Study IV**. The findings demonstrated that the sexualization of minors (SOM) over the age of ten has become rather normalized in our society, and for SOM to be problematic, it must be connected to a crime. Otherwise, it is just part of the culture. From a young age, children are exposed to messages that blur the lines between childhood and adulthood (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). The American Psychological Association (2007) outlined that the evidence of girls’ sexualization is drawn from cultural sources, including television, music videos, cartoons, news, games, the internet, advertising, and products (like clothing and dolls), as well as interpersonal interactions. Sexualization has been linked to a range of adverse effects spanning cognitive development, physical and mental well-being, sexual behaviors, and personal beliefs (ibid.; Papadopoulos, 2010). SOM is not an isolated phenomenon, it stems from the sexualization of culture: sex and sexuality have become a standard presence in the public sphere (ibid.). The pervasive nature of SOM seems to do more than distort, it interrogates the very fabric of societal norms, redrawing the boundaries of childhood and adulthood (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). In essence, the sexualization of minors has resulted in shortening the duration of childhood (**Study IV**). The shortening of childhood is not just a perceptual shift but a cultural shift that has made it harder for participants to recognize the “child” in child sexual abuse.

The shortening of childhood is further supported by the *sexual agency claim* parents made in **Study V**, where the presence of sexual agency was the measure of the victim’s innocence or deviancy and the potential harm of the encounter.

⁶¹ Alcohol consumption has been consistently observed to diminish the perceived credibility of victims, as evidenced in multiple studies (Anderson & Doherty, 2007; Mooney, 2007; **Studies I–III**). Mooney (2007) posits that, in contrast to conditions like coma or drug-induced incapacitation, inebriation is distinct. This differentiation seemingly arises from the perception that individuals have agency over their alcohol consumption, implying a responsibility to avoid excessive intoxication that might hinder their ability to resist or voice non-consent (ibid.).

The claim suggests from a certain age, children develop sexual agency and leave behind their childhood innocence and, as a result, are seen not only as bad but also outside the “protective cloak of childhood innocence” (D’Cruz & Stigmatti, 2008, as cited in Woodiwiss, 2023). Participants believed that sexual agency indicates a readiness for sexual encounters, thereby also negating potential harm. Two primary issues arise here. First, the sexual agency claim overlooks consent. Sexual agency itself does not imply any readiness for sexual encounters. Consensual sexual encounters between people (of consenting capacity) should be predicated upon consent. The sexual agency claim seems to imply something to the nature of perpetual consent, which fundamentally, goes against the nature of consent. Consent can be inferred only from communication,⁶² not from external characteristics such as age, gender, the presence of sexual agency, being in a relationship, etc. Otherwise, consent itself becomes meaningless.

The second concern is linking the sexual agency claim to what I term *conditional harmfulness*, which is the pre-determination of the extent of harm.⁶³ Woodiwiss (2023) identified a similar dynamic in public narratives of CSA within two popular TV dramas, referring to it as “a hierarchy of harm.” Essentially, this approach fixes the extent of harm an act can cause based on attributes of a potential victim (i.e., the victim’s behavior or other characteristics) rather than the inherent nature and potential harm of the act itself. It also pre-determines the extent of harm an act can cause even before it has taken place, possibly overlooking the actual harm inflicted upon the victim when the act occurs while simultaneously providing another “frame” for the victim to fit in, meaning the extent of harm “allowed” for victims with a sexual agency is preset. Xie and colleagues (2016) further highlight the gendered biases in harm perception, noting that boys are often seen as less harmed by sexual abuse, aligning with the idea that perceptions of victims and harm compete with the reality of harm. After all, what makes conditional harmfulness irrational is that it relies on the victim’s behavior and persona (and the underlying perceptions) rather than factors genuinely indicative of harm – such as physical, psychological, emotional, and social consequences.

⁶² The form of which is a whole different matter in itself and not subject to this thesis, so it will not be further explored here. For further discussion on the form, see, e.g., Moore & Reynolds (2018: 81ff.).

⁶³ Not to be confused with the actual harm. While the specific harm (e.g., anxiety, depression, PTSD, etc.) vary based on external factors (such as the victim’s health, genetic predisposition, relational closeness to the offender, etc.), the intrinsic nature (including potential harm) of the act remains static.

4.3. The good, the bad, and the predatory other

The conceptualization of risk seems to be intrinsically tied to the notion of responsibility. This dualism in risk perception discerns between risks that can be controlled and those that cannot. These findings are supported by the literature as well: humans tend to view voluntary risks as within their control (Slovic, 1987: 283). And from that, a more pivotal question emerges: who bears the responsibility for a given risk, and then, who becomes the subject of blame once that risk materializes? Essentially, this touches upon blame attributions. It is either the victim, their parents (for not being the “good” parents), or in some cases, the offender (Collins, 1994: 88). **Studies I** and **III** suggest that victims bear the primary onus for both the manifestation of the risk and its prevention. Conversely, **Studies II** and **V** distribute this responsibility between parents and adolescent victims, with variations between **Studies I** and **III**, and **II** and **V** attributed to participant demographics. When risks were associated with victim-related elements, they served to validate or invalidate the victim, mainly influencing blame attribution. From the parents’ study, family-related dynamics consistently emerged as primary indicators in evaluating the potential risk of CSA. Much like Collins (1994), I observed a pronounced disparity between the perceived risk of CSA for the general child population and their child, with the latter always perceived as lower. While this finding aligns with other studies (see, e.g., Chen & Chen, 2005; Xie et al., 2016), it is particularly noteworthy in comparison to Collins’ due to both being qualitative studies with similar objectives and research questions. Intriguingly, despite sociocultural variances between participants⁶⁴ and nearly three decades separating **Study II** from Collins’ work, the perceptions and protective behaviors surrounding CSA risk have remained markedly consistent. The main divergence lies in parents’ mediation of online risks – a development understandable given the state of the internet 30 years ago. Considering the time⁶⁵ and contextual differences, the answer might be embedded in the risk perception process itself. It seems conceivable that consistent risk perceptions arise from innate cognitive frameworks that people universally employ, as discussed above. Yet, to delve further into these cognitive processes would require expertise in domains I do not possess.

Again, echoing Collins (1994), parents in **Studies II** and **V** often viewed themselves as different from those whose children were considered at risk of sexual abuse. Parents seemed to operate under the belief that being “good” parents inherently shields their children from sexual abuse, a sentiment echoed in earlier studies (Collins, 1994; Collins, 1996). Although there is empirical support for the

⁶⁴ The difference is between the U.S. and Estonia, and the participants in Collins’ study were already more diverse in terms of ethnicities, religion, socioeconomic status, and victimization experience.

⁶⁵ The “time” does not merely represent time as such but also the substantial advancements in CSA prevention programs, the surge in information accessibility, technological evolution, and societal changes over three decades.

protective nature of certain parental practices against abuse susceptibility (Assink et al., 2019; Claussen et al., 2013; Collin-Vézina et al., 2013; Finkelhor & Baron, 1986a; Finkelhor, 1993), this belief requires caution. Even when proactive parenting is protective (Wurtele, 2009), the assumption that “good” children with “good” parents are immune to victimization is baseless. These beliefs can hinder essential parent-child talks about risks (Chen & Chen, 2005; Collins, 1994; Collins, 1996; **Study II**), as they may discourage parents from initiating necessary preventive discussions (Priekhidko & Kenny, 2021). Parents’ disclosure-related perceptions provide that parents often hold the assumption that strong relationships with their children ensure immediate disclosure if abuse occurs. However, this belief may be overly optimistic. Priebe and Svedin (2008) found that boys were less likely to disclose abuse if they lived with both parents or perceived their parents as caring and overprotective. Age also plays a pivotal role in the disclosure process. Children under seven are less inclined to report promptly, influenced by their developmental stage and potential manipulation by offenders (Kogan, 2004). Meanwhile, those aged 7–13 typically disclose to adults, though peers become increasingly significant confidants during adolescence (ibid.). Even more so, studies show that sexual abuse is largely hidden from adult society (Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Beyond the quality of parent-child relationships, numerous factors deter disclosure. These include feelings of shame, guilt, concern about others’ reactions, and underestimating the gravity of the incident (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Gemara & Katz, 2023; Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Reitsema & Grietens, 2016; Soo et al., 2015b; Ullman, 2002; **Studies I and III**). Thus, a positive relationship with a child, rather than always facilitating open dialogue, can sometimes serve as a barrier to disclosure.

The selective nature of parental risk assessment can result in a disproportionate emphasis on certain threats, with others being marginalized (Kahneman & Tversky, 2013). This can at least partially be attributed to heuristics (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020; Slovic, 1987). For example, the availability heuristic, which is influenced by readily accessible examples or experiences (Siegrist & Árvai, 2020), could influence a parent’s risk perception based on news or personal experiences. Parents based their risk assessment of the *exhibitionist* on their own experience from decades ago. Prominent risks like “stranger danger” and kidnapping overshadow more prevalent risks, like sexual abuse by people known to the child. Such heightened anxieties correlate with prevailing media portrayals (Slovic, 1987).⁶⁶ The media’s influence, combined with challenges in comprehending

⁶⁶ Participants’ statements revealed that their perception of CSA was influenced by media, personal experiences, and the legal culture they adhered to, with the latter most evident in **Study IV**. While not exhaustive, these emerged as dominant being either directly referred to or inferred from remarks like “I just read about...” Much of the stereotypic offender and “true” sexual abuse can be linked back to media portrayals. According to Babatsikos (2010), the media serves as the public’s primary source of CSA information. The selective emphasis on “ideal victims” in high-profile cases not only shapes the public’s understanding of the crime but also guides the narrative and responses of the criminal justice system (Bosma et al., 2018). For instance, a prevailing media pattern accentuates cases with exceptionally young victims

probabilities and individual anecdotal experiences, often results in the misperception of risks (Slovic, 1987). The likeliest of the risks were largely absent from discussions. This oversight aligns with prior research findings (AlRammah et al., 2019; Babatsikos, 2011; Chen & Chen, 2005). Attempts to distinctly categorize offenders as the “predatory other” are indicative of societal inclinations for predictability and a semblance of control. The identification of specific offender profiles, particularly the emphasis on the “foreign pervert” and the “pedophile,” is reflective of broader societal stereotypes, despite evidence challenging these (see, e.g., Smallbone & Wortley, 2001; Tammiste, 2022; Uisk, 2023). The tendency to portray the offender as distinctly different from the general populace is exemplified by constructing the foreign pervert profile as the most violent and dangerous. I presume Estonia’s historically less diverse demographic has some influence on this.

The perceptions of CSA risk across publics can be contextualized within the framework of the “just world” theory (Lerner, 1980; see also, *observer’s motives* in Bosma et al., 2018), positing that positive outcomes befall the virtuous and the good, while misfortunes target the deserving. However, this theory does not fully account for instances where individuals identify with victims or offenders, which the defensive attribution theory does (Shaver & Drown, 1986). Together, these theories offer a more comprehensive understanding of blame attribution. And blame attribution is not strictly separate from the risk, it also indicates responsibility. Of course, when one’s perception of the world (more specifically, of the risk) is threatened, it is not just about a general sense of who deserves what but a question of control (Maes, 1994; Slovic, 1987). As a result, to control the situation (meaning to control the risk, even if hypothetical), nothing is done about the risk itself, only some psychological distance is created between the risk and the person in question. Although many might subconsciously recognize that substantial threats to children often come from within the home, people focus their fears on external threats as these are easier to cope with both practically and emotionally (Kitzinger, 1999, as cited in Greer, 2007). As such, pushing risk further away just helps to make our lives more manageable.

