

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE: FACTORS INHIBITING OR TRIGGERING THE DISCLOSURE OF THE SECRET

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Abstract

The secret character in the abusive relationship, as well as the child's vulnerability, forces him to remain silent and allows the abuse to be repeated. The objective of this paper was to identify the factors that inhibit or cause disclosure of child sexual abuse. The study is based on the opinion of six young women between the ages of 19 and 27, victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse, who benefited from special protection measures.

Based on the interview method, the following were analyzed: individual and family history; the age of onset of sexual abuse, its duration and type; the strategies used by the aggressor in keeping the secret; the way of disclosure and the results obtained afterward. In four of the six cases, the perpetrator was the biological father, and the „secret of sexual abuse” was secured through repeated threats, terrorizing, and physical abuse. Three of the young women revealed the sexual abuse to a friend, respectively to the foster mother (intentionally), one other young woman confessed what happened to them during counseling sessions, and therapy (requested/supported), and one young woman spoke when she was a child to the educator from kindergarten (accidental). One of the participants spoke for the first time about childhood sexual abuse during the present study. Fear of being blamed or held responsible, and feelings of shame contributed to the delay in disclosing the secret.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, special protection measure, disclosure of the secret, sexual abuse accommodation syndrome.

Résumé : Le caractère secret dans la relation abusive, ainsi que la vulnérabilité de l'enfant, l'oblige au silence et permettent la répétition des abus. L'objectif de cet article était d'identifier les facteurs qui inhibent ou provoquent la divulgation d'abus sexuels sur des enfants. Six jeunes femmes âgées de 19 à 27 ans ont participé à la présente étude, victimes d'abus sexuels intrafamiliaux, qui ont bénéficié de mesures de protection particulières.

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Sur la base de la méthode d'entretien, ont été analysés: les antécédents individuels et familiaux; l'âge du début de l'abus sexuel, sa durée et son type; les stratégies utilisées par l'agresseur pour garder le secret; la nature et la qualité des relations primaires/significatives dans l'enfance et l'adolescence; le mode de divulgation et les résultats obtenus par la suite.

Dans quatre des six cas, l'auteur était le père biologique et le «secret des abus sexuels» a été préservé grâce à des menaces répétées, à la terreur et à des violences physiques. Trois des jeunes femmes ont révélé l'abus sexuel à un ami, respectivement à l'assistante maternelle (intentionnellement), une jeune femme a avoué ce qui lui était arrivé lors de séances de conseil, de thérapie (demandée/soutenue) et une jeune femme a parlé à l'institutrice de maternelle quand elle était enfant (accidentellement). L'une des participantes a parlé pour la première fois d'abus sexuels durant l'enfance au cours de la présente étude. La peur d'être blâmée ou accusée, les sentiments de peur et de honte ont contribué au retard dans la divulgation du secret.

Mots clés : abus sexuel sur enfant, mesure spéciale de protection, révélation du secret, syndrome d'accommodement de l'abus sexuel.

Rezumat: Caracterul secret în legătura abuzivă precum și vulnerabilitatea copilului, îl obligă pe acesta la tăcere și permite repetarea abuzului. Obiectivul acestei lucrări a fost identificarea factorilor care inhibă sau provoacă dezvoltarea abuzului sexual asupra copiilor. Studiul se bazează pe opinia a șase tinere cu vârste cuprinse între 19 și 27 de ani, victime ale abuzului sexual intrafamilial, care au beneficiat de măsuri de protecție specială. Pe baza metodei interviului au fost analizate: istoria individuală și familială; vârsta debutului abuzului sexual, durata și tipul acestuia; strategiile folosite de agresor în păstrarea secretului; modul de dezvăluire și rezultatele obținute ulterior. În patru din cele șase cazuri făptuitorul a fost tatăl biologic, iar „secretul abuzului sexual” a fost asigurat prin amenințări, terorizări și abuzuri fizice repetate. Trei dintre tinere au dezvăluit abuzul sexual unui prieten, respectiv asistentei maternale (intenționat), o tânără a mărturisit ce i s-a întâmplat în cadrul ședințelor de consiliere, terapie (solicitat/susținut), iar o tânără a vorbit când era copil educatoarei de la grădiniță (accidental). Una dintre participante a povestit pentru prima dată despre abuzul sexual din copilărie cu ocazia studiului de față. Teama de a fi blamate sau învinuite, sentimentele de frică și rușine au contribuit la întârzierea divulgării secretului.

