

*What sexually abused children remember
and report: Minding the gap*

Lina Leander



DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,
GÖTEBORG UNIVERSITY, 2007

Abstract

Leander, L. (2007). *What sexually abused children remember and report: Minding the gap*. Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden.

Child sexual abuse (CSA) investigations are often problematic, as there is rarely evidence available other than the child's and the alleged perpetrator's statements. Consequently, the outcome of CSA investigations frequently depends on the child's testimony. This thesis aimed at investigating how sexually abused children, in cases where the abuse has been documented, remember and report about the abuse during police interviews. A secondary aim was to examine how differences in interviewer style affected children's reports about a verbal sexual abuse. The thesis consists of four empirical studies. In **Study I**, police interviews with 64 children, who had been exposed to a verbal sexual abuse during a phone call, were matched against the perpetrator's detailed documentation of the phone call. The children were found to omit almost all of the sexual details from the phone call. However, they reported more (30%) of the neutral details. In **Study II**, we analysed eight children's reports about a physical sexual abuse (perpetrated by a stranger) regarding the amount and type of information reported. As we had access to documentation of the sexual abuse, we knew that the abuse actually had taken place. Results showed that the majority of children did not report any or only very few sexual details. In addition, the children, at a total of 97 occasions, denied or expressed reluctance to talk about the sexual acts. The background to **Study III** is that a man developed a false identity on the Internet and contacted a large number of girls, in order to lure them into conducting on- and off-line sexual activities. We had access to detailed documentation of the communications between each girl and the perpetrator. The purpose of the study was to investigate how the girls (N=68) reported about the sexual activities. The girls were found to omit and deny a large proportion of the on-line activities, especially the more severe sexual acts. In contrast, we found that there were few omissions and denials regarding the real-life meetings with the perpetrator. The aim of **Study IV** was to analyse how differences in interviewer style affected 61 children's reports about a verbal sexual abuse. Specifically, we examined how establishing rapport and different types of questions affected the richness and accuracy of the children's statements. Results revealed a positive relationship between rapport establishing utterances and the richness of the children's reports. However, when controlling for number of questions asked, the relationship was weakened. Interestingly, there was a positive relationship between establishing rapport and number of questions asked. The results reported in the present thesis revealed that children often produce fragmentary reports about sexual abuse, marked by a lack of details describing the course of the event. Furthermore, the results showed that these difficulties apply in cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by a stranger, and for different forms of sexual abuse (i.e., verbal, Internet-initiated and physical sexual abuse). Presumably, there is a gap between what children report about the abuse and what they actually remember (note that the gap is not between what children tell and what actually took place, where the accuracy is often high). Speculatively, the unwillingness to report about sexual abuse may be due to emotional factors (e.g., feelings of shame and guilt). In order to facilitate reporting and help the child overcome emotional barriers, considerable focus must be put on establishing rapport with the child during the investigative interview. Furthermore, the recommendation in the Swedish courts that CSA reports should be detailed in order to be considered credible (Gregow, 1996) may not apply in cases of CSA.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Children as witnesses, Child interviews, Verbal sexual abuse, Internet-initiated sexual abuse

Lina Leander, Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Box 500, SE-40530, Gothenburg, Sweden. Phone: +46 (0)31 786 4282, Fax: +46 (0)31 786 4628, E-mail: lina.leander@psy.gu.se

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is an enormous violation of a child's integrity and self. It affects the child's wellbeing and can cause lifelong suffering. That sexual abuse is disclosed, investigated, and its perpetrators put to trial are of utmost importance for the child's (and perhaps other children's) safety, the possibility to receive treatment, and for the redress of the child. CSA investigations are often problematic in nature, as there is rarely evidence available (e.g., medical evidence, and other witnesses) other than the child's and the alleged perpetrator's statements (which are often contradictory). Consequently, the outcome of CSA investigations frequently depends on the child's testimony. In addition, the reliability of children as witnesses has often been questioned (especially regarding young children), and there are no foolproof methods to evaluate children's reliability. Furthermore, previous research suggests that children often are unwilling to report about sexual abuse experiences (e.g., Hershkowitz, Lanes & Lamb, 2007; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Smith, Letourneau, Saunders, Kilpatrick, Resnick & Best, 2000; Svedin & Back, 2003).

In Sweden, only about two out of ten reports of alleged CSA to the police lead to prosecution (Diesen, 2001). There are also reasons to believe that numerous CSA cases are never reported to the police. A further challenging issue in this field involves acknowledging false CSA allegations and separating them from factual allegations (Goodman, 2006). On a more positive note, however, a vast amount of research during the past decades has been devoted to investigating issues of children as witnesses. Knowledge, among legal actors, about the mechanisms underlying children's testimony, and whether systematic patterns are present at CSA reports, can serve to enhance the quality of the investigation and produce satisfying legal outcomes.

The present thesis is devoted to investigating how sexually abused children remember and report about the abuse during police interviews in cases where a) the abuse has been documented (i.e., we know the ground truth) and b) the perpetrator is unknown to the child (i.e., factors such as loyalty conflicts, and fear of negative consequences for the life situation, may be excluded as complicating factors). Furthermore, a secondary aim of the present thesis is to examine how the investigative interview affects children's reports (e.g., effects on richness and accuracy).

Children's memories

Memory systems

Our memory consists of multiple interacting systems, which contribute to the encoding, storing and recalling of information (Cordon, Pipe, Sayfan, Melinder & Goodman, 2004; Goodman & Melinder, 2007; Tulving, 1985). When discussing memory in the context of the judicial domain, the *episodic memory system* is ordinarily referred to. Episodic memory is explicit and organizes our personal and autobiographical experiences. It is the most evolved, recently developed and advanced memory system in the human mind (Schacter & Tulving, 1994). The *semantic memory system* contains our knowledge about facts. It is age related and can be forensically relevant in some situations (e.g., regarding a child's general knowledge about sexual information). The *procedural memory system* is the first developed and most basic memory system. It is implicitly activated and expressed through behaviour, and therefore not of particular relevance in forensic contexts (which mostly rely on verbal recall).

It is also important to recognize the difference between *explicit* and *implicit* memory systems, especially regarding young children's memories. Implicit memories can be observed early in infancy and are activated without conscious awareness. Explicit memories, on the other hand, are consciously activated (Howe & Courage, 1993; Nelson, 1995) and developed during the first years of life as a function of increased neurological and cognitive development. Some researchers, however, argue that explicit and implicit memories are both functional during early infancy (Howe, 2000).

In sum, the distinction between episodic, semantic and procedural memory refers to different memory *systems*. The distinction between explicit and implicit memory, on the other hand, refers to the level of consciousness awareness. Nevertheless, the different concepts are related, as episodic, semantic and procedural memory can be either explicitly or implicitly activated. In the present thesis, I will mainly focus on *explicit, episodic* memory.

Measuring human memory

When discussing memory performance in witness psychology, different types of measures can be referred to. The *richness* of a statement refers to how rich in details and information a testimony is. The *completeness* of a statement refers to the number of details reported from an event, of the possible number of details there are to remember and report. The *accuracy* of a statement refers to how correct the reported information is (as gauged against ground truth). Furthermore, quantity-based measures of memory (richness and/or completeness) can be said

to be *input-bound*, in that they assess the likelihood of remembering a given input item. Accuracy-based measures, on the other hand, are *output-bound*, in that they reflect the likelihood that a reported item is correct (Koriat & Goldsmith, 1996). In the present context, it should also be noted that children's ability to provide accurate reports can be discussed in terms of *credibility* and *reliability*. It is important to acknowledge the difference between these terms. Reliability refers to the accuracy of the report and credibility refers to the believability that one assigns to the witness testimony. Thus, a report that is highly reliable may be judged as not credible and vice versa (Bruck, Ceci & Hembrook, 1998). Finally, it is important to note the distinction between memory *performance* and memory *capacity* (Lamb, Sternberg & Esplin, 1995). In the next section, children's memory development and memory capacity will be discussed.

Children's memory development

Even children as young as three years of age can provide accurate, although brief reports about a distinctive experience or about a familiar recurring event. As children grow older, the richness and informativeness of their memories increase (Fivush, 1997, 1998; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Although young children's (i.e., preschoolers) narratives tend to be briefer than the narratives of older children (i.e., school children), they usually tend to be rather accurate (e.g., Goodman & Reed, 1986). Furthermore, errors of omission are more common than errors of commission among both pre-school and school children (e.g., Steward, 1993). Lamb, Sternberg and Esplin (1998) suggested that children may be regarded as competent witnesses from about age four. With increased age, children accumulate more experiences, gain more elaborated knowledge, better strategies to encode and retrieve information, better linguistic skills (e.g., greater vocabulary), and they become less dependent on external memory cues (Goodman & Melinder, 2007). Furthermore, understanding of time and sequence is developed around four years of age, and the amount of temporal information reported increases with age (Fivush & Haden, 1997). It should be noted, however, that there are individual differences between children of the same age (Lamb et al., 1995).

Although children are capable of providing accurate reports about experiences, memory failures do occur. There are three stages of memory – the *encoding* of the event, the *storage*, and the *retrieval* – and failure can occur at any of these stages. For example, it is often impossible to attend to all aspects of an event, and therefore only a selection of all information is entered into memory. The information that is stored, and how it is stored, depends on the child's previous knowledge and experiences. During storage, the memory for the original

event can be impaired by post-event information from another source. Furthermore, a witness may be susceptible to stress during an investigative interview, which may plausibly affect retrieval (Milne & Bull, 1999; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach & Esplin, 2004). Children, especially preschoolers, are also more susceptible to suggestion than adults. It is, however, important to consider that different factors affect susceptibility to suggestion (e.g., individual factors, type of information suggested, the context of the suggestion, time since the event occurred) and that susceptibility to suggestion among children varies (see Ceci & Bruck, 1993 for a review). There are also studies showing that children generally are resistant to abuse-related suggestions (e.g., questions falsely implying that abuse occurred), even several years after the to-be-remembered event (e.g., Goodman, Batterman-Faunce, Schaaf & Kenney, 2002). Furthermore, children have been shown to be more capable of reporting central details from an event compared to peripheral details (e.g., Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas & Moan, 1991).