(capturing an essence of “innocence”), who have been abused by a stranger or a figure of authority (Greer, 2007). Such portrayals also align closely with representations of the clear case of exploitation and, to an extent, with the violent crime depictions of sexual abuse. Kahneman (2017: 138) notes that unusual events attract disproportionate attention and are consequently perceived as more common than they empirically are. This highlights the disparity between our mental representation of the world and its actual state. Our expectations regarding the frequency of events are distorted by the prevalence and emotional salience of the messages we encounter (ibid). Considering that most children are abused by a family member or someone close to them, such images are virtually absent from mainstream media representations (Greer, 2007). Greer (2007) also argued that the key element in constructing a compelling crime narrative is the attribution of responsibility or blame. At its core, the media’s portrayal, or lack thereof, shapes public perception.

4.4. Defensive othering and other implications

The observable implications of sexual abuse perceptions manifest distinctly across the three populations examined herein – the victims, the parents, and the wider populace. Starting from the latter, sexual abuse perceptions first influence the social categorization of the incident, subsequently shaping attitudes and behaviors toward victims. Victims were more often disbelieved, blamed, and shamed than believed and supported. Besides overall negative attitudes toward victims, guidance for further help-seeking was only given to those deemed the “ideal victims.” For all other victims, participants found reasons why they should not turn to the police. At the same time, offenders’ actions were frequently rationalized or justified. The allocation of responsibility in such cases invariably influences the blame attribution (see, e.g., Adolfsson, 2018; Call, 2021). Another notable observation was the *defensive othering effect*. The effect was evident when forum participants differentiated themselves from victims, attributing incidents to the victims’ mistakes meanwhile asserting they were not like that or would never make such decisions (as observed in **Studies I** and **III**). The defensive othering effect, while not named as such in other studies, is not a unique discovery. For example, Strömpl (2015) identified a similar behavior among young people distancing themselves from victims of online sexual abuse, presenting themselves as more discerning. However, Blum (2004) noted that any stereotyping inherently involves some form of moral distancing, a detachment leading to reduced empathy toward a specific group or individual.⁶⁷ The third observation regarding the behavioral impact on the general population was found in the recommendations they gave to victims regarding how to avoid future victimization or protect oneself. Participants suggested various strategies to mitigate the risk, ranging from avoiding specific locations or circumstances and switching schools to acquiring self-defense skills. Some even advocated carrying protective items like scissors or pepper spray. Another recommendation was for victims to be exemplary in behavior, epitomized by academic excellence and fostering independence (**Studies I** and **III**). Girls being “good girls” (by way of studying and behaving well) was a common theme in recommendations to avoid victimization. Implicit in such advice is the aspiration to be more like an “ideal victim” – someone who is not supposed to get raped. However, the suggested prevention tactics do little to address the fundamental etiology of sexual abuse.

With the second population, the parents, the observable implications were threefold: the general impact on their attitudes toward victims and offenders (which manifested mainly in social categorization and blame attributions), in resorting to defensive othering, and in (self-reported) prevention and mediation activities. Having already discussed the first point at the beginning of this chapter,

⁶⁷ Both moral distancing and defensive othering result in psychological detachment, influencing perceptions and behaviors. The key difference seems to lie in their triggers: interactions about the stereotyped (including conversations about them) initiate moral distancing, while defensive othering is triggered by similarities.

I will refrain from revisiting it here. The defensive othering effect was markedly more pronounced among parents than other groups, though this observation might be influenced by the research design. What is interesting with parents compared to other populations, defensive othering was triggered not only in relation to their perceptions of the self but extended to their children, too. Thus, the effect was also triggered when parents perceived similarities between their children compared to potential victims and offenders. However, this behavior does not appear to be intentional or deliberate. The effect is seemingly activated sub-consciously by perceived similarities. The underlying motivation for defensive othering is psychological self-preservation: pushing risk further away just to make our lives more manageable. Parental perceptions translated into risk assessment, prevention, and mediation strategies as well. Overall, the findings align with Ricciardi's (2008: 87) observation that perceived risk carries more weight in decision-making than the actual risk. Consistent with earlier research, the findings demonstrate that boys are commonly perceived as less susceptible to sexual abuse (see e.g., AlRammah et al., 2019; Chen & Chen, 2005; Tang & Yan, 2004; Xie et al., 2016), though parental views on this were limited to teen boys. Conversations with children predominantly addressed the threats posed by male strangers and were mostly directed at daughters (Collins, 1994; Prikhidko & Kenny, 2021; Xie et al., 2016). The strong focus on stranger danger, especially regarding male perpetrators, negates the statistically more prevalent risks posed by acquaintances or even family members. That is not to say that parents should start scaring their children by telling them that everyone is a threat and comes with bad intentions – no. I argue, that in risk prevention and mediation, the risk could be disconnected from perceived victims and perceived offenders as these frames are unduly limiting; particularly as research tells us that children may have difficulty in recognizing the inappropriateness of sexual requests by trusted people (Kenny & Wurtele, 2010). Akin to previous studies, parents in **Study II** believed that their children were more capable of self-protection (Collins, 1994; Tang & Yan, 2004; Xie et al., 2016). At the same time, it cannot be said that parents take no action at all. Although parents usually do not have direct conversations about sexual abuse, they prioritize indirect preventative measures, such as nurturing a strong parent-child bond and imposing digital limitations, to safeguard their children from CSA. Similar approaches have been reported by other studies too (Collins, 1994; Tang & Yan, 2004; Xie et al., 2016).

The most striking implications observed were seen in relation to victims. The implications were noted mostly on three levels: self-perceptions, counter-reactions to the reactions from others, and observable outcomes. The implications observed differed strongly between the victims who were categorized as the “ideal victims” and those who were not. Victims who did not align with the prevailing ideal victim stereotype encountered significant challenges. Their experiences were often minimized or completely redefined, leading to blame, shame, and a lack of support. IICSA (2022) found that individuals and institutions often thought children were lying when they tried to disclose what was being done to them; victims were frequently blamed as being responsible for their own sexual abuse. Similar findings

have been reported across the literature (see e.g., Adolfsson, 2018; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Ehrlich, 2007; Healicon, 2016: 16ff.; Mooney, 2007). The effect of societal perceptions influencing victims' self-perception was seen in some victims who already in their initial post blamed themselves, justified the perpetrator, or downplayed the severity of the incident. It was also visible with the victims who in their initial posts already tried to differentiate themselves from other victims and describe themselves more like the "ideal victims" (in the form of "I am not like that" or presenting the characteristics they perceived as legitimizing victimhood or their experience). This means that the defensive othering effect was present in victims' self-representations where they tried to create distance between themselves and the victims, whom they perceived as more deserving of what happened. Upon facing negative reactions, victims exhibited two predominant counter-reactions: non-responsiveness or assertive attempts to validate their experiences. In their efforts to garner belief, victims argued with others, provided more details, pleaded for others to believe them, explained what evidence they had, and occasionally relied on defensive othering (in ways already discussed a couple of sentences prior). But these efforts were never successful.

Distinct disparities emerged in the reported outcomes for victims based on the nature of reactions they received from others. Victims subject to negative reactions predominantly did not disclose the incident to parents, seek professional help, or approach law enforcement. Disclosure of sexual abuse is a dialogical process, and others' reactions (perceived or actual) are strong predictors of the decision to disclose abuse (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016). As such, those perceived as "ideal victims" and who received empathetic and supportive responses reported seeking and receiving the assistance they initially desired, such as informing authorities, undergoing psychological counseling, or disclosing abuse to their parents. Literature supports that negative social reactions are harmful to victims' well-being (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016; Ullman, 2002). Abuse-related attributions and others' reactions, and even perceived reactions, are strongly associated with treatment outcomes (Cohen & Mannarino, 2000). Coyle (1995) found that some professionals treating sexual abuse victims deem the reframing of the experience as an important part of the treatment journey. Given the profound influence of (both perceived and actual) social categorization, there seems to be a strong case for such an approach. Notably, the nature of advice can manifest tangible repercussions. Victims tend to act upon the explicit recommendations given to them, whether it be reporting the crime, confiding in a parent, or seeking retribution. The adherence of victims to explicit recommendations, as evidenced in **Study III**, showcases the influence of community advice and the responsibility that comes with it. What is more, the findings from **Study I** showed the victims' reluctance to report the crimes, primarily for not knowing or understanding that one is a victim of a crime. Or in some cases, for the others who had framed the incident as something else. And herein lies the core of our dilemma with reporting sexual abuse to the police: Will you report a crime you do not recognize as such? Well, likely you will not. Because reporting a sex crime is daunting in its own right (Skogan, 1984), and the framing or reframing of the incident as anything short of

a crime will ensure that the crime will go unreported. Often, even acts considered crimes go unreported (see, e.g., Priebe & Svedin, 2008; Skogan, 1984; Soo et al., 2015b; Tarling & Morris, 2010; Ullman, 2002). Even parents are hesitant to contact the police (Babatsikos, 2011) and sometimes believe that reporting to the police would cause more harm to the child and thus decide not to report (Tang & Yan, 2004; Xie et al., 2016). The perceptions of the severity of the offense are found to be the central factor influencing victims' decisions to report (Skogan, 1984; Tarling & Morris, 2010). Incidents deemed more "believable," such as those involving a weapon or a stranger as the perpetrator, are more likely to be reported (Skogan, 1984). Another common reason for not reporting is the belief that "nothing could be done" or that "there is not enough proof" (Skogan, 1984), both of which were also echoed in **Studies I and III**. The profound misunderstanding of the roles and duties of law enforcement is quite concerning. Collecting evidence is, by law, specifically, the duty of the police, and no crime should go unreported due to misinformation. Skogan (1984) found that general beliefs about crime or personal fear do not significantly impact the decision to report; however, social circles can play a crucial role in defining an event as a crime, deciding if it is serious enough to report, or is it the sort of thing appropriate for the police to handle. This could account for some portion of the crimes not reported to the police. As we saw children report way more victimization than ever gets to the police. The low reporting rates of sexual abuse to police are not simply a function of individual inhibitions but rather an intricate web of barriers (Reitsema & Grietens, 2016; Skogan, 1984).

4.5. Some final remarks on the discursive boundaries

The linguistic choices evident in the findings underscore the power of language in reflecting and shaping societal perceptions. In the context of CSA, linguistic choices can either validate or invalidate victims' experiences, influencing societal responses, legal outcomes, and even victims' self-perceptions. For instance, the common easy shift between sex and rape is reflecting that the line between the two is so thin or blurry that distinguishing sex from rape is difficult or confusing to the populations studied. Labeling a victim as a "victim" or a "child" underscores their vulnerability and need for protection and someone else's accountability. Yet, calling victims "young women" alludes to maturity and agency, potentially suggesting responsibility or blame for the incident. It also aligns with victim blaming tendencies in discussions of sexual abuse (Doherty & Anderson, 2004). Similarly, when victims are called "young women" but perpetrators close in age (to victims) are termed "boys," it can downplay the gravity of their actions, insinuating immaturity or accidental wrongs rather than deliberate crimes. Even more so, discussing those two in the same conversation creates a hierarchy of accountability making it seem like one is more adult and should be more responsible than the other. Additionally, characterizing male victims of female perpetrators as "lucky" perpetuates the damaging notion that men cannot be victims or

that all advances from women are desirable, overlooking the trauma male victims may suffer (Romano & De Luca, 2001).⁶⁸ It was through these devices that victimhood was either validated or denied. And if victimhood is denied, then there is no victim, and there is no crime (**Study IV**).