Cuvinte cheie: abuzul sexual al copilului, măsură de protecție specială, divulgarea secretului, sindromul acomodării cu abuzul sexual.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is often difficult to identify because many children find it difficult to talk about (Paine and Hansen, 2002). There are victims who only in adulthood dare to denounce the acts they were subjected to in childhood. For example, London et al. (2005) conducting a review of 11 retrospective studies in adults, despite the differences in definitions of abuse, the methodology used, and the characteristics of the population studied, noted that in 10 of the 11 retrospective studies, only one-third of the adults who experienced childhood sexual abuse disclosed it at that time.

In scientific literature, the term disclosure of sexual abuse is approached from several perspectives. Generally, most researchers consider that the disclosure

of sexual abuse is not a simple act, but an active, interactional process, which often takes place sequentially and entails a series of consequences on a personal, family, or community level (Reitsema, Grietens, 2016). Some authors believe that disclosure of sexual abuse has a certain „life course” depending on each person because attitudes and willingness to disclose change over time. Other authors approach the disclosure of sexual abuse as a request for help, as an important step in the recovery process, to let go of the sense of shame, guilt, and sense of responsibility that many survivors feel (Livesey, 2002).

Other authors emphasize how information is transmitted within a disclosure: through *verbal or non-verbal means (letters, drawings, gestures), directly or indirectly, partially or fully, determined or accidental* (Alaggia, 2010).

At the same time, a disclosure may have an informal recipient (for example, a family member or friend), or a formal recipient (such as the social worker or psychologist working in child protection services). Factors that influence disclosure in one context are not necessarily the same as those that influence disclosure in a different context (McElevay, 2008). Telling a friend is not the same as telling a parent. Telling in an informal context is different from telling a professional what happened, in an investigative interview or a therapy session. Grandgenett et al. (2021) showed that informal disclosure was most frequently to a parent (n=754; 60%), a family member who did not have childcare responsibilities (n=117; 9%), school staff (n =114; 9%) or the child's therapist (n=114; 9%), and one hundred and ninety young people (15%) told another person (e.g., a friend, a doctor, a babysitter, or any of the law).

However, many child sexual abuse survivors delay or fail to disclose their abuse, even when they appear for formal investigative interviews. Caregivers are more likely to believe allegations when young people have disclosed before the interview and less likely to believe if the alleged perpetrator lives at home (Grandgenett et al., 2021).

In professional relationships, disclosures can be influenced by: the personal approach of the specialist, his knowledge and experience, the time given, etc. In the scientific literature (Paine and Hansen 2002; Alaggia, 2004) the patterns of disclosure of sexual abuse most frequently used are:

- *Accidental disclosures*: when abuse is revealed by chance, it does not imply a deliberate effort on the part of the child. It often involves discovery by third parties (for example, during medical examinations).
- *Requested/sustained disclosure*: appear only in response to direct questions, often determined by a certain verbal or non-verbal behaviour of the child; were typically described as occurring in supportive settings (investigative interviews, counseling, therapy, etc.)
- *Intentional disclosures*: when a child consciously decides to tell someone else; involves memories recovered in adulthood, awareness of what happened.

Alaggia (2004), in the qualitative study of 24 male and female survivors of child sexual abuse, developed an expanded conceptualization of disclosure

patterns. This included four categories: (1) *Purposeful disclosure* to describe direct and indirect verbal attempts and intentional behavioural attempts to disclose; (2) *Behavioural manifestations* to include intentional and unintentional behavioural attempts to reveal behavioural effects or symptoms; (3) *Intentionally withheld disclosures*, to include willful withholding, false denial, accidental discovery, and prompt or sustained disclosure; and finally, (4) *Triggered disclosures of delayed memories*. The latter refers to the disclosure following retrieving memories that may have been inaccessible due to developmental factors.

In the case of sexual abuse, the term **latency** (time delay in disclosure) refers to the period between the beginning of the abuse and the moment when a child or young person discloses or attempts to disclose that abuse. Researchers examining latency to disclosure report a long period, with an average delay of 3 to 18 years (London et al., 2005). Delay in disclosure may indicate feelings of responsibility for the abuse itself, but also the impact of the disclosure on those around them. It can be seen as both a symbolic loss (loss of innocence) and a fundamental loss of control over sexuality (forced sex), including a sense of loss of bodily integrity, confusion about sexual orientation, or an inability to have satisfying sexual relationships (Alaggia, 2005).