In sum, children's eyewitness memory capabilities are controversial, complex and dependent on many factors, such as cognitive, social and emotional factors. Lamb et al. (1995) pointed to the importance of interviewers' ability to elicit information and children's willingness and ability to *express* it, rather than their ability to *remember* it.

Children's memories and reports about stress and trauma

Most children who come into contact with the legal system have witnessed or experienced traumatic and stressful events. Consequently, the effect of trauma and stress on memory is a crucial question in the legal context. Unfortunately, this is a rather difficult question to answer as a) there is no clear definition of what constitutes a traumatic experience, different individuals may understand and interpret the stressful events differently, and b) individual factors may affect all three stages of memory (i.e., encoding, storage and retrieval) of traumatic events differently (Cordon et al., 2004).

Research has shown that children as young as 3 years can provide brief, verbal reports about stressful and traumatic experiences (Fivush, 1993; 1997, 1998), and most researchers seem to agree that stressful experiences are better remembered than neutral, mundane events (Howe, 2000; Peterson & Whalen, 2001; Goodman, Bottoms, Schwartz-Kenney & Rudy, 1991; Goodman, Hirschman, Hepps & Rudy, 1991; see Christianson, 1992 for a review). However, it should be noted that some researchers argue that stress may hinder children's eyewitness memory (Ceci & Bruck, 1993). It is also important to consider the fact that

different research methods may result in different findings. To further illuminate this issue, I will describe and discuss different research methods.

The typical procedure in *experimental* research is that an individual is exposed to a controlled event (for example, children may be exposed to play sessions or a video clip) and is later interviewed about this event (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Quas & Lench, in press). Experimental studies, however, can never fully imitate the complex conditions present during actual traumatic and stressful events. Due to ethical considerations, the amount of stress induced in the laboratory must be highly limited (see Christianson, 1992 for a review on adults).

The relation between stress and memory has also been studied for *naturally occurring stressful* events, such as children's memory for painful and stressful medical experiences (e.g., Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991; Goodman, Quas, Batterman-Faunce, Riddlesberg & Kuhn, 1994; Saywitz et al., 1991), accidental injuries and treatment (Peterson, 1999; Peterson & Bell, 1996; Peterson & Whalen, 2001; Steward, 1993) and natural disasters (Bahrack, Parker & Fivush, 1998; Fivush, McDermott Sales, Goldberg, Bahrack & Parker, 2004). These types of studies include relatively high levels of stress. Still, it can be discussed whether they are traumatic or "just" painful and stressful experiences. Furthermore, factors such as secrecy and shame (often present in forensically relevant situations such as CSA) are likely to be absent. Some studies on the relationship between naturally occurring stressful events and memory have shown that stress enhances memory (e.g., Bahrack et al., 1998; Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991; Peterson & Bell, 1996; Peterson & Whalen, 2001). Other studies have shown no or a negative relationship between stress and amount of recalled information (e.g., Howe, Courage & Peterson, 1995; Merritt, Ornstein & Spicker, 1994). Note that there are sources of variability across these studies that need to be acknowledged in this context. For example, some studies have relied on observers' and parents' reports about the child's distress (Goodman, Hirschman et al., 1991; Peterson & Bell, 1996), measuring the observers' interpretation about the child's *expressed* behaviour rather than the child's *experienced* distress. Other studies have measured stress by relying on physical indicators (e.g., heart rate) (Quas & Lench, in press). In addition, differences in memory measures and selections of control groups may vary across studies.

Furthermore, researchers have investigated children's memories for and reports about traumatic events such as kidnapping, abduction, and sexual/physical abuse (events that are often unexpected and the circumstances of which are not controlled by the researchers). These types of *case studies* are often conducted by interviewing children about their experiences or

by analysing already conducted investigative interviews (e.g., Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Terr, 1988). Case studies are often forensically relevant as they include a large amount of stress, as well as victim-related factors (e.g., shame, secrecy and loyalty to the perpetrator). However, unlike experimental and naturally occurring studies, children's memories for real-life traumatic events can seldom be checked for accuracy and completeness. Research on children's memories for real-life traumatic events has shown that it is extremely difficult to provide evidence that children's memory processes are adversely affected (Howe, Cicchetti & Toth, 2006). Terr (1988) argued that children retain detailed and vivid memories of traumatic events (such as kidnapping and rape) even after long periods of time. In line with this, Jones and Krugman (1986) found that a 3-year-old girl gave an accurate account of an abduction and assault, after which she was left to die. Case studies of CSA involving access to verifying documentation of the abuse will be discussed later in the thesis.

Cordon et al. (2004) argued that "it is only by examining children's memory in relation to a wide range of experiences that we can begin to understand the way in which cognitive, social and individual difference variables interact to determine children's memories on a continuum of at one end neutral and mundane and at the other traumatic experiences" (p. 105). In the next section, some important factors that may affect children's memories of trauma will be discussed.

Factors affecting memory for trauma and stress

Just as with neutral, mundane experiences, *age* has also been found to affect children's recall of stressful experiences, such that older children recall more information, and sometimes are more accurate, compared to preschool children (Goodman et al., 1994; Peterson, 1999). Age differences are due to corresponding differences in cognitive development, more experiences and increased knowledge about events, which influence the child's understanding of the event and consequently result in better memory performance (Goodman et al., 1994).

Traumatic and stressful experiences are often better remembered than mundane experiences, both after short and long delays (i.e., even over several years), and regarding both completeness and accuracy. However, Peterson and Whalen (2001) found that, over time, children remembered an accidental injury better than the hospital treatment following the injury. Thus, the children's memories seemed to be better retained for the features of the core event. That central details from a stressful event are better remembered than peripheral details is a recurring finding in eyewitness research (Christianson, 1992). Additionally, previous knowledge about features of a stressful experience, and whether the experience is

explained during or after the occurrence, affects memory performance positively (Goodman et al., 1994). Other factors contributing to enhanced memory of stressful experiences are the distinctiveness, personal significance and duration of the event. Whether the to-be-remembered event is associated with reminders (e.g., discussion and questions about the event) is also an important feature that affects children's memories positively (Cordon et al., 2004). One may suspect that some traumatic events (e.g., accidental injuries) are associated with more questions and discussions than are, for example, sexual abuse events.

Social and emotional factors have also been found to affect children's memories of stressful experiences. For example, children's memory performance regarding stressful experiences has been positively linked to parental support and attachment classification (Cordon et al., 2004). Children with secure parent-child relations have been found to be more emotionally prepared for a stressful experience (e.g., a medical procedure), less stressed during the experience, and found it easier to trust unknown adults (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), which may positively influence the encoding of stressful events and subsequent recall. Attachment may also influence communication between child and parent, which may result in more rehearsal and the development of better coping strategies (e.g., Goodman, 2005; Nelson, 1993). One should also consider whether the focus during the event is external (e.g., the course of the event) or internal (e.g., own feelings) (Cordon et al., 2004). Goodman et al.'s (1994) study of children's memories for the VCUG (involving painful and stressful catheterization of the bladder and genitals) revealed that the children's own emotional reactions seemed to affect their recollections. For example, children who were proud of the medical test were also more correct in their reports, while children who were embarrassed about the medical test provided less correct information in free recall.

Children's memories and reports about sexual abuse

CSA investigations are frequently characterized by a lack of corroborating evidence. Consequently, the child's report is often of paramount importance for the investigation and the legal outcome (Roberts & Powell, 2001). In addition, children's testimonies are often likely to be questioned (i.e., vulnerability to suggestion, and parental or other coaching) (Goodman, 2005). The norm in most abuse cases is that the child must provide a detailed account of what has happened and specific information regarding the course of the event and surrounding circumstances, such as time and place (Robert & Powell, 2001). Furthermore, the Swedish Supreme Court claims that for an account of sexual abuse to be considered credible,

it must be coherent, clear and detailed and not contain items that are difficult to explain or that can give rise to doubts as to whether the alleged event actually occurred (Gregow, 1996). A study by Cederborg and Lamb (2006), investigating how the courts evaluate testimonies made by children with learning difficulties within the legal system (in cases of alleged CSA), indicates that the courts actually employ these criteria.

Investigations of alleged CSA have frequently been impeded when children fail to disclose and report about the abuse. Failure to make a full disclosure at the time of formal investigation is likely to result in suspicions that the abuse is unfounded or unsubstantiated, resulting in the investigation being closed (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Furthermore, the investigatory and legal processes often necessitate that the child make repeated disclosures of abuse to multiple individuals during a relatively long period of time (Paine & Hansen, 2002). To sum up, alleged CSA cases are characterized by several obstacles, greatly complicating the investigative process and outcome. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to obtain knowledge and understanding of how children remember and report about sexual abuse, and which factors may affect children's reporting. Such understanding will facilitate evaluations and interpretations of children's reports, and direct attention to those features that are important to conducting satisfactory investigative interviews with children. In the following sections, I will discuss two trajectories of research on children's reports of CSA.