In essence, language does not merely describe reality; it helps shape it (Foucault, 1972; Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 9). The terms, phrases, and narratives we employ can create cognitive boundaries, inadvertently guiding us toward some perceptions and away from others. The power of language, therefore, lies not just in its descriptive capability but also in its prescriptive nature. The prescriptive nature was best exemplified by the way victims described the incident and themselves in their initial posts in **Study I**. Particularly in the case of peer sexual abuse, as victims did not describe it with words like “rape” or “violence” but as “a betrayal of trust.” It seems to be a common experience for female victims of acquaintance rape to not be able to name it rape (Wood & Rennie, 1994; Bergen, 1996). It appears the victim status is not readily available to all victims (see also, e.g., Philip’s story in Øverlien, 2023). Bergen (1996: 43ff.) further found that women used the term “rape” in partner relationships only to describe extremely violent sexual acts. Such limitations are not exclusive to victims; parents too, exhibit struggles in their linguistic choices when describing family members who sexually abuse children, being torn between calling one a “pedophile” vs a “brother-in-law acting suspiciously” (Babatsikos, 2011: 165).

It is exactly in these small nuances one can see how restricted we are by the culturally available discourses (Ehrlich, 2007). It is almost as if victims’ access to their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings of an incident can only be expressed within a specific and rather predetermined frame. And in case one presents anything outside the “frame,” the others will just take your “story” and push it back into the frame while simultaneously offering new meaning to your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. I argue that for victims who are victimized by someone they know and trust, it becomes extremely difficult to represent themselves as victims, and as it seems from the studies and the literature, it is not an isolated happening but a representation of the discursive restrictions. Perhaps some consideration should be given to how we can make such discourses available that rape by a partner or by an acquaintance is no less than by a stranger. At the end of the day, rape is rape regardless of the perpetrator, and as the data from **Study I** evidenced that though some victims are hesitant to name it “rape,” the trauma is

⁶⁸ I highly recommend reading Claire Cohen’s (2018) work on the matter. She describes the portrayal of male victimization by female offenders as “doubly anomalized, doubly invisibilized.” According to Cohen, male victims are not only considered “non-ideal victims,” but their victim status is further delegitimized by a female offender who is perceived as a “non-ideal offender.” She contends that both male victims and female offenders are cast into roles that defy conventional expectations, thus rendering their experiences and actions less visible and less legitimate in the eyes of society. Cohen also points out a troubling cycle where interest in male victims surges briefly in response to high-profile cases only to quickly diminish, leaving these victims in a state of perpetual rediscovery without any lasting change in perception or policy.

still there and is observable in victims' statements of pain, fear, confusion, and nightmares. **All things considered, it is not just about a child's comprehension but also about the stories we, as a society, tell and, more importantly, fail to tell.** It is both what is portrayed in media and what is not. What is deemed a crime and what is not. And who is deemed worthy of help and who is not.

CONCLUSIONS

- This doctoral thesis aimed to conceptualize and explain perceptions of child sexual abuse and the risk thereof and the observable implications of these perceptions across various publics – namely victims, parents, and segments of the general public – to create more efficient prevention and intervention efforts. In pursuit of this aim, qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected from three sources: forum posts (n=28) and comments (n=361) from an unmoderated Estonian online forum for children and young people, focus group interviews (n=6) with 22 participants, and online comments (n=450) from a Reddit forum. For data analysis, I used discursive psychological and thematic analyses. The findings and the main conclusions are presented below as answers to the research questions, followed by some final remarks, recommendations, and directions for future research.
- **What is considered sexual abuse, and what is not?** In general, what is considered sexual abuse is determined through the process of social categorization that relies on three categories of criteria: situation-related elements, victim-related elements, and offender-related elements. The elements are largely reliant on prevailing myths and stereotypes. As a result of the social categorization, the incident can be categorized either as (1) “true” sexual abuse, (2) ambiguous, or (3) not sexual abuse. Definitive child sexual abuse is identified when it aligns with all three criteria, often mirroring violent crime stereotypes or clear cases of exploitation that center on power imbalances and victim vulnerability. However, most incidents were not categorized as definitive child sexual abuse, even though by law, these would have been regarded as such. There is no clear categorization of certain acts as always and inherently as sexual abuse; even with rape cases, some incidents were deemed as something lesser than rape when the elements of all three categories were not met. Sex crimes against adolescents are often dismissed due to the belief that their developed sexual agency implies consent, coupled with the expectation that they can resist or defend themselves if they do not consent. In consequence, the “child” in child sexual abuse rarely includes teenagers (those over the age of 10), except in some exceptional instances of overt and severe violence. Overall, in comparison to law, social categorization is far more limiting in categorizing sexual abuse.
- **How people characterize child sexual abuse victims and offenders?** Victim characterization is largely preset by sociocultural frames. Foremost, it is the “ideal victim” stereotype against which all victims are compared. The “ideal victims” are typically young, “innocent” children under the age of 10 who display clear signs of trauma. Children aged 10 to 13 may still be classified in this category if they present additional vulnerabilities. Sometimes, tangible evidence, like injuries or documented proof, is also expected. Conversely, “non-ideal” victims are seen as those “inviting” abuse, attributed to provocative attire, alcohol consumption, and overall risk-taking behaviors. They are usually regarded as

more culpable and less harmed than the “ideal victims.” The “being less harmed by sexual abuse” view was explained by the concept of *conditional harmfulness*, which describes erroneously predetermining the impact of abuse based on specific attributes of a victim (i.e., victim’s behavior or other characteristics) rather than the inherent nature of the abuse or its actual effects. Alongside, stereotypical offenders are portrayed as the “predatory other” – deviant and different from “us,” and thus, recognizable. The “ideal offender” serves to validate the victim’s experience and affirm their status as an “ideal victim.” The “ideal offender” is an antisocial, violent male stranger. In contrast, the “unlikely offenders” who diverge from this mold and seem more relatable, often receive undue societal credibility, occasionally to the point of their actions being rationalized.

- **How people understand and describe the risk of child sexual abuse?** Publics’ perceptions are shaped by sociocultural constructs and cognitive processes, each with its limitations and biases. Typically, risks are categorized as either inherent (uncontrollable) or chosen (controllable). The distinction intricately links to the dynamics of responsibility, control, and blame attribution. For instance, inherent risks elicit sympathy, while chosen risks often direct blame on victims or caregivers. Moreover, uncommon risks are generally overestimated, whereas common risks are underestimated. Parents tend to view their children as less at risk than the wider child population. Societal fears are dominated by external threats, such as from strangers compared to people known to the child. That is largely due to media portrayals, challenges in understanding probabilities, and personal experiences. The unfamiliar tends to be viewed as more dangerous – hence the notion of the *foreign pervert* – whereas familiarity, like with peers, generates trust. The emotional weight of the topic means risk judgments often serve to create psychological distance from the risk rather than addressing the risk itself.
- **What are the reported or observed implications of sexual abuse perceptions?** Sexual abuse-related perceptions influence how we assess risk related to abuse, further dictating our preventive and reactive measures. Regarding participants’ perceptions of risk, *defensive othering effect* plays a key role in risk management. The effect operates subconsciously in response to perceived similarities, and it functions as a means of psychological self-protection, enabling people to displace risks to simplify and make their lives more manageable. Perceptions about sexual abuse also guide social categorization, influencing the seriousness attributed to incidents and shaping societal responses. This determines the level of belief and support victims receive. When victims are seen as blameless, society is more empathetic and supportive and urges them to report to authorities. Conversely, when victims are viewed as complicit, they face blame, shame, and discouragement from reporting the crime. These perceptions and others’ reactions (both perceived and actual) impact victims’ self-perception, self-blame, and the decision to report or disclose abuse. Social categorization seems to have more bearing on whether an act is considered a crime (and hence reported to the police) than the actual legal classification.

- In conclusion, the stories society tells about sexual abuse become the framework for our collective understanding (i.e., sociocultural framing) of sexual abuse. This framework, in turn, informs the social categorization of incidents, victims, and offenders. Social categorization determines reactions toward victims. These reactions subsequently influence how victims see themselves and guide the actions victims choose or refrain from. Then again, even without others' reactions, the sociocultural framing still influences victims' self-perceptions and subsequent decisions. It is almost as if one simply cannot escape the discourse. Altogether, it appears the social expectations for some victims of sexual abuse are quite high. Not only are they expected to protect themselves, but in the unfortunate event of victimization, they must act within a predetermined frame and prove the incident and their "innocence" first to society and then to the police. And then move on with their lives. As for the question I asked at the outset of this thesis: *if the world deems you unworthy of help, would you still pursue it?* Well, based on the findings of this thesis, it is more likely than not that you would not.

Recommendations

For general awareness and prevention efforts

- Based on findings and literature, the tendency of people to psychologically distance themselves from troubling topics or associated risks and the need for simplification over abstraction should be considered in designing effective awareness messages. The natural inclination to psychologically protect oneself can result in dismissing topics perceived as irrelevant or unsettling (e.g., in a manner, "I am not like that, so it does not concern me"). Given the findings about how various publics assess risk, communication strategies should prioritize clarity, directness, and relatability to ensure the content resonates and prompts consideration among the target audience. Thus, it is not just about the importance of the message as such since without due consideration the message could be lost due to cognitive biases and the underlying brain processes working to protect people from unpleasant or distressing information.
- Legal provisions alone cannot adequately address the complexities of identifying and reporting crime, especially when the public struggles to recognize certain crimes. No crime should go unreported due to misinformation, misconceptions or not knowing the incident is a crime. To enhance public understanding of various forms of sexual abuse, particularly incidents that are difficult to recognize as a crime (e.g., online forms or peer sexual abuse), policymakers could promote awareness campaigns to educate the public. One approach could be creating brief, engaging videos on platforms like TikTok or Facebook, illustrating specific scenarios and elucidating their criminal nature. These videos could also offer

guidance on countering or averting such issues. Raising awareness not only helps to recognize crime better but might also preempt it, especially among people unaware of certain acts being criminal. Relevant institutions like the Children's House or the police could lead such initiatives.

- Considering the prevalence of sexual abuse and the potential negative consequences stemming from people's reactions and recommendations (or the lack thereof), awareness campaigns could also address these issues. Educating the public about the importance of informed and empathetic responses could help counter the unhelpful approaches. Emphasizing the harm of misguided advice and specifying what not to say could lead to more supportive environments for victims. By seeing messages advising against certain responses, even if subconsciously registered, it might sow a seed of caution. In confronting such situations, that seed may deter inappropriate remarks and might even spur some people to seek out appropriate ways to respond. Recognizing people's preference for concrete guidance, policymakers might promote messages suggesting that, when in doubt, individuals should simply listen to the victim without rushing to offer solutions, or they could seek expert advice from professionals in the field.
- News coverage has often leaned into prevailing stereotypical portrayals of incidents, victims, and offenders. Considering that media is a critical source of information about sexual abuse, the news representation of those prevailing stereotypical constructions could be balanced by contextualizing these incidents more. For instance, when a particular incident is portrayed, it might be beneficial to explain it in a wider context of sexual abuse, e.g., how it diverges from common occurrences, highlighting that abuse may manifest in other ways. Moreover, including expert opinions could offer a more comprehensive view, contextualizing individual incidents within a larger narrative. Importantly, news stories should always offer information on relevant resources for victims, such as websites and contact information on possibilities for further help-seeking. Media professionals who are unsure of the appropriateness of their approach could consider consulting field experts for guidance on best practices.
- Prevention strategies, including parental mediation, should move beyond specific person-related threats to encompass general safety guidance and risk-related approaches. For instance, children should be taught about bodily autonomy, personal boundaries, and the ability to recognize potential risks or risky situations, not just specific types of perpetrators. By fostering situational awareness, be it recognizing boundary violations or addressing unsettling online experiences, we can empower children to navigate a variety of challenges rather than merely warning them about strangers. Potentially risky or harmful situations should be recognized for the situation itself, not for specific offenders, as the misconception that only visibly deviant individuals could do harmful things or commit crimes contradicts current understandings. Additionally, given the tendency for many to see active resistance as the dividing line between sex and crime, it could be beneficial to counter the narrative by moving toward an affirmative consent ("yes means yes")

approach that emphasizes the necessity for mutual, clear, and voluntary agreement in sexual activities (which does not always have to be verbal) rather than waiting for a refusal or resistance in the style of a “no means no” approach.