Research suggests that **several factors** can influence a child or young person's decision to disclose sexual abuse. For example, in some studies, extrafamilial sexual abuse is more frequently reported than intrafamilial sexual abuse (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

The age of the child at the onset of the abuse was also identified as a predictor of disclosure of sexual abuse in some studies, but nonsignificant in others (London et al., 2005). However, studies indicate that the disclosure rate of sexual abuse in children younger than 6 years old is lower compared to other age groups and that developmental factors may explain young children's inability to intentionally disclose (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Paine and Hansen, 2002). School-aged children are more likely to confide to a parent than to a friend or peer, and adolescents are more likely to confide to another adolescent (London et al. 2008). Grandgenett et al. (2021) show that older age at the forensic interview also predicted disclosure.

The likelihood of **intentional disclosure** increases with age, when girl victims between 7 and 13 are more likely to confess to an adult or a friend as opposed to those aged 14-17 who are more likely to confess to an adult (McElvaney, 2008). Older children and adolescents tend to intentionally disclose sexual abuse as opposed to younger children who tend to disclose what happened to them spontaneously. Younger children are more vulnerable to delayed confession due to immaturity, language difficulties, being more easily manipulated, and not realizing the gravity of the facts (London et al. 2008)

The scientific literature differentiates between individual characteristics (gender, age of the victim), family characteristics (dysfunctional families, the existence of other forms of violence in the family, families with alcohol consumption, drugs, crime, child abuse, and neglect) and the specifics of the abuse

(severity, frequency, duration) that influence disclosure. The victim's relationship with the perpetrator can also affect disclosure.

Victims *who decide to confess the abuse* do so for emotional reasons, but they are those of anger, fear, and confusion because they are asked directly or because of being involved in a conversation about the abuse. They may also feel compelled to disclose because they know they have done wrong or want to prevent future abuse of themselves or others (Winters et al., 2020). Most victims who disclose to others do so because they have a close or trusting relationship with that person. In other cases, victims chose to tell a particular person because they hoped that person could help them or stop the abuse, or the person witnessed or suspected the abuse (Winters et al., 2020).

Family factors were also found to influence disclosures. Families characterized by chaos and aggression, the presence of other forms of child abuse, violence, and dysfunctional communication, can affect children's decisions to confess sexual abuse (Alaggia, 2010).

Disclosure may occur as a result of overwhelming family conflict, accidental discovery by another person, or community awareness and awareness of sexual abuse. If family conflict does trigger disclosure, it is usually only after several years of continuous sexual abuse and after an eventual failure of the child's coping mechanisms (Summit, 1983).

Relationship with the perpetrator is another factor cited in the literature that explains why some child (children) victims keep sexual abuse a secret. The closer the victims are to the perpetrator, the less likely they are to disclose the sexual abuse. When the perpetrator is a significant family member, attachment issues, traumatic bonding, and the child's need to protect family integrity are suggested as possible explanations for maintaining secrecy and delaying disclosure (Paine & Hansen, 2002; Summit, 1983). Children may feel fear of the perpetrator and the potential consequences of disclosure. Therefore, to survive sexual abuse by a family member, i.e. a trusted person, children try to accommodate the situation by putting great effort into accepting and keeping the secret (Summit, 1983).

Structural factors such as discrimination, migration, and poverty have been identified as potential deterrents to disclosure of sexual abuse. Children may also fear their marginalization in the community and other negative consequences related to cultural attitudes and beliefs (Alaggia, 2001). Disclosure of intrafamilial sexual abuse can be more complicated in cultural communities that place a high importance on preserving the family and avoiding its breakdown (Paine & Hansen, 2002).

Among the reasons most often cited by children who did not disclose sexual abuse are: shame (London et al., 2005), the belief that the incident was not serious enough, lack of evidence (Winters et al., 2020), feelings of guilt (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003), fear of negative consequences (London et al., 2005), fear of not being believed (McElvaney, 2008). Winters and colleagues (2020) also list the following internal barriers to disclosure of sexual abuse: emotional distress (fear and embarrassment), avoidance, and confusion about the abuse or what others will

say. Among the external or environmental barriers are elements such as: not wanting to upset others, avoiding problems that may arise, the belief that reporting would not lead to any significant change, or threats from the aggressor.