Disclosure studies

Disclosure studies focus on the main disclosure of CSA (see Pipe, Lamb, Orbach & Cederborg, 2007 for an update on current research). Disclosure studies can be conducted in one of two ways: a) by interviewing a large sample of adults who claim to have been abused as children (i.e., retrospective studies). These surveys address questions such as how many adults with a history of CSA have disclosed the abuse, and when, to whom, and why they disclosed (Arata, 1998; Crisma, Bascelli, Paci & Romito, 2004; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Smith et al., 2000). The second way is b) by interviewing children or adolescents who are being treated or investigated for CSA about their disclosure (or non-disclosure) (DiPietro, Runyan & Fredrickson, 1997; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones & Gordon, 2003; DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Gries, Goh & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Sauzier, 1989; Sorenson & Snow, 1991; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). By asking adults about their CSA experiences, the delay until disclosure, as well as non-disclosures can be identified. On the other hand, by asking children who are being evaluated for substantiated sexual abuse, valuable information about the disclosure process can be provided, as the children are being

interviewed in connection with the process, and have it fresh in their memory. A large number of studies investigating children's disclosure have been conducted. It should also be noted that a few comprehensive disclosure models have been proposed (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Sorenson & Snow, 1991; Summit, 1983; 1992). The child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome (Summit, 1983) is the most widely recognized of these models. These models will not be further discussed, as they are beyond the scope of the present thesis.

Research findings from disclosure studies

In a comprehensive review of the literature, London, Bruck, Ceci and Shuman (2005, 2007) reported low levels of disclosure rates (about 31% to 45%) in the majority of the studies reviewed. London and colleagues concluded that two-thirds of adults did not disclose the abuse during childhood (not even to friends or family). Furthermore, delay was common among children who did disclose. Smith et al. (2000) conducted an American, nationally representative telephone survey of women's experiences of trauma and health (this study was included in the London et al., 2005, 2007 review). The authors reported that 28% of CSA victims had never told anyone about the abuse and 47% waited more than five years to disclose the abuse. Smith et al. (2000) argued that the phenomenon of delayed disclosure might be more common than has been indicated by previous research. With a few exceptions (e.g., Fergusson, Lyskey & Horwood 1996), retrospective disclosure studies have consistently shown that the majority of adults do not disclose abuse they experienced during childhood. This consistency between studies is rather remarkable, given the differences in method, definition of abuse, and sample characteristics across the studies (London et al., 2005, 2007). It should be acknowledged, however, that retrospective studies entail a large number of biases (e.g., concern about the accuracy of the informative reports due to, for example, long retention intervals) (London et al., 2005, 2007; Neisser, 1997; Read & Lindsay, 1997).

In studies using child samples, where the children are asked directly during a formal interview, London and colleagues argued that with a few exceptions, high rates of disclosures were found in studies where the abuse status of the child was well defined (e.g., based on medical findings). Low disclosure rates, on the other hand, were associated with samples where the diagnoses of abuse were unknown or questionable. Furthermore, London and colleagues reported that only a small percentage of abused children demonstrated denials and recantations during formal interviews. Hershkowitz, Horowitz and Lamb (2007) conducted a study based on all child abuse investigations conducted in Israel between 1998 and 2002. The authors reported that about two-thirds of the children made an allegation during the

investigative interview. Notable, the disclosure rate was especially high for sexual offences. Hershkowitz and colleagues argued that the relatively high disclosure rate might reflect the fact that all children were interviewed with the empirically validated NICHD Investigative Interview Protocol.

Note, however, that there is often a great variability between studies on child samples (e.g., how the children were interviewed and in the information collected). A major problem when investigating children's CSA disclosure is the issue of the validity of the sexual abuse (i.e., whether abuse actually has occurred). In sum, research has shown that children tend to delay disclosure (if they disclose at all), nevertheless, most children do report about abuse when asked directly in a formal setting, and only a small minority of children recant their previous disclosure (London et al., 2005, 2007).

Scientific case studies

The secondary type of studies to be discussed here are the *scientific case studies* (see also Bidrose & Goodman, 2000), which investigate how children report about sexual abuse during formal interviews, such as police interviews or court hearings, and when the researchers have access to verification of the abuse (e.g., film, photographs or computer files documenting abuse). Documentations of abuse are very important in that they highlight the *ground truth* (i.e., what actually has taken place) and allow measurement of children's accuracy and completeness, number of denials and unsupported allegations (Goodman, 2006). One may discuss which type of documentation could be considered to present a reliable ground truth, and how the documentation should be used. Solely relying on the perpetrator's reports is a rather dubious way of evaluating the ground truth, as the perpetrator may not remember the information correctly and/or deliberately provide false information. However, today's society, with its exploding technical development, sometimes offers CSA cases in which the perpetrator has documented the abuse. Films, photographs and computer files are often reliable documentations, but must be used with some caution. For example, sexual acts may have occurred, but not been documented, and photographic material may have been manipulated by the perpetrator.

Lamb and colleagues (Lamb, Sternberg, Esplin, Hershkowitz & Orbach, 1997) developed a "Ground Truth Scheme", which is used to judge the plausibility that an event actually has taken place. The ground truth scheme describes five types of information: medical evidence, eyewitness account, suspect's confession, material/physical evidence, and miscellaneous

information. The available information is then used to judge whether it is “very likely”, “likely”, “unlikely” or “very unlikely” that the event occurred.

A few scientific case studies have been conducted and will be further discussed later on in the thesis (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Svedin & Back, 2003; Orbach & Lamb, 1999; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a).

Research findings from scientific cases studies

Research based on scientific case studies has shown that, during formal interviews, children can give accurate reports about sexual abuse. Orbach and Lamb (1999) found that a 13-year-old girl’s account during police interviews about the sexual abuse was highly accurate (compared with an audio recording of the abuse). Similarly, Bidrose and Goodman (2000) investigated details reported during police interviews and courtroom hearings by four girls regarding repeated sexual abuse. They found supportive evidence for about 80% of the allegations made by the girls (85.6% of the alleged sexual acts, 42.95% of the alleged coercive acts, and 82.5% of the alleged preparatory acts). Consequently, there were high levels of accuracy in the allegations made by the children. However, the girls had a high level of omission errors, 39% of sexual acts for which there was evidence were not reported by the girls. In the same vein, Sjöberg and Lindblad (2002a) reported a tendency among sexually abused children to deny or downplay sexual abuse experiences. Some children did not want to report their experiences, some purported having difficulties remembering them and one child lacked concepts to understand and describe them. There was also an absence of false claims of sexual abuse. Svedin and Back (2003) investigated 30 children who had been sexually abused and exploited for the purpose of producing child pornography. Seven of the abused children were not aware of what they had been exposed to, because they were too young or unaware (sedated or asleep) during the abuse. Of the remaining 23 children, no one had spontaneously disclosed what had happened until the abuse was discovered. In the police interviews, the children’s testimonies were found to contain a large amount of omission errors. Furthermore, some of the children denied being part of the actions, even when they were shown evidence such as film clips and photographs showing that it actually had occurred.

It should be acknowledged that there are relatively few scientific case studies, and the studies that do exist are based on testimonies from a very small number of children.

Disclosure studies vs. scientific case studies

There are two primary reasons why *both* disclosure studies and scientific case studies are discussed here. First, it is reasonable to assume that similar factors affect both the disclosure and the subsequent reports during a formal interview (e.g., complicating factors such as feelings of shame and loyalty with the perpetrator). Second, there are very few case studies at hand, and in order to broaden the view regarding children's abuse reports, both types of studies may provide important contributions. Furthermore, there is a relation between the *disclosure* of abuse and the *report* during a formal interview that needs to be acknowledged. Children who have disclosed abuse before are more prepared and willing to report about it during a formal interview than are children who have not made a previous disclosure (London et al., 2005, 2007).

It should be noted, however, that there are important differences between the disclosure of abuse and subsequent reporting during formal interviews. Regarding the disclosure of abuse, the child is often the only one deciding whether, when, and to whom he or she will disclose. Regarding formal interviews, the child does not have the possibility to influence the circumstances surrounding the interviews. Furthermore, although disclosure is an important indication of a child's reluctance or willingness to reveal abuse, it is a gross and dichotomous measure (disclosure vs. nondisclosure) (Paine & Hansen, 2002). In contrast, children's reports during formal interviews are much more complex in that they involve informational details and allow measurement of memory (e.g., accuracy and completeness).

Factors affecting children's reports about sexual abuse

A number of factors have been suggested to influence children's abuse reports; some of these factors will be discussed in the following section. Due to limited results from scientific case studies, I will primarily refer to findings from disclosure studies.

Developmental factors. Developmental factors are often suggested to affect children's disclosure and reports, particularly cognitive limitations such as lack of memory and limited language capacity (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Gries et al., 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; DiPietro et al., 1997), and social/emotional factors (London et al., 2005, 2007). A number of researchers suggest that young children (i.e., preschoolers) have more difficulties disclosing CSA than do older children and adolescents (DiPietro et al., 1997; Gries et al., 1996; Hershkowitz, Horowitz & Lamb, 2005; Smith, 2000). For example, Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994) reported that children younger than five were least likely to disclose abuse during a formal investigation. Preschoolers may lack the cognitive, communicational and emotional

abilities to understand, remember and describe abuse comprehensibly. Furthermore, young children's limited knowledge about societal sexual taboos may hinder their disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). In brief, they may not fully understand that abuse is wrong and inappropriate, or may not have experienced it as actual 'abuse'. In the same vein, Smith et al. (2000) argued that older children may be more aware of standards of sexual behaviour and quicker to realize the severity of abuse, and that older children have more possibilities to report abuse to someone outside the home. Eisen, Qin, Goodman and Davis (2002) investigated a large number of children's memory and suggestibility in the context of an ongoing maltreatment investigation, and reported, among other things, that age was significantly related to amount of details in children's abuse disclosure.