To facilitate disclosure and reporting

- To bridge the gap between victimization and reporting, policymakers should directly address the barriers victims face. These include perceived societal reactions, internalized beliefs about the deservingness of help, uncertainty about where to turn, not identifying incidents as criminal, and general distrust toward the police. Studies showed many misconceptions exist about the police, especially concerning whether police will believe you, take your case seriously, the nature of evidence required to initiate a police inquiry, etc. For greater trust and clarity regarding police procedures, proactive communication by the police is pivotal. This could be done by fostering a supportive tone and delivering messages from police that counter common misconceptions and address the concerns victims have over reporting a crime to police or even interacting with the police. Building trust within the community does not only concern victims but also their parents, teachers, friends, or others who could benefit from such information.
- Another aspect to consider is that given the heightened apprehensions that victims (or their families) experience about the potential repercussions of reporting abuse, it is essential to alleviate the burden of decision-making during such stressful moments. People directly impacted by difficult situations, as opposed to detached observers, often face significant emotional and cognitive restrictions when bearing the responsibility of needing to make an important decision. To address this, perhaps messages that aim to encourage disclosure or reporting should specifically include information about not needing to make any decisions immediately. For example, offering messages that stress victims can simply call a helpline – not for immediate action, but just to ask questions or have a conversation – might encourage more victims to engage in dialogues that could later lead to disclosure or police reports. Initiating a conversation, while challenging, is the critical first step. Additionally, reinforcing messages, such as “it is not your fault,” seemed to be helpful for validation and support. Perhaps media campaigns or resources aimed at victims might also incorporate messages that address the psychological barriers preventing disclosure or reporting.
- Online platform owners (and moderators), especially those frequented by children, should actively counter misinformation and ensure adequate support for young users. It is important to prevent passive observation of victim blaming or misinformation when real help can be offered. These platforms do not just facilitate conversations, they also shape them. Their influence can perpetuate harmful narratives or direct positive discourses. When providing guidance to children, it should be noted that recommendations children receive play a pivotal role in outcomes. Studies showed that victims relied more on messages that were

encouraging and were explained in greater detail. At the very least, if platform owners are uncertain of the best practices to approach such concerns, they could consult with professionals who can provide guidance such as the police, Children's House, Estonian Union for Child Welfare, etc.

Directions for future research

- While some potential directions for future studies concerning the study limitations were already discussed in Chapter 2.3, I will not reiterate these here. My research into perceptions of sexual abuse has unveiled some insights; however, it simultaneously opened the door to numerous questions that warrant further investigation. First, the conceptual model, while foundational for the social categorization of sexual abuse, requires more in-depth inquiry to fully grasp the nuances of the process. An exploration of the specific elements, their construction, and interactions could better capture the intricacies of the process. Second, studies grounded in psychology could further illuminate how sexual abuse perceptions influence the risk assessment process and the cognitive mechanisms guiding risk-related categorizations and decisions. Particularly as my interpretation and insights into the topic lack the specific expertise needed for a deep dive into cognitive processes associated with risk perception. Third, considering the experiences of victims, future research could delve into the distinct barriers they face in help-seeking, spotlighting intervention focus areas. The dynamics between self-perception, perceived reactions, and actual reactions that influence disclosure and police reporting require deeper understanding. Additionally, both in Estonia and elsewhere, the plight of male victims of sexual abuse remains not only significantly underexplored but also persistently marginalized and overlooked in research and policy discussions (Cohen, 2018). Addressing this gap is imperative to develop support mechanisms that are informed by a nuanced understanding of gender-specific barriers and challenges.
- Then, the gap between social categorization and legal categorization of sexual abuse merits consideration. Quantitative research could shed light on the extent of the problem uncovered in this thesis. If the misrecognition of crime is widespread, it poses significant concerns. Additionally, the way social categorization of sexual abuse manifests in specific contexts such as criminal procedures or judicial proceedings also demands exploration. It could be beneficial to investigate how the negotiation between the expected element categories works in such contexts. To the best of my knowledge, such studies have not been conducted in Estonia before. On a related note, the recent legislative change of the age of consent from 14 to 16 raises intriguing questions about its potential influence on societal interpretations of childhood, especially in the context discussed prior about who is a "child" in child sexual abuse. On a final note, although my studies incorporated the views of young people, the research largely revolved around specific abuse contexts. Future research might expand on this by examining general youth perceptions of sexual abuse risk, especially in online contexts. It would be

insightful to discern what the general youth populace deems as trustworthy, what they view as suspicious (in particular, whether tied to certain behaviors or individuals), and their coping mechanisms when faced with these risks. Such insights would help us to understand the similarities and differences in risk perception compared to other populations (e.g., parents or the public) and provide us clarity on how well-founded our concerns are about the general youth population coping with these risks and their approaches regarding safety.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ühiskondlik määratlus

Võiks arvata, et inimesed oskavad seksuaalset väärkohtlemist enam-vähem täpselt määratleda. Määratlemise all pean silmas võimekust selgitada, mis seksuaalne väärkohtlemine on või mõne konkreetse juhtumi või teo pinnalt hinnata, kas tegu on väärkohtlemisega või mitte. Ilmselt on määratlemine juba n-ö etteantud juhtumite pinnalt kergem. Ja eks me inimestena seda üldiselt teemegi. Valdav osa meist ei ole valdkonna eksperdid ega tööta igapäevaselt nende juhtumitega. Me kuuleme (või loeme) mõnest juhtumist ja siis anname juhtumile mingisuguse hinnangu. Näiteks otsustame, kas ja keda või mida usume, ja keda või mida ei usu. Samuti otsustame, kas konkreetne juhtum või tegu on meie hinnangul piisavalt tõsine, kas see väärrib kaastunnet ja karistust, kas tegu on kuriteoga, kas tuleks politseisse teatada jne. Need otsustused mõjutavad ka meie suhtumist ning edasist käitumist (**artiklid I–III**). Otsustamine eelnimetatud küsimuste üle ei toimu alati teadlikult, vaid võib aset leida meile endile üpris märkamatu – alateadlikult (Kahneman, 2017: 20jj). See, kuidas inimesed seksuaalset väärkohtlemist määratlevad, on mõjutatud mitmetest erinevatest asjaoludest, sh õiguslikust raamistusest, kultuurilisest kontekstist, meediast, inimeste teadmistest ja kogemustest jms-st (vt nt Babatsikos, 2010; Greer, 2007; Wodda, 2018; **artiklid I–V**). See tähendab, et meie kollektiivset arusaamist juhivad nii teemat raamistavad diskursused kui ka see, kuidas üldiselt erinevaid teemasid tajume,⁶⁹ mõistame ja mõtestame. Sõltuvalt meie rollist võivad määratlemist piirata ka teatavad täiendavad raamistused. Nii näiteks määratlevad õiguskaitseorganid või juristid seksuaalset väärkohtlemist kuriteokoosseisude piires ning nendest piiridest välja jääv ei ole õiguslikult⁷⁰ käsitatav seksuaalse väärkohtlemisena. Akadeemias on seksuaalse väärkohtlemise määratlemine ajalooliselt olnud tugevalt seotud konkreetse distsipliini piiride ja eesmärkidega, kuigi uuemad määratlused on märkimisväärselt avaramad ning üldjuhul ei sisalda selliseid piiranguid (Collin-Vézina jt, 2013). Määratlemine on määrava iseloomuga tegevus. Nii omab isikute vastutusele võtmise ja karistamise aspektist tähtsust, kas ja kuidas seksuaalne väärkohtlemine on karistusseadustesse sisse kirjutatud. Õiguslikud määratlused näitavad meile, millised on keelatud teod ja nende eest ettenähtud karistused ning

⁶⁹ „Tajumine“ ei kanna siinkohal psühholoogias aktsepteeritud termini tähendust, vaid lihtsustatult öeldes esindab seda, milline on meie üldine arusaam mingist konkreetsest teemast.

⁷⁰ Väärrib märkimist, et õigusliku määratluse all ei ole silmas peetud seksuaalse väärkohtlemise karistusõiguslikku määratlust, kuivõrd sellisel seda üldjuhul karistusseadustes ei määratleta. Siinkohal on mõeldud hoopis erinevaid selliseid tegusid, millised seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ennetamiseks ja karistamiseks on kriminaliseeritud. Seksuaalne väärkohtlemine on üldjuhul karistusseadustesse sisse kirjutatud nt eraldi kriminaliseerides intsesti, alaealiselt seksi ostmise, inimkaubanduse alaealise suhtes, alaealistega seotud pornograafiasüüteo, alaealise vägistamise (Eestis on seda tehtud nt kvalifitseeritud koosseisu läbi, mitte siis eraldiseisva paragrahvi näol).

kes on need isikud, keda õigus kaitsma peab. Ohvritele pakutavate riiklike teenuste kättesaadavus on tihtilugu seatud sõltuvusse õiguslikest määratlustest, st üldjuhul pakutakse teenuseid neile, kes on seksuaalkuriteo ohvrid. Ka poliitika-kujundamise ning ennetusmeetmete puhul määrab see, kuidas seksuaalset väärkohtlemist määratletakse, erinevate meetmete eesmärgid, ulatuse ning sihtrühmad. Akadeemilised määratlused on otsustavad eelkõige selliste uuringute tarvis, milles levimust kaardistatakse, kuna erinevad määratlused võivad viia erinevate tulemusteni (Finkelhor, 1986). Õiguslike ja akadeemiliste määratluste kõrval esineb ka seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ühiskondlik (või sotsiaalne) määratlus, mis sisuliselt tähistab seda, kuidas inimesed üldiselt seksuaalset väärkohtlemist mõistavad ja mõtestavad. Ning just ühiskondlik määratlus ja selle mõju on käesoleva töö fookuses.