At the same time, it must be taken into account the fact that the reasons for non-disclosure change over time due to the child's cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development, but also due to changes in the systems (educational, social, medical, etc.) with which he interacts (McElvaney, 2008). Sometimes actual disclosure is preceded by several prior attempts, but fear of consequences may significantly predict delayed disclosure (Goodman-Brown et al., 2003).

In 1983, Roland Summit, a renowned psychiatrist, published a formal description of how sexually abused children disclose abuse. Summit's model, called *child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome*, included five elements: (1) *keeping the secret (secrecy)*; (2) *helplessness (feeling helpless)*; (3) *blocking and accommodation*; (4) *delayed, unconvincing disclosure*, and (5) *retraction*. The purpose of this model was to highlight that some children may be reluctant to disclose sexual abuse. According to this model, this occurs because of the physical and psychological constraints that the perpetrator exerts on the child to maintain secrecy. Thus, the author states, „He is most often fearful, insecure, and confused about the nature of continuing sexual experience and the outcome of its discovery (disclosure)” (Summit, 1983, 178).

Roland Summit's 1983 work was highly regarded among specialists. The model proposed by the above-mentioned author is considered very sensitive from a psychological point of view because it tries to describe the internal dynamics of the child in his efforts to cope with the experience of abuse (McElevay, 2008).

2. Research methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research was to identify the factors that inhibit or cause the disclosure of sexual abuse of children and young people. Six young women between the ages of 19 and 27 years old participated in the present study, victims of intrafamilial sexual abuse, who benefited from special protection measures.

The research questions we started from, are:

- (1) What is the socio-familial profile of sexually abused children and young people?
- (2) What is the specificity of sexual abuse in the case of children and young people (age of onset, duration, and type of abuse)?
- (3) What intimidation strategies do the aggressors use on child and young victims for not disclosing the sexual abuse they are subjected to?
- (4) How and to whom do child and young victims disclose sexual abuse?

Based on the interview method and using a semi-structured interview guide, the following aspects were analyzed: individual and family history; the age of onset of sexual abuse, its duration and type; the strategies used by the aggressor in keeping the secret; the nature and quality of primary/significant relationships

in childhood and adolescence; the way of disclosure (intentional, accidental or requested) and the results obtained afterward.

Subjects were identified by the snowball method. A recruitment ad has been posted on a social media³ non-profit organization group whose members are young people from the special protection system. The researchers were contacted by two people, who, in turn, recommended other people to be part of the study. By providing the information used in this study, the participants agreed by giving their consent to be used in this scientific research under anonymity. The young women who are the subject of this study ended up in the protection system with special protection measures, due to various forms of abuse and/or neglect (including sexual abuse) to which they were subjected in the nuclear or extended family of origin. The age of entry into the protection system of the participants in the study is the period of middle childhood, between 7-10 years old, and in the case of three of the respondents the age of entry into the system is the period of adolescence 14, 17 years old. The length of stay in the special protection system varies between 1 and 9 years old (see Table 1).

The interviews were conducted between September 25-30, 2023. The average duration of the interviews was $M=42$ min.66 sec., the shortest interview being 27 min.15 sec., and the longest interview being 1h 05 min. The interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded with a tape recorder, then transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically.

Table 1. Data on sexual abuse and period history from the study participants' protective system

Interview code	Age (years completed)	The reason for entering the protection system / Perpetrator	Age of onset of sexual abuse/ Duration of sexual abuse	Disclosure type/ confidant	Special protective measure	Age of entry/exit into the protection system
I1	21 years old	abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and neglect/ biological father	4 years old/ Over 5 years	Intentional disclosure/ foster mother	1. Family foster care 2. Institutional care	entry-10 years old exit-19 years old
I2	27 years	sexual abuse/ biological father	11 years old/ 5 years	Intentional disclosure/ high school friend	1. Institutional care	entry-17 years old exit 19 years old

³ It is about the "Council of Institutionalized Youth" Association <https://www.facebook.com/ConsiliulTinerilorInstitutionalizati> which aims to represent institutionalized children and youth at local, national and international level and to defend and promote the rights of those who have benefited from a special protection measure intended for children deprived, temporarily or permanently, of the protection of their parents, to increase their active participation in the life of the communities in which they operate, according to the association's website <https://consiliultinerilor.ro>