However, the relationship is complex and many researchers argue that it is not sufficient to claim that older children are more capable and willing to report about abuse than are younger children. For example, Hershkowitz (2006) found that older children were more likely to delay disclosure than were younger children. In the same vein, Hershkowitz, Lanes et al. (2007) found that 7- to 9-year-old children were much more likely to disclose promptly than were 10- to 12-year-olds. It is possible that lack of knowledge (e.g., about sexuality and sexual abuse), which is common among younger children, may actually facilitate their reporting, as they do not appreciate the taboo nature of the event and the possible negative consequences of a disclosure. They may also be less embarrassed about discussing the topic than are older children (Hershkowitz, Lanes et al., 2007; Saywitz et al., 1991). It has been suggested that developmental changes occur in children's understanding and feelings of embarrassment, with five to seven years of age being a critical time for these developmental changes (Saywitz et al., 1991). Saywitz et al. (1991) found that 7-year-olds were less willing to report about genital or anal touching (during a medical examination) than were 5-year-olds, plausibly due to social and motivational factors (e.g., greater knowledge of social conventions). Furthermore, Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) found that fear of negative consequences for others was more influential for older than younger children with regard to the length of time it took them to disclose. Moreover, several studies suggest that accidental disclosures are more often found among young children (Sorensen & Snow, 1991), and purposeful disclosures are more often found among school-age children (DiPietro et al., 1997). Furthermore, age differences have been found in studies of forensic interviews with children in alleged cases of sexual abuse. Younger children were less complete in their reports about the alleged abuse than were older children. Age differences were, however, especially evident in response to free recall and open-ended questions (Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin

& Mitchell, 2001). The pattern of disclosure among adolescents is unclear. Some researchers have shown that adolescents do not delay disclosure for long periods (Everill & Waller, 1995). Furthermore, victims of sexual abuse during adolescence are more prone to disclose the abuse (which may be due to the availability of same-aged confidantes) (e.g., Everill & Waller, 1995; Kellogg & Hoffman, 1995). Crisma et al. (2002) conducted a telephone survey with adolescents who had experiences of sexual abuse and found that they were especially reluctant to seek help from professionals. There are, however, few studies investigating disclosure pattern among adolescents and more research is needed. Finally, it should be noted that some researchers have failed to find any relationship between age and delay of disclosure (e.g., Arata, 1998; Kellogg & Hoffman, 1995).

Gender. The majority of studies suggest that boys are more reluctant to disclose abuse and take longer to disclose as compared with girls (DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Gries et al., 1996; Hershkowitz et al., 2005; Hershkowitz, 2006; Hershkowitz, Horowitz et al., 2007; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994). However, research has shown that girls are more likely to blame themselves for the abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), plausibly because girls tend to be more closely related to the perpetrator and to have been abused for longer durations than boys have (Kendall-Tackett, Williams & Finkelhor, 1993). On the other hand, boys may be more socialized to not reveal weakness and fear. Sexual stereotypes and concerns regarding homosexuality may further complicate boys reporting (e.g., Summit 1983). Still other studies have found gender and disclosure to be unrelated (DiPietro et al., 1997; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Sauzier, 1989).

Intrafamilial vs extrafamilial abuse. Sauzier (1998) found that children were less likely to disclose CSA if the perpetrator was a natural parent. In cases of extrafamilial abuse, children were more likely to disclose immediately. Sauzier argued that loyalty conflicts and fear of family reactions can explain children's unwillingness to report intrafamilial sexual abuse. If the perpetrator is a family member, children may be afraid of breaking up the family (e.g., a parent may go to prison or the child to a foster home), or of other negative consequences of their disclosure. Hershkowitz, Horowitz et al. (2007) reported that the children were extremely unwilling to accuse their parents or parent figure. Similarly, Sas (1993) reported that 89% of children exposed to intrafamilial abuse, compared with 54% of children exposed to extrafamilial abuse, either delayed disclosure or did not disclose at all (see also Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hershkowitz et al., 2005; Hershkowitz, Lanes et al., 2007; DiPietro et al., 1997; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b; Smith et al., 2000). Quas, Goodman and Jones (2003) found that increased attribution of self-blame was predicted by having a close relationship

with the offender, which may negatively affect the reporting. Bottoms, Goodman, Schwartz-Kenney and Thomas (2002) conducted an interesting experimental study investigating children's (age 3 to 6) use of secrecy. Results showed that older children who had been instructed by their mothers to keep an event secret tended to do so in a subsequent interview. Bottoms et al. suggested that if children can keep a trivial act secret when asked to do so by their mothers, they may be able to do so regarding a more serious event as well. The authors concluded that "threats from loved, trusted adults will be powerful barriers to children's disclosures in forensic contexts" (p.307). Other studies have failed to find any association between relationship to the perpetrator and CSA disclosure (e.g., Arata, 1998; Kellogg & Hoffman, 1995; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994).

Perception of responsibility and feelings of shame. Children who have been sexually abused may come to believe that they are responsible for the abuse. Young children may feel responsible due to increased egocentrism (Piaget, 1932), and older children may feel responsible, as they may believe that they could have prevented the abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003). Furthermore, children's socialization (i.e., social awareness) may contribute to feelings of shame, which may inhibit discussions and reports about sexual experiences or genital touch (Saywitz et al., 1991). Feelings of responsibility, self-blame and shame are suggested to result in unwillingness to report about abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Saywitz et al., 1991; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a). In addition, studies by Goodman et al. (1994) and Saywitz et al. (1991) on children's memories for a medical procedure, including genital touch, indicate that children may be embarrassed about the genital exam, and thus, hesitant to report that information.

Fear of negative consequences. Goodman-Brown et al. (2003) reported that children who were afraid of negative consequences took longer to disclose. Moreover, the children waited to disclose because they feared negative consequences for *others*, not primarily threats to themselves. Similarly, Sas and Cunningham (1995) claimed that fear of negative consequences, of not being believed and fear of threat are factors that may make children unwilling to talk about abuse experiences. Sauzier (1989) found that children who showed a high reluctance to talk about sexual abuse also had the highest scores on fear (e.g., fear of losing the affection of the perpetrator, being blamed or punished, and being harmed).

Lack of understanding. Crisma et al. (2004) found that the most important barrier to disclosure among adolescents was lack of awareness of sexual abuse and of their right to not be violated. The stereotypical idea often promoted by the media – that sexual abuse is associated with a rape conducted by a stranger – caused confusion among adolescents as to

whether their experiences were abusive. As mentioned earlier, young children may also not know that sexual acts are wrongful. Furthermore, some types of sexual abuse may not be experienced as either stressful or painful (e.g., the child may be unaware of the severity of the act), which may reflect the reporting about the event (i.e., it is not a distinctive event and therefore not well remembered).

Parental support. Researchers have found that children who receive support from their parents are more willing to disclose abuse than are children with non-supportive parents (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). Additionally, Hershkowitz, Lanes et al. (2007) found that expectations of negative reactions from parents were strongly related to delayed and non-spontaneous disclosure of abuse. Maternal support during disclosure is important for the child's wellbeing, but also for the child's ability to recall and report about abuse (see Alexander, Quas and Goodman, 2002 for a review on the relation between attachment and memory for distressing events, see also Lovett, 2004).

Type of abuse. Children's abuse experiences vary dramatically on dimensions such as type of contact, duration and the perpetrator's use of force (Quas et al., 2003). Quas and colleagues (2003) found that long-lasting abuse that involved penetration, perceiving the abuse as disgusting, and coping with the abuse by pretending it was not happening were related to increased attribution of self-blame. Hershkowitz et al. (2005) showed that non-disclosure was more common when physical rather than sexual abuse was involved. This finding may be due to the fact that parents are most often the perpetrators of physical abuse, which may complicate disclosure. Arata (1998) found that children exposed to more severe abuse were less likely to disclose the abuse than were children exposed to less severe abuse. However, she found no relationship between disclosure and type of coercion used by the perpetrator. Hershkowitz, Lanes et al. (2007) found that children were more likely to delay disclosure of more severe abuse involving intrusive sexual acts and multiple incidents compared to a single, less severe CSA incident. In contrast, London et al. (2005, 2007) reported that their review of the disclosure literature revealed no consistent association between severity or method of coercion and disclosure.

Dissociation. Dissociation is hypothesized to be a psychological mechanism, operating during and immediately after the traumatic event, that aids coping with extreme stress and trauma. The idea is that dissociation often results in isolated features of the traumatic events that are not integrated into other memory features. Therefore, memories for such traumatic events may be fragmentarily recalled (e.g., Putnam, 1997, 2000). Research on adults who are dissociating has shown impaired memory such as memory loss (Goodman et al., 2003;

Putman, 1997, 2000), partly owing to lack of rehearsal. However, there are few studies investigating plausible dissociative strategies in children, and the studies conducted have shown a somewhat different pattern of results. Eisen, Goodman, Davis and Qin (1999) found that dissociation among maltreated children was associated with more detailed memories, perhaps due to dissociation of feelings rather than dissociation of facts. However, more research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn with respect to the actual presence of dissociation, and its relation to memory.

Post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Studies of long-term memory of CSA revealed that CSA victims with more PTSD symptoms remembered the abuse particularly well, even with delays ranging from 12 to 20 years after the abuse experience (Alexander, Quas, Goodman, Ghetti, Edelstein, Redlich, 2005). It seems as though PTSD victims have a heightened orientation against the trauma-related information (e.g., re-enactment of the trauma), which may result in better memory for the trauma. However, PTSD is also associated with denials of the trauma and avoidance of reminders, which could be assumed to be negatively related to memory for the trauma (Goodman et al., 1994). The lack of research on children's memories and PTSD symptoms impedes any further discussion, and more research is needed in this area.

A final caveat should be made regarding how different factors influence children's disclosure and abuse reports. Most often there is a complex interplay between the different factors and the individual child, and each factor must be regarded in relation to other factors. A single factor is rarely sufficient for predicting disclosure and/or reporting about the abuse; rather a number of factors may be operating mutually (Eisen et al., 2002; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

The investigative interview

One especially important factor for the child's possibility to report about CSA is the investigative interview, which will be described and discussed in this section. Research has shown that, when interviewed appropriately, children are capable of producing informative and reliable reports (Milne & Bull, 1999; Pipe et al., 2004; Fivush, Gray, & Fromhoff, 1987).