Doktoritöö **eesmärgiks** oli välja selgitada, kuidas inimesed mõistavad ja mõtestavad laste seksuaalset väärkohtlemist ja selle riski ning milline on väärkohtlemisega seotud arusaamade mõju. Eesmärgi saavutamiseks seadsin järgmised **uurimisküsimused**:

1. Mida peetakse seksuaalseks väärkohtlemiseks ja mida mitte? (**artiklid I–V**)
2. Kuidas inimesed kirjeldavad seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ohvreid ja toimepanijaid? (**artiklid I, II, III, IV**)
3. Kuidas inimesed mõistavad ja kirjeldavad seksuaalse väärkohtlemise riski? (**artiklid I, II, V**)
4. Milline on seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud arusaamade ja hoiakute teatatud või täheldatud mõju?⁷¹ (**artiklid I, II, III**)

Minu doktoritöö panus seisneb järgnevas. Empiirilisel annab doktoritöö eri distsipliine sidudes ülevaate sellest, kuidas seksuaalset väärkohtlemist mõistetakse ja mõtestatakse, täpsemalt kuidas määratletakse konkreetseid juhtumeid, ohvreid ja toimepanijaid, väärkohtlemise riski ning inimeste arusaamade ja hoiakute mõju nende enda ja teiste (sh ohvrite) käitumisele ja otsustele. Teoreetilised panused hõlmavad teisesuse rõhutamise (*defensive othering effect*) mõiste kui riskitajuga seotud reaktsioonide selgitamist ja edasiarendamist, tingimusliku kahjulikkuse (*conditional harmfulness*) mõiste selgitamist ning seksuaalse väärkohtlemise sotsiaalse kategoriseerimise mudeli (*social categorization model*) välja töötamist, sh kategooria kolmikjaotuse ning kategooria elementide omavahelise seotuse selgitamist. Metodoloogiliselt käsitab doktoritöö sobivaid meetodeid tundlike teemade uurimiseks ning kaasnevaid eetilisi ja praktilisi väljakutseid. Töö lõpus

⁷¹ Eesti keelde tõlgitud neljas uurimisküsimus ei ole üks-ühele vaste ingliskeelsele versioonile (*What are the reported or observed implications of sexual abuse perceptions?*) ja seda kahel põhjusel. Esiteks, sõna taju või tajumine (*perception*) oleks siinkohal pigem eksitav (vt allmärkus 66), mistõttu otsetõlge külvaks vaid segadust. Teiseks, sõnastuse mõningane muutmine on põhjendatud selguse ja loetavuse huvides. Nendel kaalutlustel otsustasin kasutada võimalikult lihtsat ja selget sõnastust andes siiski edasi neljanda uurimisküsimuse mõtte.

on toodud praktilised soovitused teemaga seotud väljakutsetega tegelemiseks ning edasised uurimisvõimalused.

Doktoritöö põhineb viiel teadusartiklil ning toetub kolmele empiirilisele uuringle, millised kõik on kvalitatiivse suunitlusega. Esimeses uuringus püüdsin ühes Eesti avalikus veebifoorumis olevaid foorumipostitusi analüüsides välja selgitada, kuidas lapsed, kes on seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ohvrid, internetist abi otsivad ning millised on inimeste reaktsioonid nende abiotsimise püüetele (**artiklid I ja III**). Teises uuringus keskendusin lapsevanemate teadmistele, arusaamadele ja hoiakutele seoses laste seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega ning sellega seotud riskidega (**artiklid II ja V**). Andmed kogusin fookusgrupiintervjuudega, milles osales kokku 22 lapsevanemat. Kuigi artiklid lähtusid samadest algandmetest ning analüüsimetoodikast, on artiklite fookus üpris erinev. **Artikli II** raames keskendusin üldisemalt seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud arusaamadele ja hoiakutele, eriti (potentsiaalsete) ohvrite ja toimepanijatega seotud arusaamadele ning **artiklis V** keskendusin lapsevanemate vaadetele seoses seksuaalse sisuga veebiriskide (*online sexual risks*) ja veebis toimuva seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega (*online sexual abuse*). Kolmandas uuringus analüüsisin Redditi veebifoorumi arutelusid seoses alaealiste seksuaalse või erootilise kujutamise erinevates vormides (täpsemalt sünavõltsingute ehk *deepfake* seksuaalse väärkohtlemise materjali ning *hentai* kontekstis). Lõplik valim koosnes 450 kommentaarist. Kolmas uuring oli ka ainus, mis ei keskendunud Eesti inimeste uurimisele, vaid hõlmas pigem inimesi teistest riikidest. Kokkuvõttes keskendusin oma doktoritöös kolmele erinevale sihtrühmale – ohvritele (**artiklid I ja III**), lapsevanematele (**artiklid II ja V**) ja laiemale üldsusele (**artiklid I ja IV**). Tulemused ja peamised järeldused on uurimisküsimuste kaupa esitatud alljärgnevalt. Nendele järgnevad praktilised soovitused ning edasised uurimisvõimalused.

- **Mida peetakse seksuaalseks väärkohtlemiseks ja mida mitte?** Üldiselt määratlevad inimesed (kes ei ole eksperdid ega tööta selles valdkonnas spetsialistidena) seksuaalset väärkohtlemist läbi sotsiaalse kategoriseerimise (*social categorization*) protsessi. Selle asemel, et võrrelda juhtumiga seotud asjaolusid mis tahes määratlusega, kaldutakse juhtumi asjaolusid kõrvutama stereotüüpiliste arusaamadega sellest, milline on „päris“ seksuaalne väärkohtlemine või kes on „tõelised“ ohvrid (vt ka Christie, 1986; **artiklid I–V**), mõlemad on seejuures valdavalt stereotüüpilised, vägistamismüütidel ja väärarusaamadel põhinevad konstruktsioonid. Kategoriseerimise tulemusena määratletakse juhtum kas (1) nn „tõelise“ seksuaalse väärkohtlemisena, (2) ebaselge juhtumina või (3) mitte väärkohtlemisena. Määratlemise tulem sõltub kolme kategooria kriteeriumitest: situatsiooniga, ohvriga ja toimepanijaga seotud asjaoludest (vt ka lk 38: *Joonis 1*). Situatsiooniga seotud asjaolud olid väärkohtlemise etteaimamatus ning ohvri ja toimepanija suhe. Etteaimamatus tähendab, et rünnak pidi olema ootamatu ja vältimatu. Ohvri ja toimepanija suhte osas selgus, et mida kaugem oli suhe (nt kui toimepanija oli võõras), seda suurema tõenäosusega käsitati juhtunut „päris“ seksuaalse väärkohtlemisena ning mida lähedasem oli suhe, seda tõenäolisemalt liigitati juhtunu kas ebaselge juhtumina või mitte väärkohtlemisena. Ohvriga

seotud asjaolud on nt tema sugu, välimus, haavatavused, vigastused jm tõendid rünnakust või väärkohtlemisest, ohvri käitumine nii juhtunu ajal kui ka juhtunu järel. Toimepanijaga seotud asjaolud olid tema sugu, käitumine ning välimus. „Tõeline“ toimepanija on alati meessoost, käitumise osas eeldati äärmiselt vägivaldset ja üldiselt antisotsiaalset käitumist ning välimuse osas eeldati teatavat väliselt äratuntavat „kurjust“, „ebameeldivust“ või keskmisest inimesest piisavat „erinevust“, et **sellised isikud on võimalik kuidagi välimuse järgi ära tunda või neid teistest eristada**. Niisiis, „päris“ väärkohtlemiseks peetakse vaid sellist, mis vastab kõigi kolme kategooria eeldustele. Enamasti hõlmavad „päris“ väärkohtlemised vaid selliseid juhtumeid, mille puhul on tegu (füüsiliselt) äärmiselt vägivaldse väärkohtlemisega või ilmselge ärakasutamise juhtumiga, milles on tuvastatud ohvri enesestmõistetavad haavatavused (nagu vanus või erivajadus) ning selge võimuvahetuse erinevus ohvri ja toimepanija vahel. Võrreldes nt kriminaalmenetlusega, on sotsiaalses sfääris ohvri ja toimepanija rollid justkui ära vahetatud – selgitusi, õigustusi, tõendeid jms-st nõutakse ohvrielt, kusjuures ohvri puhul kehtib hoopis süüdlase, mitte süütuse presumpatsioon. Üle 10-aastaste ohvrite puhul üldjuhul eeldatakse, et ohver on vähemalt mingis ulatuses juhtunud ise süüdi. Enamikku juhtumitest ei määratletud „päris“ seksuaalse väärkohtlemisena, ehkki seaduse järgi oleksid need selliseks loetud. Samas ei olnud määratlemine otseselt seotud konkreetset tüüpi väärkohtlemisega, kuna isegi osade vägistamisjuhtumite puhul määratleti need kas ebaselge juhtumina või mitte väärkohtlemisena. Seda tuli sageli ette nt teismeliste vastu suunatud seksuaalkuritegude puhul, kuna teismelistelt oodati, et nad peaksid olema võimelised end kaitsma ja vastupanu osutama. Sarnaselt läheneti ka juhtumitele, mille puhul oli toimepanijaks teismelise ohvri eakaaslasest poiss-sõber. Selliseid juhtumeid kirjeldati pigem kui „noore inimese eksimust“ või amoraalset tegu, kuid mitte kui vägivaldat või kuritegu. Isegi kui inimesed üldjoontes teavad, mis seksuaalne väärkohtlemine on, ei paista nad konkreetsete juhtumite määratlemisel lähtuvat ratsionaalsetest kaalutlustest ja hinnangutest. Seksuaalse väärkohtlemise sotsiaalne määratlus peaks eelduslikult vähemalt ligikaudselt vastama õiguslikele määratlustele. Kahjuks on sotsiaalne kategoriseerimine võrreldes õiguslike määratlustega märkimisväärselt piiravam – kahekümne kaheksast juhtumist vaid neli olid sellised, mida käsitati kui „päris“ seksuaalset väärkohtlemist, kuigi meie karistusseadustiku järgi oleksid kõik 28 seda olnud. Tuleb tõdeda, et **inimesed kipuvad ära tundma vaid sellist väärkohtlemist, mis „näeb selgelt välja“ nagu kuritegu** – see tähendab tõsise füüsilise vägivalla ja nähtavate vigastuste olemasolu. Sellest järeldub, et õigus pakub ohvritele enam kaitset kui inimesed seda vajalikuks peavad.

- **Kuidas inimesed kirjeldavad seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ohvreid ja toimepanijaid?** Ohvrid jaotusid valdavalt kahte kategooriasse: „tõelised“ ohvrid ning need, kes olid „kuidagi vähem“ ohvrid. Täpsem määratlemine leidis aset eelkirjeldatud sotsiaalse kategoriseerimise protsessi raames ning enamasti toimus selliselt, et ohvrit võrreldi või kõrvutati „tõelise“ ohvri stereotüübiga ning mida sarnasem konkreetne ohver oli sellele stereotüübile, seda tõenäolisemalt ka see