Interview code	Age (years completed)	The reason for entering the protection system / Perpetrator	Age of onset of sexual abuse/ Duration of sexual abuse	Disclosure type/ confidant	Special protective measure	Age of entry/exit into the protection system
13	20 years	neglect sexual abuse/ first cousin and husband of the foster mother	10 years old/ Over 5 years	Intentional disclosure/ researcher	1. Institutional care (Mother and child center) 2. Family foster care 3. Institutional care	entry-10 years old exit-19 years old
14	21 years old	abuse (sexual, physical, emotional/ biological father	6-7 years old/ 1 year	Accidental disclosure/ kindergarten teacher	1. Family foster care 2. Institutional care	entry-7 years old exit-18 years old
15	21 years old	abuse (sexual, physical)/ maternal uncle)	13-14 years old/ 1 year	Requested, sustained disclosure/ psychologist	1. Institutional care	entry- 14 years old exit-18 years old
16	19 years	sexual abuse and physical, emotional/ biological father	17 years old/ months	Intentional disclosure/ friend from high school	1. Institutional care	entry-17 years old exit-18 years old

Source: Table made by the authors based on the information obtained from the respondents

3. Study results

3.1. Individual and family history

The study participants come from disorganized families (alcohol consumption, unstable income, domestic violence, etc.)

Separated from the maternal figure from a young age, raised by an abusive and alcoholic father, one of the participants in the study came to the attention of the authorities, after the precarious conditions in which she and her brother grew up, were reported by the neighbors: „*My biological father was very aggressive and alcoholic. We grew up in bad conditions (...) our father raised us until I was 9 years old and my brother was 11 years old (...) Some neighbors reported this and the people from child protection came to check and after that, they took us (...) I met my mother one time. I can't say that I felt incredibly connected to her... it was a meeting I made of curiosity, to see who she is, and what she looks like and that's it. (...) I saw her once more, we exchanged phone numbers, and she called me*” (I1).

Another respondent declares that she ended up in the care of the state after her father sexually abused her: „*I ended up in the residential center (...) at the age of 17. When it all started, my mother was hospitalized, she was hospitalized for a long time*” (I2).

In the case of respondent I3, the unfavorable conditions in the family are noticeable: the father went to work abroad, the mother had to move with the children from one place to another, and she could no longer cope with the difficulties. So I3 confesses: *„I'm 20 years old, but I'm still a high school student because of the unfavorable environment in which I grew up, I went to school later (...) I stayed with my mother at a mother-child center, and then a protection measure was instituted for me (...) I had shortcomings in my family (...) I also come from a Roma family and the environment in which I grew up was not a favorable one (...) my father had left, in Italy, as if all the difficulties started from there. When he left, my mother was left alone, then my mother quarreled with her in-laws, that is, my father's parents, and they kicked her out of the house where I was staying (...) my mother was alone with three children after her and I was still staying at my mother's sisters' turn until the protection was notified”* (I3).

One of the interviewees says that both the mother and the father had problems with alcohol, and when the parents separated, each of the children stayed with one of the parents. In addition to physical abuse, he also suffered sexual abuse: *„I started first grade at the nursery school. At the age of 7, I entered the protection system (...) Cause: parents. (...) My mother was an alcoholic, and my father was also an alcoholic, he beat us, made us undress, and touched me and my older sister in certain areas. (...) And when my parents split up, my mother left with my sister and I stayed with my father (...) My mother worked during the day, and my father was always at home (...) My parents split up because of (...) Alcohol, beatings”* (I4).

Orphaned as a child, one of the interviewees says that her uncle is the one who tried to abuse her sexually and thus ended up in the protection system: *„The parents are deceased. I was 5 years old... about that when my father died and 7 years old when my mother died (...) I was left in the care of my aunt, my mother's sister (...) What age did I enter the system? I think at 14 years old. (...) I was in the 9th grade”* (I5).

Tired of being physically assaulted by her father and witnessing fights caused by him, one of the interviewees declares that she chose to leave home: *„I ran away from home and had some pretty big problems with my parents, or rather parents... (...) Only the father is biological, the mother, isn't”* (I6).

The family history of sexually abused children shows that they came from disorganized families, with a precarious material situation, in which the lack of a maternal figure, paternal figure, or even both parents, led them to grow up in improper conditions. Thus, some children were taken from their families by the authorities following reports made by various people, and others chose to run away from home to end the verbal, physical, and sexual abuse they were subjected to.