Type of questions. Researchers have found that open-ended questions, or free recall invitations, elicit longer, more detailed, and more accurate responses from children being interviewed about sexual abuse experiences (compared to closed, option-posing and suggestive questioning) (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ghetti, Goodman, Eisen, Jianjian, & Davis,

2002; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Sternberg, & Esplin, 1997; Sternberg, Lamb, Hershkowitz, Esplin, Redlich, & Sunshine, 1996). Furthermore, directive and leading questions should be used with caution and suggestive questions should be avoided entirely (Lamb et al., 1995). Despite this, investigative interviewers tend to use non-recommended interviewing techniques. In a study of Swedish interviewers, Cederborg, Orbach, Sternberg and Lamb (2000) found that investigators frequently used suggestive and option-posing utterances. On a percentage basis, 39% of the utterances were option posing, 14% were suggestive, 41% were directive, and only 6% of the utterances were open-ended invitations. Similar findings have been reported by Hershkowitz et al. (1997) and by Sternberg, Lamb, Davies and Westcott (2001). On a more positive note, research has shown that interviewers can improve their skills if they receive training and adequate feedback (Lamb, Orbach, Sternberg, Esplin, & Hershkowitz, 2002). Recently, Thoresen, Lonnum, Melinder, Stridbeck and Magnussen (2006) analysed the interviewing style used by Norwegian police in interviews (with young children) conducted from 1985 – 2002. The results showed that interviewer strategies have improved over the years, at least with respect to the use of suggestive, yes/no, and option-posing questions, and the increased use of cued recall questions. Yet, the frequency of open-ended questions was low during the entire period. It should be noted, however, that younger children often produce incomplete reports in response to open-ended questions. Consequently, it is sometimes necessary to ask more focused questions quite early in the interview. When asking more focused questions, it is important to follow up the question (“pair the question”) with open-ended questions, in order to elicit free narratives after having directed the children’s attention (Lamb et al., 1995). Saywitz et al. (1991) found that the majority of girls who had been exposed to a medical examination including genital and anal touch did not report that particular information during free recall, but reported the information when asked direct questions using a doll (see also Bahrack et al., 1998). This is perhaps because direct questions provide both memory cues and social cues (i.e., the interviewer shows that it is okay to talk about such matters).

Establishing Rapport. One important feature when interviewing children is to begin the interview by establishing rapport with the child (Milne & Bull, 1999; Poole & Lamb, 1998; Roberts, Lamb, & Sternberg, 2004). There are different ways of establishing rapport, one common way being that the interviewer asks open-ended questions about neutral and familiar events that the child feels comfortable talking about, and that the interviewer shows interest in the child’s narrative and gives positive feedback (e.g., “that sounds interesting, tell me more about the birthday cake you ate”). The establishing rapport phase is important in that it will

prime the child on how to elaborate his/her forthcoming responses (e.g., not just answering yes or no to questions). In addition, it will transfer control from the interviewer to the child. It is important that the interviewer make it clear that it is the child who holds the information and not the interviewer (Bull, 1992; Lamb et al., 1995; Lamb et al, 1998; Milne & Bull, 1999; Saywitz, Geiselman, & Bornstein, 1992). In an experimental study, Sternberg et al. (1997) found that children who had been asked open-ended questions during the establishing rapport phase provided two and a half times the number of details in response to the first invitation in the subsequent question phase, as compared to children who had only been asked directed questions in the establishing rapport phase. Roberts et al. (2004) found that children who had been asked open-ended questions during the establishing rapport phase were more accurate during the subsequent question phase than were children who had been asked direct questions; however, they found no difference between the two conditions regarding richness of information. Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg and Horowitz (2006) investigated structural differences between forensic interviews in which children made allegations of sexual abuse and those in which children did not make such allegations. Results showed that interviews that yielded allegations of CSA were characterized by different dynamics than those characterizing interviews with children who did not make allegations during the interview. Interestingly, children who did not make allegations during the interview provided fewer informative (non-abuse) details already during the establishing rapport phase. Hershkowitz et al. (2006) suggested that interviewers can assess children's engagement in the rapport-building phase and the likelihood of a subsequent disclosure. Research has also shown that children are more resistant to misleading questions when they are questioned by warm, supportive and neutral interviewers (e.g., Carter, Bottoms & Levine, 1996). Furthermore, Quas, Bauer & Boyce (2004) showed in an experimental study that children who had been greatly distressed during the to-be-remembered event (stress was measured using heart rate) displayed better memory when the interviewer was supportive than non-supportive, whereas the memory reports from less stressed children were unaffected by interviewer behaviour. These results indicate that interview demeanour may be especially important when children are reporting about stressful events.

Ground Rules. In the beginning of an investigative interview, it is also appropriate that the interviewer establish some ground rules, such as making it clear that the child knows the difference between lying and telling the truth, and informing the child that the interviewer may repeat questions, and that this is not because the child gave the wrong answer to the first question (Memorandum of Good Practice, 1992). Repeated questions may pressure the child

into replying even if he or she does not know the answer, or into changing an initial answer in order to please the interviewer (Memon & Vartoukin, 1996). Hence, it is important to inform the child that it is completely acceptable to answer “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand” to the questions (Mulder & Vrij, 1996). It is also important to inform the child about correcting the interviewer when necessary (Milne & Bull, 1999; Poole & Lamb, 1998).

Summary of the Empirical Studies

General Aims

This thesis aimed at investigating how sexually abused children, in cases where the abuse has been documented, and the perpetrator is unfamiliar to the child, remember and report about the abuse during police interviews. A secondary aim was to examine how different elements of the investigative interview affect abused children’s reports.

Study I

In cases of CSA, detailed objective documentation showing what actually occurred during abuse is typically lacking. In cases where such documentations can be found, researchers are often able to control for children’s completeness and accuracy (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Goodman, 2006).

We were granted access to an extensive police investigation, which included police interviews with 67 children who had been sexually harassed during a phone call by an unknown perpetrator. All children were contacted once by the same man – a man claiming that he was from the university and conducting a survey on relations. After some neutral questions, the man soon began to ask sexual questions that severely violated the children’s integrity (e.g., “Do you usually masturbate?”, “How do you know that you’re horny?”). When the man was eventually tracked down, the police found a detailed record of each telephone interaction on his computer; these records contained the questions posed to the children and, in the majority of cases, the answers received. This material provided a unique opportunity to match the information reported by the children during police interviews with the information found in the man’s files. Hence, we investigated the completeness of the children’s (age 8 to 16 years) statements (i.e., the number of informative details provided of the total number there were to remember) and the accuracy of the children’s reports. We also examined the richness

and the type of information reported. In addition, we calculated the predictive power of factors such as age, gender, retention interval, and the interviewer. In line with previous research, we predicted that the children would omit much of the sensitive and sexual information (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Svedin & Back, 2003). We also predicted that the children would be accurate in their reports (Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991; Howe, Courage & Peterson, 1996).

Method

To examine the richness of the children's statements (64 children), all informative details mentioned were counted and summarized individually. Subsequently, a frequency score was calculated for each child based on the number of details provided. Furthermore, the details were grouped into different categories corresponding to different features of the phone call. The fact that we had access to the perpetrator's questionnaires, containing all the questions asked and statements made by the perpetrator, allowed us to measure the completeness of the children's statements. The completeness was calculated for the perpetrator's *neutral*, *sensitive* and *sexual* questions/statements (as this information had been documented in detail by the perpetrator) by matching all details reported by the children with the documentation of the perpetrator (i.e., the number of details there were to remember). To assess the accuracy of the information provided by the children, each reported detail was scored with reference to the verification data.

Results

In line with our prediction, we found that the children omitted much of the sexual and sensitive details and reported more of the neutral details. Of the neutral questions and statements possible to remember, the children reported 31.3%. Of the *sensitive* questions the children reported 4.3%, and of the *sexual* questions the children reported 2.8%. Furthermore, and in line with our prediction, the children were found to be highly accurate in their reports, about 80% of all details were correct and about 8% were partly correct. Retention interval ($p < .01$) and interviewer ($p < .05$) (there were six different interviewers conducting the interviews) were found to affect the richness of the children's statements. The longer time period between the phone call and the interview, the fewer details reported.

Conclusions

Research has shown that children as well as adults remember traumatic events quite well over time (e.g., Christianson, 1992; Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991). However, a somewhat different pattern emerges in cases of sexual abuse, such that sexually victimized children have been found to omit a great deal of information about the actual abuse (Svedin & Back, 2003). The latter pattern – that sexually abused children are omitting information about abuse – found support in Study I. The children were found to omit a great deal of the sexual information, but reported more of the neutral information. The omission of sexual information in children’s reports may be due to actual forgetting or to the fact that they deliberately withheld this type of information. The fact that the children did remember neutral information (all children remembered the phone call per se) may suggest that they actually remembered the sexual information as well, but that they deliberately chose not to report it. If this is the case, one possible underlying reason may be that children experience shame or embarrassment. It should be noted, however, that verbal abuse might be less well remembered than physical sexual abuse involving actual body contact. Furthermore, it is possible that the children (especially the younger children) did not fully understand the sexual information. Consequently, we cannot rule out the possibility that the children had more difficulties encoding the sexual and sensitive information, compared to encoding more neutral information.

Study II

In a few *case studies* on children’s reports on sexual abuse, researchers have had access to documentation (e.g., films and photographs) (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Orbach & Lamb, 1999; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003). Results from these studies show a similar pattern: Testimonies from abused children tend to be incomplete and fragmentary. Children tend to omit sexual information, and some children deny being part of sexual acts, even when there is evidence that abuse did in fact occur. This finding is contrary to research on children’s memories of stressful events, which mainly shows that children remember stressful events rather well (e.g., Goodman, Hirschman et al., 1991; Howe et al., 1996). Limited memory capacity, limited language capacity, limited knowledge about the sexual acts (Fivush, 1993; How & Curage, 1993; Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Kail, 1988; Ornstein, Larus & Clubb, 1991), shame and feelings of responsibility (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Hazzard, Celano, Gould, Lawry & Webb, 1995), fear of negative consequences (Sas & Cunningham, 1995), and loyalty conflicts (Sauzier, 1989) are all factors that may explain children’s high

level of omissions regarding sexual abuse. Furthermore, several studies have shown that children experience more difficulties in reporting abuse in cases of interfamilial abuse than in cases of extrafamilial abuse (e.g., DiPietro et al., 1997; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b).