ohver „tõeliseks“ loeti. Samal ajal, mida kaugemale ohver sellest stereotüübist asetus, seda tõenäolisemalt teda „tõeliseks“ ohvriks ei loetud. „Tõeline“ ohver ei põhine objektiivsetel andmetel või hinnangutel, vaid on stereotüüpiline konstruktsioon ohvrist, kes n-ö ühiskonna hinnangul ei ole „ära teeninud“ seda, mis temaga juhtus ning kellele ühiskond seetõttu ka kaasa tunneb (Christie, 1986). „Tõelised“ ohvrid on üldjuhul lapsed vanuses kuni 10 aastat, kelle puhul on nähtavad ka selged viited traumale (nt nutmine või muu käitumine, mis võiks viidata traumale). 10- kuni 13-aastaste laste puhul ilmnes, et ka nemad võivad siiski olla „tõelised“ ohvrid, kui neil on täiendavaid haavatavusi, mis seda õigustaksid, nagu nt erivajadus, arusaamisvõimetus vms. Mõnikord eeldatakse ka n-ö käegakatsutavaid tõendeid, nagu vigastused või dokumentaalsed tõendid (nt fotod või kuvatõmmised vestlustest) ning üle 10-aastaste ohvrite puhul eeldati tugeva füüsilise vastupanu osutamist. Kusjuures **füüsilise vastupanu osutamine oli peamine kriteerium, mille järgi eristati vägistamist vabatahtlikust seksuaaltegevusest.** Lisaks, „tõeline“ ohver ei riietu ega käitu „provokatiivselt“ ja annab juhtunud võimalikult varakult teada (st räägib vanematele või teatab politseile). Ohvrite puhul, keda ei käsitatud kui „tõelisi“ ohvreid, leiti, et nemad on (vähemalt osaliselt) juhtunud ise süüdi ning iseenda eksimuste tõttu juhtunu „esile kutsunud.“ Väärkohtlemise või ründe nn „esile kutsumist“ seostati provokatiivse riietuse, alkoholi tarvitamise, pidudel käimise ning üldise riskikäitumisega. Seejuures väärib osutamist, et teismeealiste tüdrukute osas on inimeste suhtumine kardinaalselt erinev võrreldes nt alla 10-aastaste lastega. Üldine konsensus näis olevat, et teismelisi ei saa seksuaalselt väärkohelda ega ära kasutada, välja arvatud kui (1) nad seda just ise ei taha, mis omakorda tähendab, et tegu ei ole „päris“ seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega, või (2) seda tehti äärmiselt tõsise füüsilise vägivallaga, millega kaasnesid nähtavad ja tõsised vigastused. Teismeealisi kõrvutatakse enam täiskasvanutega ning „lapse“ tähendus laste seksuaalse väärkohtlemise kontekstis ei hõlma üldjuhul teismeealisi. See nähtus ka inimeste sõnavallikutest (**artikkel I–IV**) – „tõelistest“ ohvritest kõneledes kasutati pigem sõnu „laps“ ja „ohver,“ samal ajal teistele ohvritele viidati sageli kui „noortele naistele.“ Üks võimalik selgitus on seotud lapsepõlve ning üldise kultuuri ja avaliku ruumi seksualiseerimisega. Täpsemalt sellega, et seks ja seksuaalsus on muutunud tavapäraseks nähtuseks avalikus ruumis, sh ka lastega seonduvale seksuaalsuse omistamine ja teatud juhtudel isegi laste seksuaalne kuvandamine (American Psychological Association, 2007; Papado-poulos, 2010). Seksualiseerimist esineb nii meedias üldiselt, filmides, sarjades, multifilmides, internetis, mängudes ja reklaamides, nt erinevate toodete puhul nagu nukud, riided ja kosmeetika (American Psychological Association, 2007). Eelkirjeldatud nähtus mitte ainult ei kujunda ühiskondlikke arusaamasid ja sotsiaalseid norme, vaid ka nihutab lapsepõlve ja täiskasvanuks saamise piire (Moore ja Reynolds, 2018). Nii on seksualiseerimine lühendanud ühiskondlikku arusaama lapsepõlve kestusest, mh ka seoses seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega, kuivõrd „laps“ laste seksuaalse väärkohtlemise tähenduses paistab tähistavat vaid alla 10-aastaseid (**artikkel IV**). Ka toimepanijaid kirjeldati üpris stereotüüpilistes raamistustes – st sellistena, kes on kuidagi silmnähtavalt „meist“ erinevad ning seega äratuntavad. Stereotüüpne

toimepanija on kujutatud antisotsiaalse ning vägivaldse mehena, kes ohvrit varasemast ei tunne ning on pigem pärit „mujalt“ kui Eestist. Samal ajal toimepanijaid, kes on meile sarnasemad (n-õ tavalised eestlased, kes ei „paista“ kuidagi silmnähtavalt ohtlikud, vägivaldsed ja antisotsiaalsed), usutakse sagedamini kui ohvrit ning **meile n-õ sarnaste toimepanijate tegusid ei peeta nii tõsiseks kui meist erinevate toimepanijate.**

- **Kuidas inimesed mõistavad ja kirjeldavad laste seksuaalse väärkohtlemise riski?** Tulemuste pinnalt saab riskid jaotada kaheks – olemuslikud ehk kontrollimatud ning valitud ehk kontrollitavad riskid. Selline eristus on otseselt seotud vastutuse, kontrolli ja süü omistamise dünaamikaga. Näiteks kutsuvad olemuslikud riskid esile kaastunnet, samas kui valitud riskid on seotud süü omistamisega ja seda enamasti ohvrite või ohvrite vanemate suunal. Olemuslike riskiteguritena käsitati selliseid asjaolusid nagu nt ohvri vanus, sugu ning erivajaduse olemasolu, samas kui valitud riskidena kõneleti sageli ohvri käitumisest, riietusest ning valikutest (nt otsusest minna peole või tarvitada alkoholi). Vanemate uuringus anti kõige enam kaalu vanemluse ja perekonnaga seotud riskiteguritele (**artikkel II**). Kokkuvõtlikult läheneti seksuaalse väärkohtlemise riskile sageli selliselt, **et seksuaalne väärkohtlemine juhtub eelkõige „teatud laadi“ lastega, kes on „teatud laadi“ perekondadest.** Enda lastega seotud riske hinnati peaaegu alati üpris madalaks ning oma laste riskihinnangu osas eristati oma lapsi selgelt nii nendest, keda arvati olevat suuremas väärkohtlemise ohus kui ka laste üldpopulatsioonist. Lisaks nähtus lapsevanemate uuringust ka riskihindamise teatav valikulisus. Esi- teks, ebatõenäolisemaid riske hinnati tõenäolisemaks kui need tegelikult on ning tõenäolisi riske selgelt alahinnati (Kahneman ja Tversky, 2013; **artikkel II**). Nii peeti kõige suuremaks ohuks „meist“ etniliselt erinevana kirjeldatud „välismaa perverti,“ keda seostati ka lapserööviga samas kui nt nn „liputajat“ kirjeldati kui vana ja psüühilise häirega purjus meest, kes üldiselt ei ole „päriselt“ ohtlik, pigem lihtsalt häiriv. Teiseks, vanemate riskihinnangud lähtusid kohati üpris ebaolulisest või asjakohatust nagu nt 1990-ndatel (nn „liputajad“) ja 2000-ndate alguses aset leidnud sündmused (nn „türgi perverdid MSN-is“). Toimepanija ohtlikkuse hindamise lähtepunktiks olid eelkõige erinevused ja sarnasused võrreldes hindajaga – mida erinevam, seda ohtlikum (nt nn „välismaa pervert“) ja mida sarnasem, seda vähem ohtlikum (nt „liputaja“). Muuhulgas mõjutab riskihindamist ka teema emotsionaalne kaal ning (alateadlik) soov end ebameeldiva informatsiooni eest kaitsta. See aga tekitab korduvalt olukorra, kus osalejate lähenemine riskile oli seotud enam iseenda ja riski vahele psühholoogilise distantssi loomisega pigem kaitsmaks ennast selle mõtte eest, et midagi halba võiks juhtuda, samas jättes riski kui sellise osas midagi tegelikult ette võtmata. Nii näiteks leidis osa vanemaid, et ei pea vajalikuks lastega nendel teemadel rääkida, kuna nende lapse puhul on väärkohtlemise risk madal, samas kui riski madalaks hindamine oli seotud teisesuse rõhutamisega (*defensive othering*) enda laste ja potentsiaalsete ohvrite või toimepanijate vahel. Teisesust rõhutati nt kirjeldades enda last selgelt erinevana nendest lastest, kelle puhul riski kõrgemaks hinnati, nt stiilis „minu laps ei ole selline.“ Erinevuste välja toomisel rõhutati laste üldist head käitumist, intelligentsi, häid

õpitlemusi ja muid saavutusi. Sarnased asjaolud kumasid läbi ka esimese uuringu tulemustest, milles **ohvritele antud soovitude puhul väärkohtlemise edaspidi-seks vältimiseks domineerisid ohvri kontrolli all olevad asjaolud nagu nt „hästi käitumine“ ja „tubli olemine,“ õppetöös pingutamine ja heade hinnete saamine, kooli vahetamine (toimepanija vältimiseks), ära kolimine, enese-kaitse õppimine jms (artiklid I ja III).** Lisaks, samasugused mustrid esinesid ka lapsevanemate püüetes end eristada või erinevana kujutada nendest vanematest, kelle lapsi hinnati suuremas väärkohtlemise ohus olevaks. Kokkuvõttes nähtus uuringus osalejate riskihinnangutest, et (1) seksuaalse väärkohtlemise riski tahe-takse pigem seostada kontrollitavate asjaoludega, kuna see tekitab turvalisema tunde ning ei muuda riski niivõrd kontrollimatuks ja suvaliseks (nagu võiks sek-suaalne väärkohtlemine igapähega juhtuda), ning (2) riski psühholoogiline lähedus (nt olemuslikud sarnasused arvatavate ohvrite ja enda laste vahel) tekitab pigem olukorra, kus inimesed loovad psühholoogilist (või mõttelist) distantssi enda ja riski vahele, kuid riski kui sellise osas midagi tegelikult ette ei võta.

- **Milline on seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud arusaamade ja hoiakute mõju?**⁷² Tulemustest ilmneb, et kõik väärkohtlemised ei ole inimeste silmis samavõrd tõsised ja tõsiseltvõetavad. Meie arusaamad mõjutavad, kuidas hin-dame kellegi süüd, vastutust ning väärkohtlemisega seotud riski, mis omakorda mõjutavad meie otsuseid seoses ennetuse või juhtunule reageerimisega. See, mida peame „päris“ seksuaalseks väärkohtlemiseks ja keda „tõeliseks“ ohvriks, mõjutab juhtumitele omistatud tõsidust ning kujundab inimeste suhtumist ja käitumist ohvri suhtes. „Tõelisi“ ohvreid enamasti usutakse, neisse suhtutakse empaatiliselt ja toetavalt ning julgustatakse nt vanematele rääkima või politseisse pöörduma. Keskne sõnum „tõelisele“ ohvrile on „see pole sinu süü.“ Samal ajal ülejäänud ohvrite puhul on olukord vastupidine – keskne sõnum on „ise oled süüdi, et nii rumal olid“ ning tavapäraselt neid ohvreid ei usuta, neid süüdis-tatakse, halvustatakse ja alandatakse ning edasist abi otsimist ei soovitata. Mõni-kord tuuakse isegi põhjuseid miks ei tasugi kellelegi rääkida – nt politseisse pöör-dumise ebaedu ennustades stiilis: „[s]elliste vägistamiste kohta öeldakse politseis lihtsalt, et libud jõid end purju.“ Kõige selgemalt joonistusid seksuaalse väärkohtle-misega seotud arusaamade ja hoiakute mõjud välja ohvrite puhul. Nii nähtus, et abi, mida ohvrid veebifoorumist otsima tulid, said vaid ja ainult need ohvrid, keda peeti „tõeliseks“ ohvriks ja kes seeläbi said osaks empaatilistele ja toetavatele reaktsioonidele. Need olid ka ainsad ohvrid, kes pöördusid foorumisse tagasi tea-tamaks, et nad kas rääkisid juhtunust vanematele, pöördusid politseisse või maksid juhtunu eest kätte. **Negatiivseid reaktsioone saanud ohvrite puhul paistis abi otsimine katkev.** Osade ohvrite puhul nähtus küll n-õ dialoogipüüdeid, kus ohvrid püüdsid teisi veenda selles, et nad räägivad tõtt, kuid edutult – kui ini-mesed olid juba n-õ ära otsustanud, et „sa oled ise süüdi,“ siis ümber mõtlemist

⁷² Osutan, et uuringutes kaardistasin eelkõige „mõju,“ milline oli nähtav uuringus osalejate vastustes ehk siis asjaolud, mida nad kas ise välja tõid (nt väites, et nad pöördusid politseisse) või mis oli nähtav osalejate suhtlusest (nt konkreetsete soovitude mõju ohvri valikutele).

kui sellist ei ilmnenud. Toetavaid reaktsioone saanud ohvrite puhul oli tähelepanuväärne veel, et ohvrid lähtusid konkreetsetest soovitustest, mida neile anti – kellel soovitati kätte maksta, see seda ka tegi, kellel politseisse pöörduda, pöördus politseisse ja kellel vanematele rääkida, rääkis vanematele (**artikkel III**). Seega võivad ka ohvritele antavad soovitused olla määrava tähtsuse ja iseloomuga. Viimane käsitlemist vajav tulemus on seotud politsei rolli ja kuvandiga ohvrite (ja ka teiste uuringus osalejate) silmis. Suhtumine politseisse oli ülekaalukalt negatiivne: ohvrid kartsid või ei usaldanud politseid, samasuguseid suhtumisi kordasid või esitasid ka teised uuringus osalejad ning politsei osas levisid mitmed väärarusaamad ja -uskumused (nt kas politsei tegeleb selliste juhtumitega või milliseid tõendeid on vaja, et pöörduda politseisse). Veel üheks oluliseks takistuseks politseisse pöördumisel oli teo või juhtumi määramine (või kategoriseerimine). Seda esines nii juhtumite puhul, kus inimesed ei teadnud ja arvasid, et tegu ei ole kuriteoga kui ka juhtumite puhul, mida määratleti nt eksimuse või moraalselt vale käitumise aga mitte kuriteona. Viimast esines peaaesjalikult eakaaslasest partneri poolt toime pandud vägistamise puhul (**artikkel I ja III**). Eelkirjeldatud hoiakud ja uskumused paistavad toimivat barjäärina politseisse pöördumise osas. **Kokkuvõttes osutavad tulemused, et konkreetse seksuaalse väärkohtlemise teo kuriteoks lugemisel omab vähem tähtsust, mida õigus selle osas ütleb.** Otsustavaks on hoopis, kas ja mida inimesed selle kohta ütlevad.