3.2. The age of onset of sexual abuse, its duration and type

One of the victims of sexual abuse states that she was abused from a very young age and that she always had to grow up in a tense environment. Unfortunately, the abuses (including sexual abuse) were committed by the biological father himself, for five years: *„The father was abusive... physically, sexually... The sexual abuse started as long as I know myself... I have memories since*

around the age of four and I know clearly that even it was happening (...) A sexual act. It happened when I was four years old and continued for five years when I was removed from my biological family and placed in foster care” (I1).

Having to cope with the trauma, some of the abused children are unable to recall the details of what happened in the family. This is also the case of respondent I2 in which the sexual abuse (by the biological father) started at the age of 11 and continued for 5 years. The young woman does not remember a series of details regarding the abuse, only that it usually happened in her own home, in the absence of her mother: *„It started, I was in the 4th grade, I was very young, and it lasted until I reached high school (...) The first time he abused me was when I was 11 years old, yes. For five years (...) Sexual abuse by the natural father (...) happened, when the mother was absent... in the house, yes. With what frequency? I don't have clear memories of that time. And during the investigation, it was difficult for them to get everything from me, because it was deleted automatically. I was probably stuck, and it was difficult for me to remember, to be able to give details” (I2).*

An extreme situation was shared by one of the young women who was sexually abused as a child by one of her older cousins: *„Then I couldn't say that it was serious, nor normal what was happening because the environment where I came from was already used to it, I was used to this kind of thing, for cousins to touch each other or I know... there were moments of sexual abuse between cousins (...) My mother had a sister and that sister had a child and that child was giving me no peace (...) I was about ten years old then, I think he was over five, six, seven years older, something like that”. (I3).* Later, this young woman benefited from a special protection measure, placement with a foster nurse but, unfortunately, she was sexually abused again, even by the foster nurse's husband. The man was using licentious language and exposing his genitals in front of her and her sister: *„I don't know exactly... to tell you about those abuses, they were related and only done by the nanny's husband and when he was alone at home. Without his wife he started to be very... he started to be very abusive, he made sexual remarks to me and these things happened several times (...) Several times it happened (...) he would come and watch us at night sleeping (...) when my sister and I were alone at home with him, the man became very sexual (...) he was very open to what it meant, I don't know sexual things (...) he had no problem to talk to 10-year-old children (...) to take off his pants, it was an example that still marks me (...) with both of them he did the same (...) No. No sexual contact, just the thing, I told you with my pants (...) the man was very sexual (...) if my sister asked him something like a child who had access to the Internet and was watching, I don't know, at pornographic things for example, if she asked him something, he had no qualms about explaining to her what it meant or look, let me show you or... so... pedophilia, I consider it pedophilia and it is pedophilia” (I3).*

At a young age, individuals do not differentiate between the limits of showing affection and what constitutes sexually abusive behavior on the part of someone, especially when it is a familiar person, a person who offers them protection and safety. This is also the case of respondent I4 (abused by her father around the age of six). Although there was no sexual intercourse with penetration,

touching in the intimate areas happened several times a week: „I was around six years old (...) I saw him, I can say, as a normal one. At that age. I didn't know how to tell the difference (...) If by attention you can understand, I don't know... let me kiss you, obscenely caress you (...) Sexual contact, no. Penetrative sexual contact, no. To put it this way (...) Yes. Intimate, touch using his sexual organ in my private area (...) Night. It happened quite often. 3 times a week (...) About 2-3 times a week, so to speak” (I4).

Exhibitionist gestures from adults are also reported by respondent I5, who, in her teenage years, testifies that her uncle ended up giving her the impression that he was in love with her, showing jealous behaviors. From her accounts, it can be deduced that she was subjected to several forms of abuse: „Sexual abuse by my aunt's husband (...) At 14 years old (...) It started when I was about 13 years old, I think. The reason? The sexual abuse (...) didn't manage to do anything to me, but he tried (...) my aunt was at work, and he was trying.... he was trying to hit me just to shut up, not to say nothing. He would undress in front of me, thinking that who knows what I'm going to do, things like that (...) In addition to sexually abusing me (...) he would hit me many times, lock me out, and tear my clothes, he thought I had someone else or who knows what, I don't know what he was thinking. She confesses that her uncle provoked her, tried his best to attract her attention to bring her closer to him and expose her to various acts of exhibitionism: „These things happened, usually in the evening, but nothing happened in the evening, only while he was trying to get me out of the room, to draw my attention to what he was doing when his boy was in the room (...) he was trying to get me out of the room by unplugging my TV or... and to annoy me, because he was probably trying to do something and show his penis (...) I was lucky from God that I didn't suffer anything more serious...” (I5).