Study II investigated children's memories and reports of a single act of sexual abuse, perpetrated by a total stranger (i.e., complicating factors such as loyalty to/dependence on the perpetrator, fear of negative consequences for the family, and strategies of avoidance as a consequence of long-term, repeated abuse may be excluded). Furthermore, we had access to photographs (taken by the perpetrator) documenting the sexual abuse, the perpetrator's detailed confession and medical examinations of the children. Consequently, we were able to verify that abuse had actually occurred. Specifically, Study II focused on the amount and type of information reported by the children (i.e., information before, during, and after the abuse, and neutral versus sexual information), the number of denials or "unwillingness to report" expressed by the children, and the number of sexual allegations, made by the children, that could not be verified through the documentation.

Method

Eight children's reports (i.e., during police interviews) were coded on the basis of eight categories concerning specific features of information: 1) before the assault; 2) during the assault (sexual); 3) during the assault (sensitive); 4) during the assault (neutral); 5) after the assault; 6) additional informative details from the event; 7) denial/unwillingness to report; and 8) unsupported sexual allegations. All informative details provided by the children were coded and divided into the first six categories depending on the nature of the information. In addition, all denials and unsupported allegations made by the children were counted and summarized.

Results

All children provided information about what preceded the sexual assault, which indicates that they remembered the incident and were aware of the reason for the interview. Furthermore, five children did not report any sexual details from the event and one child provided just a few sexual details. Only two children gave detailed reports about the sexual acts. When looking at the "during abuse information", only about one in five details concerning the course of the sexual abuse actually described *sexual* acts. It should be noted, however, that we did not code the interviewers' questions, and consequently we do not know

how the questions may have affected the children's reports (e.g., more questions referring to neutral information). However, when reading the interviews, it is evident that the interviewers generally were very eager to receive sexual information from the children. On a total of 97 occasions, the children denied or expressed reluctance to talk about sexual acts. Furthermore, one allegation was made that could not be supported by the perpetrator or the documentation.

Conclusions

The majority of the children did not report any, or just very few, sexual details in the police interviews. Thus, the present data indicate that children often experience difficulties when reporting about sexual abuse, even when the perpetrator is a stranger (i.e., when factors such as loyalty conflicts, dependence on the abuser, fear of negative consequences for the family may be excluded). Given that the children remembered the event per se (they reported neutral details), and that previous research has shown well-retained memory for traumatic events (Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991; Howe et al., 1996), it is plausible that the children actually remembered the sexual acts. Feelings of shame and guilt are plausible explanations for the high degree of omission errors.

Study III

Since the mid 1990s, use of the Internet has come to play a growing role in sex crimes committed against children and youth. The Internet reduces the risk of offenders being identified, thus giving them the opportunity to remain anonymous and to create false identities (Stanley, 2001). The Internet has become an important tool for grooming children into sexual exploitation (i.e., providing children with attention, affection, kindness, gifts and money until their inhibitions are lowered). Children can be seriously mistreated, for example by being manipulated to perform sexual acts in front of a web camera, or they can be sexually assaulted during a real-life encounter. Research has shown that children often do not report sexual solicitations made on the Internet, even when the offender attempts to contact them in real life (Finkelhor, Mitchell & Wolak, 2000).

The background to Study III is that a Swedish man had developed a fake identity on the Internet and contacted a large number of girls in order to lure them into conducting both *on-* and *off-*line sexual acts. He pretended to be a 25-year-old woman called Alexandra, who worked for a model/escort service. Among other acts, he encouraged the girls to send nude photos and to participate in web shows while performing sexual acts. The perpetrator's final

goal was to arrange a meeting between him and the girl, a meeting during which sexual activities were to take place. We were given access to police interviews with 68 girls (some girls had met the man *off-line*; other girls had “only” been involved in *on-line* sexual activities). We also obtained access to detailed documentations of the communication between each girl and the perpetrator. Hence, we had full insight into the entire Internet conversation between the offender and the girls. The purpose of Study III was to investigate how the girls reported about the acts they had been involved in. Specifically, we attempted to investigate whether the girls reported, omitted or denied the acts. Study III had two main predictions. First, in line with findings from previous research (e.g., Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003), we predicted that there would be a gap between what the girls presumably remember about the sexual activities and what they report in the investigative interview (i.e., that they would remember more than they report). Second, and also in line with previous research (Svedin & Back, 2003), we predicted that the girls would be more hesitant to report about the more severe sexual acts than about the less severe acts.

Method

First, all acts that the girls had been involved in were coded into 10 different categories (the first 7 categories comprised *on-line* activities and category 8-10 comprised *off-line* acts) (e.g., sending nude photographs, participating in sexual web shows, and/or off-line meeting with the perpetrator including sexual activities). Second, we coded how the girls reported about each of the acts they had been involved in. The acts were coded as reported, omitted or denied.

Results

The girls' reports about the on-line activities evidenced a high frequency of omissions and denials regarding the on-line activities. Additionally, the girls were more willing to report about the less severe activities (72% of these acts were reported) (e.g., that they had provided the man, who they thought was a woman, with personal information and sent him facial photographs) than they were to report the more severe acts (49% of these acts were reported) (e.g., that they had sent nude photos and participated in sexual web shows). In contrast, we found that there were very few omissions and denials regarding the real-life meetings with the man and the sexual activities that had occurred.

Conclusions

We found a gap between what the girls reported about the *on-line* activities and what they presumably remembered. This finding is supported by previous research, showing that children are reluctant to report about sexual details in police interviews (Orbach & Lamb, 1999; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003). We also found that the girls were more willing to report about the less severe activities (e.g., that they had provided the man with personal information and sent him facial photographs) than they were to report the more severe acts (that they had sent nude photos and participated in sexual web shows), findings in line with our predictions. One plausible explanation for this result is that the girls experienced feelings of shame and guilt. It is probably more embarrassing to send nude photos and participate in sexual web shows than to send facial photographs and reveal one's surname and telephone number. However, in line with Study I and II, one could argue that the interviewers' actions may have affected the children's reports. For example, the type of information reported by the children (i.e., more neutral than sexual information) may reflect the fact that more questions were asked about neutral than about sexual information. However, the fact that the interviewers usually knew what had happened may have caused them to press the child harder to report about the sexual details. Furthermore, omissions and denials were only coded when the child had the *possibility* to report about an act.

Contradictory to our prediction, there were few omissions and denials regarding the *real-life* meetings with the man and the sexual activities that had occurred. It is likely that the massive media reports, which negatively described the perpetrator and depicted the girls as victims, facilitated the girls' reporting. In addition, factors such as the girls' age, the fact that the perpetrator was a stranger, and the access to verification material may have affected the girls' reporting pattern. It should also be acknowledged that this is a special case of child sexual abuse and that it differs from common sexual abuse cases, which often involve long-term, repeated abuse perpetrated by someone close to the child. Thus, one needs to be cautious about generalizing these results to a broader group of sexually abused children.

Study IV

Research has shown that, when interviewed appropriately, children are fully capable of producing reliable reports that are rich in information (Milne & Bull, 1999; Pipe et al., 2004). An important component when interviewing children is to begin the interview by establishing rapport with the child (Milne & Bull, 1999; Roberts et al., 2004) (i.e., the interviewer asks

open-ended questions about neutral familiar events that the child feels comfortable talking about, shows interest in the child's narrative and gives positive feedback). Furthermore, it is preferable to mainly use open-ended questions or invitations during the questions phase, compared to using option-posing and suggestive questioning (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Hershkowitz et al., 1997; Sternberg et al., 1996).

The major aim of Study IV was to analyse how differences in interviewer style affected children's reports about a verbal sexual abuse. Specifically, Study IV set out to investigate how establishing rapport and different types of questions affect the richness and accuracy of the children's statements. The case material accessible for the study offered a unique possibility to answer this question as (a) all children had experienced the same event (an obscene phone call made by the same perpetrator), (b) all children had experienced the event once, (c) the majority of the children were about the same age (11 to 13 years old), (d) none of the children knew the perpetrator, and (e) all interviewers used the same interview manual. Hence, Study IV advances our understanding by (i) examining the actual effects of different interview styles (and not only differences in interviewer behaviour), (ii) examining these effects while controlling for a number of factors that have been proven to affect children's reports (e.g., type of event, perpetrator familiarity) and (iii) making use of a case file of verbal abuse that incorporates 'ground truth'. Study IV had three main predictions. First, based on the fact that the interviewers differed regarding the number of details they elicited from the children (see Study I), it was predicted that the interviewers would differ regarding their use of utterances to establish rapport. The rationale behind this prediction was that all interviewers used the same manual specifying the *questions* that should be asked, but not how to establish rapport. Second, in line with previous research, we predicted a positive association between the number of utterances used to establish rapport and the richness of the children's statements in the question phase (Sternberg et al., 1997). Third, we predicted that the number of open-ended questions would be positively associated with the richness and accuracy of the children's reports (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ghetti et al., 2002; Hershkowitz et al., 1997; Sternberg et al., 1996).

Method

Police interviews with 61 children, all of whom had been exposed to an obscene phone call made by the same perpetrator, were analysed (the same material as in Study II). All 61 children were interviewed about the same event: According to the documentation of the phone calls made by the perpetrator, it was evident that he proceeded in the same manner and posed

approximately the same questions to each child. To examine the richness of the children's statements, the number of informative details reported by the children was calculated. The accuracy of the children's statements was measured by matching the children's reports with the documentation made by the perpetrator during the phone calls. Furthermore, all utterances produced by the police interviewers were divided into two main categories relating to either establishing rapport or the question phase (type of questions asked).