Soovitused

Ennetuseks ja teadlikkuse tõstmiseks

- Inimestena on meil kalduvus end probleemsetest või häirivatest teemadest psühholoogiliselt distantseerida. See tähendab, et me kipume asju lihtsustama või teatavat mõttelist distantssi häirivate teemadega looma (alateadliku) eesmärgiga end erinevate ohtude eest psühholoogiliselt kaitsta. Tegelik probleemide või riskide osas selline lähenemine aga üldjuhul tulemust ei too. Samuti tuleks arvestada sellega, et inimesed kipuvad abstraktseid mõisteid või küsimusi lihtsustama. Need protsessid on seotud sellega, kuidas meie aju toimib. Samas loomulik soov end häirivate või ebaoluliseks peetavate teemade eest psühholoogiliselt kaitsta võib viia nende teemade vältimiseni (nt mõtlemine stiilis „mina ei ole selline, seega see ei puuduta mind“). Selline lähenemine puudutab nt lapsevanemaid, kes arvavad, et nende lapsed või nende pere ei ole „selline“, mistõttu nt seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud sõnumid avalikkusele ei pruugigi kõnetada (st need n-ö „lükatakse kõrvale“). Arvestades, kuidas inimesed riske hindama kipuvad (lihtsustamine, erinevad kognitiivsed nihked jms), peaksid avalikkusele (või mõnele konkreetsele sihtrühmale) suunatud sõnumid **eelistama selgust, otsekohesust ja tekitama võimaluse sõnumis edastatuga samastu-miseks**. Samastumise küsimus on eriti oluline just seetõttu, et inimesed kipuvad arvama, et „mina ei ole selline.“ Niisiis tuleks erinevate teavituskampaaniate jms-e puhul mõelda, kuidas võiks üks sõnum jõuda ka nendeni, kes kokkupuutel kõnealuse teema või mõne

konkreetses sõnumiga kipuvad mõtlema, et see ei puu-duta mind. Samastumise momenti tekitav sõnum tagaks tõhusamalt võimaluse, et sõnumi sisu võiks kõnetada ja kutsuda inimesi üles vähemalt kaasa mõtlema. Sellest, et sõnum või teema ise on oluline, ei piisa. Arvestada tuleb ka, et kognitiivsete nihete (*cognitive bias*) ja alateadlike aju protsesside tõttu, mis meid ebameeldiva või stressirohke informatsiooni eest kaitsta püüavad, võivad ka olulised sõnumid kaotsi minna.

- Õigusnormidest üksi ei piisa, et kuritegusid ennetada ja tõhusamalt avastada. Ükski kuritegu ei tohiks jääda lahendamata väärinfo, eksiarvamuste või teadmatuse tõttu (st teadmatus osas, kas konkreetne tegu on kuritegu). Seejuures on teadlikkuse tõstmine eriti oluline nende tegude puhul, mida on keerulisem kuriteona ära tunda (nt veebi vahendusel või eakaaslaste poolt toime pandud väärkohtlemine). Nagu uurimistulemused näitavad, kipuvad inimesed ära tundma eelkõige tegusid, millel on teatavad n-õ stereotüüpilised või ootuspärased kuriteo „jäljed“: verejooks, nähtavad vigastused jms. Märkimisväärne osa veebi-kuritegudest aga ei jäta füüsilisi jälgi. Lisaks sellele, et n-õ „ilma ootuspäraste jälgedeta kuritegude“ puhul on neid keerulisem ära tunda kui n-õ selgete „jälgedega“ kuritegusid, on suhtumine sellistesse tegudesse ka sageli erinev – inimesed, sh ohvrid, kipuvad selliseid tegusid käsutama kui vähem tõsise või olulisena. Igal juhul on tegu küsimusega, mille osas võib teadlikkuse tõstmine aidata kaasa sellele, et ka nende kuritegude puhul oskaksid inimesed neid tõhusamalt ennetada, paremini ära tunda ning vajadusel siiski politsei poole pöörduda. Üheks võimalikuks lähenemiseks teadlikkuse tõstmisel võiks olla **lühikeste, haaravate videode loomine platvormidel nagu TikTok või Facebook, mis lihtsate eluliste näidete pinnalt selgitavad, kas tegu võib olla süüteo või mitte**. Need videod võiksid pakkuda ka juhiseid, nt kuidas end tõhusamalt kaitsta, millised võiksid olla n-õ ohumärgid või kuidas ja kuhu abivajaduse korral pöörduda. Selliseid algatusi või kampaaniaid võiksid juhtida asutused nagu Lastemaja või politsei.
- Arvestades olemasolevat seksuaalse väärkohtlemise juhtumite ja seksuaalkuritegude statistikat saab järeldada, et tegu on levinud probleemiga, millega oluline osa ühiskonnast ühel või teisel moel elu jooksul kokku puutub. Suur osa juhtumitest aga ei jõua kunagi politseini. Lisaks sellele, et tagada vajaliku informatsiooni kättesaadavus ohvritele ning julgustada politseisse pöörduma, tasuks tegeleda ka konkreetsete barjääridega, mis politseisse pöördumist (või muud abi otsimist) takistavad. Uuringutulemustest nähtuvalt toimivad barjääridena nt inimeste negatiivsed reaktsioonid ja kahjulikud soovitusel (või ka soovitude puudumine). Samal ajal aitavad toetavad ja julgustavad reaktsioonid kaasa sellele, et ohvrid pöörduvad suurema tõenäosusega politseisse või räägivad juhtunust vanematele. Negatiivsed reaktsioonid ja kahjulikud soovitusel ei kõnele ka ilmingimata pahatahtlikkusest või ükskõiksusest. Tegu on ilmselgelt keerulise teemaga ning tõenäoliselt ei ole valdaval enamikul meist selliseid teadmisi ja oskuseid, et meie poole pöördunud väärkohtlemise ohvrit kohe õigel viisil ja õigete sõnadega toetada. Siinkohal võiks abi olla sellest, kui kätte-saadavad oleksid ka sellised materjalid, mis on mõeldud nt lapsevanematele, õpetajatele (ja laiemalt üldsusele), milles antakse **lihtsaid ja konkreetseid juhiseid, kuidas sellise olukorraga**

toime tulla. Selline materjal võiks sisaldada ka selgeid soovitusi selle kohta, mida kindlasti öelda või teha ei tasu (nt mitte soovitada kätte maksta, mitte süüdistada ohvreid jne). Teadlikkuse tõstmine teadlike ja empaatiliste vastuste olulisusest võib vähendada kasutuid ja kahjulikke lähenemisviise. Inimesed eelistavad konkreetseid ja selgeid juhiseid, eriti sellistes stressirohketes olukordades. Samuti on võimalik soovitada kahtluse korral (nt kui ei teata, mida ja kuidas öelda) lihtsalt ohvrit kuulata (ilma, et kuulaja peaks koheselt lahendusi pakkuma) ja otsida asjatundlikku nõu valdkonna spetsialistidelt enne kui mingeid soovitusi üldse pakutakse.

- Seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud meediakajastus kannab sageli edasi teemaga seotud eelarvamusi, vääruskumusi ja stereotüüpilisi konstruksioone väärkohtlemise juhtumitest, ohvritest ja toimepanijatest (või ka kahtlustatavatest/ süüdistatavatest). Kajastama kiputakse sensatsioonilisemaid ja šokeerivamaid juhtumeid. Arvestades, et meedia on äärmiselt oluline infoallikas ning arvamuste (ja ka diskursuste) kujundaja, võiks konkreetsete juhtumite selline kajastus olla paremini tasakaalustatud neid juhtumeid laiemasse seksuaalse väärkohtlemise konteksti pannes (nt tuues välja, et väärkohtlemine võib avalduda ka muul moel, lisades üldstatistikat, ekspertarvamusi kaasates jms). Seejuures on eriti oluline, et **uudislood pakuksid alati teavet ohvritele mõeldud ressursside kohta**, nagu veebilehed ja kontaktteave abi saamise võimaluste kohta (info abivõimaluste osas peaks olema kõigile alati kättesaadav, sh ka siis, kui konkreetse loo põhisisu ise maksumüüri taga on). Parimate (eetilise meediakajastuse) praktikate osas tasub kaaluda ka valdkonna spetsialistidega konsulteerimist.
- Ennetusstrateegiad (sh lapsevanemate poolt lastele õpetatav) peaks hõlmama enamat kui konkreetsete isikutega seotud ohtudest rääkimist. **Ennetusega seotud õpetused peaksid hõlmama üldise ohutuse ja riskidega seotud juhendamist**, nt seoses kehalise autonoomia, isiklike piiride tajumise, võimalike ohtude või ohuolukordade äratundmise ja toimetulekustrateegiatega. Olukorraga seotud teadlikkuse (*situational awareness*) õpetamisega, olgu selleks kehaga seotud piiride rikkumise äratundmine (nt soovimatud või sobimatud puudutused) või ebameeldivate veebikogemuste käsitlemine, võib last paremini ette valmistada keeruliste olukordadega toime tulemiseks. Potentsiaalselt ohtlikud või kahjulikud olukorrad tuleks ära tunda olukorra enda, mitte ainult konkreetsete (eeldatavate) toimepanijate tõttu. Seda eelkõige seetõttu, et lapsi seksuaalselt väärkohtlevad isikud ei ole (üldjuhul) kuidagi äratuntavad või ülejäänud ühiskonnast eristuvad ning valdav osa lastevastastest seksuaalkuritegudest pannakse toime isiku poolt, kes on lapsele varasemast tuttav. Lisaks nähtus uurimistulemustest, et vabatahtlikku seksuaaltegevust (nt eakaaslaste puhul) eristati seksuaalkuriteost sageli selle järgi, kas üks osapool hakkas aktiivselt vastu või mitte. Selline lähenemine aga ei paista olevat eriliselt tõhus, mistõttu võiks nõusoleku tuvastamine liikuda vastupanu puudumisest („ei tähendab ei“ lähenemine) hoopis aktiivse nõusolekut kinnitava lähenemise suunas („jah tähendab jah“ lähenemine või „jah-mudel“). Nõusolekut kinnitav lähenemine ei eelda alati ja ilmtingimata verbaalset nõustumist.

Väärkohtlemisest rääkimise ja politseisse teatamise toetamiseks

- Ohvrite abi otsimist (sh politseisse pöördumist, vanematele rääkimist jms-st) takistavad mitmed tegurid, sh inimeste reaktsioonid, (väär)uskumused (nt stiilis „see on mu enda süü“ või „ma ei olegi abi väärt“), ebakindlus, hirm, teadmatus (kuhu pöörduda või kas tegu üldse on kuriteoga) ja usaldamatus politsei suhtes. Uuringud (sh nii käesolev uuring kui ka varasemad) on leidnud sagedast usaldamatust ning mitmeid väärarusaamasid seoses politseiga, eelkõige nt kas politsei usub ohvrit, kas juhtunut võetakse tõsiselt, milliseid tõendeid on vaja, et politseisse pöörduda jms. Tegu on seejuures taas barjääridega, mis võiksid olla ületatavad. Usalduse tõstmiseks ja väärarusaamade ümberlükkamiseks võiks politsei (pro)aktiivselt avalikkusega sel teemal suhelda. Seda võiks teha samuti nt lühivideode näol, kus politseiametnikud selgitavad, kas üks või teine väide on n-ö müüt või tõde (nt kas politseisse tuleks pöörduda vaid siis, kui endal on tõsikindlad tõendid ka kohe käepärast võtta). Samuti võiks kasulik olla, kui ohvrid teavad, mida politseiga suhtlemisel oodata. Sellise n-ö **usaldusliku „silla ehitamine“ politsei ja kogukonna (ühiskonna) vahel võiks kaasa aidata sellele, et ohvrid teaksid ja julgeksid politseisse pöörduda**. Lisaks ohvritele puudutab selline usalduse loomine ka vanemaid, õpetajaid, sõpru ja teisi, kellele selline teave võiks abiks olla.
- Väärkohtlemisest teavitamist kiputakse kartma võimalike (arvatavate) tagajärgede tõttu (nt kardetakse pahandustesse sattuda, perele probleeme tekitada, avalikku häbi jms). Need kartused mõjutavad nii ohvreid kui ka nende peresid. Emotsionaalselt keerulises ja vastutusrikkas olukorras olevad inimesed, keda olukord otseselt mõjutab ja kes peavad vastu võtma mõne olulise otsuse (nt kas helistada politseisse, rääkida vanematele), erinevalt kõrvaltvaatajatest, seisavad sageli silmitsi oluliste emotsionaalsete ja kognitiivsete piirangutega. Need piirangud kipuvad takistama ratsionaalsete ja kaalutletud otsuste tegemist. Siin-kohal võiks abi olla lähenemisest, mis aitaks leevendada otsustamiskoormust stressirohkes olukorras. Abi võiks olla sõnumitest, mis julgustavad vähemalt mingit esimest sammu astuma, isegi kui kohe politsei poole pöörduda ei taheta. Näiteks võiksid avalikkusele suunatud sõnumid rõhutada, et ohvrid saavad helistada abitelefonile – mitte kohe tegutsemiseks või millegi otsustamiseks, vaid küsimuste esitamiseks ja vestluse pidamiseks. See võiks julgustada rohkem ohvreid dialoogi astuma, mis omakorda võiks kaasa aidata sellele, et enam juhtumeid jõuab politseini. Vestluse alustamine ongi see kõige keerulisem ja kriitilisem esimene samm. Veel võiksid kampaaniad või ohvritele suunatud materjalid **sisaldada sõnumeid käsitamaks levinud psühholoogilisi barjääre, mis takistavad juhtunust (nt vanematele või politseile) rääkimist**.
- Veebiplatvormide omanikud (ja moderaatorid), eriti selliste, milliseid lapsed külastavad, peaksid aktiivselt väärinfo vastu võitlema ja tagama vajaduse korral noortele kasutajatele piisava abi või toetuse olemasolu. **Ohvrite süüdistamist või väärinfo levitamist ei tuleks n-ö passiivselt pealt vaadata**. Veebiplatvormid

mitte ainult ei võimalda arutelusid, vaid ka kujundavad neid. Seega on platvormidel võimalik omalt poolt panustada. Lastele ja noortele nõu andes tuleks teadvustada, et soovitusel võib olla otsustav roll sellele, kas ja mida laps või noor teha otsustab. Uurimistulemused näitasid, et ohvrid toetusid rohkem julgustavatele ja üksikasjalikumalt selgitatud sõnumitele. Kui platvormide omanikud ei ole teadlikud, millised on parimad praktikad konkreetse sihtrühmaga tegelemiseks ja selliste murede käsitlemiseks, tasub konsulteerida spetsialistidega, kes saavad vastavaid juhiseid anda (nt nagu politsei, Lastemaja, Eesti Lastekaitse Liit jne).

Edasised uurimisvõimalused

- Tulemuste ja diskussiooni osas tutvustasin seksuaalse väärkohtlemise kategoriseerimise mudelit (*social categorization model*). Samas tasub arvestada, et tegu on esialgse mudeliga, mis avab kõnealust protsessi vaid osaliselt. Kategoriseerimise protsessi ning sellega seotud oluliste nüansside paremaks mõistmiseks tasub uurida erinevaid kategooriate elemente, sh seda, millistest alakategooriatest (või elementidest) need koosnevad ja seda, millist mõju üks või teine kategooria avaldab või millist tähtsust kategoriseerimise protsessis omab. Teiseks, võiks kasulik olla riskihindamisega seotud küsimuste uurimine eelkõige psühholoogia vms-e valdkonna vaatest, nt kuidas seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud arusaamad mõjutavad inimeste riskihindamise protsessi ja otsuseid või millised kognitiivsed nihked (ja kuidas) kõige enam nt riskihinnanguid mõjutavad. Psühholoogiaalane vaade antud küsimustele saaks tuua teadmist, mida minu töös toodud käsitused ja tõlgendused tõenäoliselt ei suutnud, kuivõrd mul ilmselgelt puuduvad vastavad spetsiifilised psühholoogiaalased teadmised. Kolmandaks, lähtudes uuringutulemustes läbivalt esinenud barjääridest, mis ohvrite abi otsimist takistavad või pärsivad, tasuks ohvrite paremaks aitamiseks ka neid küsimusi põhjalikumalt uurida. Uurimissuund võib hõlmata nt institutsionaalseid või psühholoogilisi barjääre (nt enesetaju, tajutavate reaktsioonide ning tegelike reaktsioonide vaheline dünaamika jms). Sügavamat mõtestamist vajaksid ka küsimused, et mis üldse ja kuidas mõjutab väärkohtlemisest rääkimist (nii vanematele, sõpradele vms) või politseisse pöördumist. Tähelepanu vajab ka Eestis jätkuvalt alauuritud ning nii uurimis- kui ka poliitikaaruteludes valdavalt tähelepanuta jääv teema (Cohen, 2018) – meessoost seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ohvrite kogemused. Sellised uurinud aitaksid kaasa terviklikuma toetus- ja abisüsteemi väljatöötamisele, võttes arvesse ka teatavaid soolisi erisusi.
- Põhjalikumat uurimist väärrib käesolevas uuringus leitu, mille kohaselt inimeste arusaam sellest, millised väärkohtlemise teod on kuriteod ja millised mitte, erineb märkimisväärselt õiguslikust reaalsusest. Kvantitatiivsed uurimused võiksid tuua suuremat selgust selle küsimuse osas. Samuti väärrib uurimist, et mida eelkirjeldatu kaasa toob (nt kui paljud süüteod jäävad politseisse teatamata, sest inimesed ei tea, et tegu võib olla süüteoga). Lisaks vajab uurimist, kuidas seksuaalse väär-

kohtlemise sotsiaalne kategoriseerimine avaldub konkreetselt kriminaalmenetlustes või kohtuprotsessides. Kasulik oleks välja selgitada, kuidas ja millist mõju erinevad kategooriate elemendid nendes menetlustes avaldavad. Mulle teadaolevalt ei ole Eestis selliseid uuringuid varem läbi viidud. Seoses sellega tekitab hiljutine seadusemuudatus, mis tõstis seksuaalse nõusoleku ea 14-lt 16-le, mitmeid küsimusi selle potentsiaalse mõju kohta ühiskondlikule tõlgendusele lapsepõlvest, eriti küsimusele, kes on „laps“ lapse seksuaalse väärkohtlemise kontekstis. Lõpetuseks, kuigi minu uuringud hõlmasid noorte inimeste vaateid, keskendusin peamiselt konkreetsetele väärkohtlemise kontekstidele. Tulevikus võiks uurimist laiendada, vaadeldes üldisemalt noorte taju (arusaamist, mõistmist) seksuaalse väärkohtlemisega seotud riskidest, eriti veebikeskkonnas. Kasulik oleks eristada, mida üldine noorte populatsioon peab usaldusväärseks, mida kahtlaseks (eriti kui see on seotud teatud käitumiste või isikutega) ja millised on nende toimetulekustrateegiad nende riskidega silmitsi seistes. Sellised teadmised aitaksid mõista riskitaju sarnasusi ja erinevusi võrreldes teiste elanikkonnarühmadega (nt vanemad või avalikkus) ning tooks ehk selgust selle osas, kui põhjendatud on meie mure noorte toimetuleku osas seoses nende riskidega.

- Uuringu piirangutega seotud edasiste uurimisvõimaluste soovitusi vt peatükist 2.3.

PUBLICATIONS

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Participation in research projects

PRG700 “Vulnerability in childhood and vulnerable subjectivity: interdisciplinary comparative perspective” (1.01.2020–31.12.2023); Principal Investigator: Dagmar Kutsar; University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Social Studies.

MSVUH21411 “Child sexual abuse crimes in media-coverage: Providing expertise for sustainable media support of the CSA crimes survivors in the Baltic Sea Region” (1.08.2021–31.07.2022); Principal Investigator: Simone Eelmaa; University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Social Studies (partner).

MSVOI18402 (814791) “Flows of illicit funds and victims of labour trafficking; uncovering the complexities (ISF Police)” (1.10.2018–31.12.2020); Principal Investigator: Anna Markina; University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Law (partner).

LSVJS19668 “Evaluation of the effectiveness of the prison release service” (1.12.2019–29.05.2020); Principal Investigator: Marvi Remmik; University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies.

MSVOI16436 “Multi agency training exit strategies for radicalised youth (MATES)” (1.11.2016–31.07.2018); Principal Investigator: Anna Markina; University of Tartu, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Law (partner).

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Teadusprojektides osalemine

- PRG700 “Lapsepõlve haavatavus ja haavatav subjektiivsus: interdistsiplinaarne võrdlev vaade” (1.01.2020–31.12.2023); Vastutav täitja: Dagmar Kutsar; Tartu Ülikool, Sotsiaalteaduste valdkond, ühiskonnateaduste instituut.
- MSVUH21411 “Laste seksuaalse väärkohtlemise kajastamine meedias: soovitud seksuaalse väärkohtlemise ohvrite kompetentseks toetamiseks Lääne-mere regiooni meedias” (1.08.2021–31.07.2022); Vastutav täitja: Simone Eelmaa; Tartu Ülikool, Sotsiaalteaduste valdkond, ühiskonnateaduste instituut (partner).

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- MSVOI16436 “Organisatsioonide vaheline koolitus kinnipidamisasutustest vabanevate noorte radikaliseerimise ennetamiseks (MATES)” (1.11.2016–31.07.2018); Vastutav täitja: Anna Markina; Tartu Ülikool, Sotsiaalteaduste valdkond, õigusteaduskond (partner).

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