Results

Our results revealed a positive association between the number of establishing rapport utterances and the richness of the children's reports. However, when controlling for the number of questions asked, the relationship was weakened. Interestingly, there was a positive relationship between establishing rapport and the number of questions asked, indicating that the interviews including well-established rapport also included a high frequency of questions that affected the richness. It could be that a high frequency of establishing rapport utterances caused the children to talk more, which in turn encouraged the interviewers to ask more questions.

Furthermore, we predicted and found a positive association between the number of open-ended questions asked and the richness of the children's reports. We also found an even stronger association between the number of specific questions asked and the richness of the children's reports. However, there was no significant association between establishing rapport and accuracy or between type of questions asked and accuracy.

Conclusions

Although interviewing children of similar age about the same event (experienced at one occasion by all children) and using the same interview manual, there were considerable differences between the interviewers regarding interviewing style (i.e., the use of establishing rapport and different types of questions) and the amount of information elicited. Interestingly, it seems as though the interviews that included well-established rapport also included a high frequency of questions, which in turn resulted in rich reports from the children. This may suggest that a high quality combination of establishing rapport and asking appropriate questions will result in rich reports from the children being interviewed. Study IV points to the importance of not solely attributing the richness of children's reports to the characteristics/abilities of the child, as differences in interviewing style are a factor of utmost importance with regard to the amount of information reported.

General discussion

This thesis aimed at investigating how sexually abused children remember and report about the abuse during police interviews in cases where a) the abuse has been documented (i.e., we know the ground truth) and b) the perpetrator is unknown to the child (i.e., factors such as loyalty conflicts, and fear of negative consequences for the life situation, may be excluded as complicating factors). Furthermore, a secondary aim of this thesis was to examine how the investigative interview affects children's reports (e.g., effects on richness and accuracy).

Remembering vs. reporting

An important finding in the present thesis is that children often tend to leave out sexual details when reporting the event in question. This finding is well in line with previous research (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002a; Svedin & Back, 2003). Specifically, Study I showed that children (age 8-16) who had been exposed to a verbal, sexual abuse (a telephone call) left out about 97% of the sexual details and about 96% of the sensitive details. In contrast, they reported about 30% of the neutral details from the phone call. Results from Study II showed that the majority of children (3-10 years old), who had been abducted and sexually assaulted by an unfamiliar perpetrator, reported none or only very few sexual details from the abuse. Furthermore, the girls in Study III (12-19 years old), who had been sexually involved with a perpetrator they met on the Internet (both on- and/or off-line), tended to omit or deny the on-line sexual activities, specifically, the more *severe* on-line sexual involvement. It should be noted, however, that the majority of the girls who had been sexually involved with the perpetrator *off-line* reported about these acts (I will return to this particular finding later in the thesis).

It is important to carefully consider whether the children's high degree of omissions of sexual details was due to actual forgetting (inadvertently omitting information) or to the fact that they deliberately *chose* not to report the information. To simplify for the reader, I will hereafter define all participants, even the adolescent girls in Study III, as *children*. With respect to the studies reported in the thesis, there are reasons to assume that the children actually remembered the sexual details from the events. There are three primary reasons for this assumption. First, according to previous research, distinctive, negative and stressful experiences tend to be better remembered than are neutral and mundane experiences (Peterson & Whalen, 2001; Goodman Hirshman et al., 1991). In addition, research on memory for

conversation has shown that people tend to remember socially deviant conversation, such as sexually explicit expressions, better than more neutral conversation (Kemper & Thissen, 1981; Pezdek & Prull, 1993). Obviously, this particular finding has most bearing on Study I, but may also be of relevance to Study III. For Study I-III, one may assume that the to-be-remembered event was distinctive, thus deviating from more ordinary life experiences and stressful, with the degree of stress being different for different children.

A second reason for assuming that the children actually remembered sexual information but deliberately chose not to report about it is that previous research has shown that central details from a stressful experience are usually better remembered than are peripheral details (Howe et al., 1996; see also Christianson, 1992 for a review). Regarding the to-be-remembered events in Study I-III, the sexual details may be regarded as central details, as compared with details such as the perpetrator's shoes, and details about the weather that day, etc.

A third reason is that all of the children in Study I-III reported neutral details from the event, which supports the notion that they had not forgotten the event as such. Furthermore, the children in Study II reported more sensitive details compared to sexual details, and the girls in Study III reported more of the *less* severe sexual acts compared to the more severe on-line sexual activities. In sum, the combined evidence suggests that the children actually remembered the event and the sexual acts, but chose not to report about them.

In fairness, some arguments must be raised in support of the possibility that some children actually did not remember the sexual information (i.e., that they unintentionally omitted sexual information). Not all incidents of sexual abuse are painful and traumatic, and children's misunderstanding of sexual abuse may impair their memory for the event. Thus, we cannot always assume that abuse is salient and easy to remember (Pipe et al., 2004). Furthermore, *cognitive factors* such as limited memory, language and understanding may contribute to difficulties in remembering and verbally reporting about sexual abuse (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Gries et al., 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; DiPietro et al., 1997). For example, a three-year-old girl in Study II had difficulties reporting about both sexual and neutral information from the assault. It could be that she did not understand the perpetrator's acts, and therefore the event may not have been fully integrated into memory. Furthermore, it is plausible that the children in Study I did not understand some of the sexual questions asked by the perpetrator. Words such as "masturbate" and "horny" may have been unfamiliar to at least the youngest children, and therefore the information may not have been integrated into memory. Regarding Study II, three children were interviewed three to five years after the

event occurred (they were five years old at the time of the assault). It may be argued that these children, due to the long delay, had forgotten the event. However, all three children reported a rather large number of neutral details (e.g., what happened before and after the event), indicating that they actually remembered the event (thus, the presence of infantile amnesia may be excluded).

With respect to Study III, it is plausible that the girls did not remember all of the *on-line* activities (some girls were involved in several acts and may have had several Internet contacts during the same period). However, as the girls systematically reported more of the *less* severe on-line activities (e.g., sending the man facial photos) compared to the more severe sexual acts (e.g., conducting sexual web shows), they presumably remembered the latter acts as well.

Furthermore, some notes should be made regarding to what extent *dissociation* and/or *repression* might be plausible explanations for the children's omissions of sexual information. With respect to Study II, the immediate reaction of fear and trauma is perhaps greater when a child is abducted by a stranger than when he or she is abused by a familiar person. However, it is argued that dissociation and repression are most common in response to repeated, painful, and very threatening abuse, and less likely in response to a single sexual abuse (Terr, 1988, 1991). Furthermore, there is a large corpus of literature arguing that robust repression is extremely unusual (if it exists at all), and a very unlikely explanation for memory loss (Read & Lindsay, 1997).

In addition, one needs to consider the fact that the children are being interviewed by a police officer at a police station. Consequently, it is not suitable to draw any definite conclusions with respect to how children report about abusive acts in other settings, such as more informal discussion with family and friends. To sum up, it is reasonable to assume that the children in Study I-III remembered more than they actually reported, and particularly so with respect to more severe sexual details. Consequently, there seems to be a gap between the children's memory and what they chose to report.

Deliberately omitting sexual information

In the following section, I will discuss some plausible explanations for why children deliberately omit sexual information.

Shame and guilt. A common explanation for children's omissions of sexual details involves feelings of shame and guilt (Svedin & Back, 2003). This explanation also applies to the studies in the present thesis. With respect to Study I, it is plausible that the children felt uncomfortable and ashamed of talking about the sexual matters. Questions like "Do you like

to masturbate?” and “How do you feel when you're horny?” can be very difficult to tell others about. Additionally, the children in Study II may also be embarrassed to talk about the sexual details, and may perhaps have experienced feelings of guilt for the abuse. Even the young children who were abducted by the perpetrator may believe, due to increased egocentrism at this age, that they were responsible for the abuse. Moreover, the children who voluntarily followed the perpetrator may blame themselves for not running away or offering resistance. With respect to Study III, it is rather safe to argue that it is more embarrassing to report having sent nude photos and participated in sexual web shows than to admit to having sent facial photographs and revealed one's surname and telephone number. Furthermore, it was rather common for the girls in Study III to admit to having performed a sexual act (e.g., participating in a web shows), but to omit the most severe and embarrassing details from the particular act (e.g., conducting sexual acts with in object). The fact that the girls in Study III, on their own initiative (although having been manipulated and deceived), engaged in on-line sexual activities may plausibly have contributed to feelings of guilt and shame.

Intrafamilial vs. extrafamilial abuse. The fact that the perpetrators in Study I-III were unfamiliar to all children speaks against any loyalty conflicts. According to both the perpetrators and the children, the perpetrators never told the children not to tell anyone about the abuse and never threatened that something bad would happen if they did. Consequently, there seems to be little reason for the children to be afraid of punishment or negative consequences for their life situation (e.g., splitting the family) if they report the abuse. Previous research indicates that children experience more difficulties in reporting about abuse when the perpetrator is someone close to the child, compared with when the perpetrator is a stranger (e.g., Sauzier, 1989; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002b). Interestingly, results from Study I-III suggest that children's reluctance to report about sexual abuse does not solely apply in cases of intrafamilial abuse, but also in cases of extrafamilial abuse (and even when the perpetrator is a total stranger).

The Interviewer. For many children, being interviewed by an adult stranger is associated with a high level of stress, which may cause unwillingness to talk about the event in question (Christianson & Lindholm, 1998). Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the interviewers, by asking more questions pertaining to neutral than to sexual information, may have contributed to the type and amount of information provided by the children. It should also be kept in mind that the police (in Study I-III) generally had access to documentation material and therefore may have felt less motivated to prompt the children's memory. In cases where such verification material is lacking (i.e., in most cases), it is possible that police

interviewers press harder to obtain information of a sensitive and sexual nature. On the other hand, access to verification material may cause the interviewer to press harder to obtain information about events he/she knows have occurred. Study IV focused on how police officers' different interviewing styles affected children's reports of verbal sexual abuse. Two interviewers were found to elicit more information than did the other two interviewers. This finding is somewhat intriguing, as all interviews were conducted under similar conditions: The children were interviewed about the same event; all the children had experienced the event once; the interviewers used the same interview manual; and the children were about the same age. Differences in interviewing style seem to be of paramount importance with regard to the amount of information reported by children. Hence, it is important to not solely attribute the richness of children's reports to the characteristics/abilities of the child.

Interestingly, results from Study IV revealed a positive relationship between establishing rapport and the number of questions asked, indicating that interviews including well-established rapport also included a high frequency of questions. This may suggest a justification for and interest in conducting high quality interviews both by establishing rapport and by including numerous questions, thus resulting in richer reports from the children. It is also plausible that a high frequency of establishing rapport utterances made the children talk more, which in turn encouraged the interviewers to ask more questions.

Denials about confirmed sexual acts

Yet another finding supporting the notion of children's reluctance to report about sexual information is the rather frequent number of denials and expressions of 'unwillingness to report'. This pattern was particularly evident in Study II and III (Study I did not address this issue). In Study II, we observed almost 100 occasions of denials/'unwillingness to report' that sexual acts had occurred. In Study III, we observed about 50 occasions of denial of sexual activities (mainly *on-line* activities) during the police interviews. Importantly, for both studies, denials were only coded when there was documentation showing that the sexual acts denied actually had occurred.

Children who do report about sexual abuse

In Study III an interesting pattern emerged that needs to be further addressed. Almost all girls who met the man in real-life (*off-line*) reported about the sexual acts, and we found very few omissions and denials regarding the meetings and the sexual activities. This result is not in line with the overall pattern in the present thesis or findings in previous research. Two

different explanations can be offered to explain this particular finding: 1) When the perpetrator was exposed by the police, there was a massive media coverage, describing the perpetrator very negatively and depicting the girls as victims. In addition, the girls realized that there were several other girls who were victims of the same perpetrator. Plausibly, such knowledge may have reduced feelings of guilt, which may have facilitated reporting. 2) It is also important to consider that the girls in Study III probably represent a rather unique sample of teenage girls. Previous research suggests that adolescent children with particular personal characteristics seem to be extra vulnerable to sexual victimization on the Internet (e.g., children with a high degree of conflict with their parents, children with depression, social difficulties, feelings of loneliness, children with prior maltreatment experiences, emotionally immature children, love- or attention-deprived children) (Stanley, 2001; Wolak, Finkelhor & Mitchell, 2004). Moreover, the girls who met the man off-line can be said to represent a sub-sample of teenage girls as they represent: first, the girls who got engaged in an *on*-line contact with the man from the very beginning, and second, the girls who also continued with an *off*-line contact with the man. Perhaps such characteristics may affect the reporting about the abuse. In line with this, it may also be the case that the victims who were willing to meet with the man were also more extraverted generally and, thus, more willing to disclose. However, it should be noted that this is only speculation, as we neither measured extraversion nor the victims' vulnerability. It should also be noted that both Study I and II offer exceptions in the form of children who reported a great number of sexual details. In this context, it is important to also consider factors such as individual characteristics (e.g., coping strategies, focus of attention during abuse), attachment style and parental support. Children's overall motivation to report abuse is a further factor that may affect their willingness to report (Lyon & Saywitz, 2006) (factors not investigated here).

Children's accuracy

Previous research has indicated that although children omit information, what they in fact do tell is often accurate (Goodman, Bottoms et al., 1991; Goodman, Hirshman et al., 1991; Howe et al., 1996). Similarly, results from *scientific case* studies have shown that children can give accurate reports about sexual abuse (Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Jones & Krugman, 1986; Orbach & Lamb, 1999). The detailed verification material used in Study I allowed us to assess the accuracy of the children's statements, and the children were found to be highly accurate in what they reported. In Study II, accuracy was not measured; however, the children's reports were generally in good agreement with the perpetrator's reports and the documentation of the

abuse (as far as the authors could determine), which suggests a high level of accuracy. In Study III, the focus was not on the girls' accuracy.

Limitations

A couple of comments should be made on the limitations of the studies in the present thesis. First, the documentations used as verification in the different studies contain some uncertainty. In Study I and IV, we had to rely on the perpetrator's own documentation of the phone calls. However, there is every reason to believe that he documented the phone calls in a complete and correct manner as (a) the questionnaires he used were prepared beforehand (i.e., he did not have to concentrate on documenting his own questions), and (b) several children reported hearing the man typing during the phone call (i.e., he documented the children's answers on-line and did not have to rely on his memory when documenting this information). Regarding Study II, there are three cases with no documentation other than the perpetrator's confession and detailed report. Nevertheless, when looking at the perpetrator's modus operandi when interacting with the other children and at other factors (such as other witnesses' statements, and correspondence regarding sexual details between a child and the perpetrator), there is every reason to believe that sexual acts occurred with these three children as well. For Study III, we had access to detailed documentation regarding the on-line contact between the child and the perpetrator, but we had no documentation regarding what happened during the off-line meetings. It should be noted, however, that in this study (as in Study II), we did not measure the accuracy of the children's reports. Rather, we focused on the type of information reported by the children and on omissions and denials.

Another possible limitation is that it is very difficult to estimate to what extent the interviewers' actions may have affected the overall result. For example, it is possible to argue that the type of information reported by the children (i.e., more neutral than sexual information) is a reflection of the type of questions asked, that is, more questions asking for neutral than for sexual information. However, the fact that the interviewers usually knew what had happened may have caused them to press the child harder to report about the sexual details. Furthermore, in Study II and III, omissions and denials were only coded when the child had the *possibility* to report about an act.

An additional, possible limitation regarding Study II is that, due to the rather few children included in the study, we were unable to conduct any statistical analyses, and the generalizability of the findings may be called into question. However, as there are rarely

real-life data accessible that can be used for scientific studies in this field, observations such as those found in Study II may provide valuable contributions.

A comment should also be made regarding the findings in Study IV. The fact that the interviewers knew what had happened may very well have influenced their interview strategy. Hence, one should be cautious about generalizing these findings to the more typical interview situation, in which the interviewer is unaware of what has happened (if anything). However, one could argue that future cases of CSA will more frequently offer some form of verification (although seldom complete verification), due to the increased accessibility of technical equipment.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that it is common that sexual abuse cases involve repeated abuse, perpetrated by someone close to the child. As the material used in the present thesis is rather unique, one needs to be cautious about generalizing these results to a broader group of sexually abused children. On the other hand, children's unwillingness to report about sexual abuse is probably even more evident in intrafamilial than extrafamilial cases (i.e., due to loyalty conflicts and fear of negative consequences for the family and life situation). Thus, the present results provide a complementary contribution, indicating that it may be even more difficult to report about sexual abuse than has previously been suggested (i.e., even when the perpetrator is a total stranger).

Conclusions and Practical implications

Obtaining details from children who have been sexually abused is of crucial importance to the legal outcome of the investigative process. One reason why so few cases of suspected CSA lead to prosecution is that there is rarely any evidence available other than the child's report. Consequently, a fragmentary report from a child may prevent the child from receiving a fair trial and outcome. Furthermore, the Swedish Supreme Court claims that, for an account of sexual abuse to be considered credible, it should be coherent, clear and detailed. Results reported here support findings from previous research showing that children generally produce fragmentary reports about sexual abuse, reports that lack details describing the course of the event. Furthermore, the present results add to previous research by showing that these difficulties also apply in cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by a total stranger, and for different forms of sexual abuse (i.e., verbal, Internet-initiated, and physical sexual abuse). The results suggest that a gap exists in child sexual abuse cases, and that this gap is not primarily about what children tell and what actually took place (i.e., children's accuracy is often high).

Instead, this gap concerns what children tell and what they actually remember (i.e., children seem to choose to be silent about the most severe acts).

Notably, the present thesis also showed that the adolescent victims involved in *off*-line sexual abuse were willing to report about these acts. There may be several reasons for this finding. It is likely that the massive media reports, which described the perpetrator very negatively and appropriately depicted the girls as victims, facilitated the victims' reporting. In addition, factors such as personal characteristics among the victims and the fact that the perpetrator was not close to the victims may have affected the reporting pattern. Consequently, reporting patterns may differ as a function of a number of potential factors (e.g., type of abuse perpetrated and individual factors).

It is especially important that professionals who interview children in forensic and clinical settings be aware of these differences in reporting patterns and of the fact that children generally tend to omit information. Appropriate resources need to be allocated to help children report about sexual abuse. Knowing that a child probably has more to report may inspire investigative interviewers to obtain more information from the child. Such an insight, however, should not be interpreted as encouraging or used as an argument for the use of pressure when interviewing a child (e.g., by using suggestive questioning). Instead, this knowledge should be used to help children overcome complicating barriers. Speculatively, emotional barriers (e.g., feelings of shame and guilt) may be especially complicating for children's reporting. Hence, components during the investigative interview that help children dare to report are of importance. In order to overcome complicating barriers and be able to report, the child must feel comfortable in the interview situation and trust the interviewer. Furthermore, the interviewer must have patience and time. Consequently, considerable focus during the interview must be put on establishing rapport with the child. Previous research has put considerable weight on determining which type of questions should be used and which should be avoided. However, research has not, to the same extent, dealt with how best to establish long-lasting rapport with the child. An important issue for future research is to continue the work on developing good rapport-establishing strategies. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the recommendation that CSA reports should be detailed in order to be considered credible (Gregow, 1996) may not be applicable when highly emotional factors are involved, such as in sexual abuse cases.

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