Respondent I6 was also subjected to several forms of abuse from the father, whose abusive behavior continues even today, as she testifies: „At 17 and a half years old I entered the system (...) Rape attempts, beatings, scandals, threats, and humiliations that even today, continue (...) This happened in December... 17 years, yes, something like that. Thereabouts. And a month later, I ran away from home (...) I was 17 and a half years old when I finally managed to leave home. It was then that I got up the courage... (...) From the biological father (...) they were physical, emotional and sexual”.

Near the age of majority, one of the interviewees was subjected to an attempted rape by the biological father who abused her both verbally, and physically: „It was all of them. On the sexual side, for example, there was an attempted rape and it happened to, I don't know... end in time. I mean, he didn't get to do a big thing to me... it was an attempt to molest (...) in beatings, shouting, swearing. Yes, because of the beatings I have serious back problems. I risk being paralyzed and I have medical evidence, black on white. I have dislocated ribs, also because of the beatings (...) One time, attempted rape (...) and emotional and physical abuse were almost daily, which still happens now. So even now it happens, including insults, including no... but, yes they are (...) He had joked before, or at least that's what he insinuated, to put his hand on my breasts, on my ass, to call me mother what big breasts you have, mother

what ... big you have, not to put it another way, things like that... but when I got into bed with him, yes, it was only once” (I6).

The age of onset of sexual abuse among the interviewed young women was distributed as follows: two during early childhood (at the age of 4 and 6-7 years old respectively), two during middle childhood (at the age of 10 and 11 years old respectively) and two during adolescence (13-14 years old, respectively 17 years old). In most cases, the perpetrator was the respondents' biological father (4 out of 6 cases). Regarding the duration of the sexual abuse, it varies from a few months to and more than 5 years.

3.3. The strategies used by the aggressor in keeping the secret

The „secret of sexual abuse” was secured through repeated threats, intimidation, and physical abuse. The fear of being blamed and shame contributed to the delay in disclosing the secret. One of the young women interviewed confesses that she was threatened with death by the very person who gave her life: *„he told me he was going to kill me, he simply told me that if I told anyone, he would take him I don't know where and he will take me to the orphanage with bars on the window and that I will be beaten there and mistreated and things you say to a child and he believes you” (I1).* Respondent I2 confesses that she loved her father so much and was very attached to him that she agreed not to tell anyone about the sexual abuse she was subjected to: *„when I was a child, a little girl, I was very attached to him. And I thought he loved me very much (...) He had put a lot of emphasis on shame. And... the fear of him was a... I was afraid (...).*

Having access to information, from sources read through the Internet, she came to the knowledge and realized that the things that are happening to her are not natural and made her take a stand so that she could escape from the trap in which she was caught: *„Now with this mind, I would have reacted differently, I wouldn't have stayed, but then I didn't have internet, I didn't have information, no... no... until I got to the institution, I didn't know that such a thing existed (...) I didn't see anyone to whom I could ask for help (...) my only escape was to leave there, in my mind there was only to learn, learn and leave”(I2).*

One of the respondents states that both she and her sister did not remain passive to the advances and exhibitionist behavior coming from the nanny's husband and reacted so that the man avoided repeating the abusive behaviors: *„When he took off my pants, she understood that it was too much and even me and my sister reacted badly and I think she got scared then, and said to keep our secret or something like that, don't let your wife find out and nah... I think that stopped him from going further” (I3).* We can also talk about the attitude and firm reaction in the face of obscene gestures in the case of another respondent, who, being close to the age of majority, decided to leave the family home and take her life into her own hands. She says, moreover, that her father was known to everyone as a difficult, aggressive person: *„There was a confrontation between me and my father (...) my father, I don't know how to tell you, invents certain stories (...) has serious problems (...) almost everyone knew who my father is” (I6).*

Other strategies used by one of the aggressors were: spying, harassing, and insulting in public: *„he was following me on the street, insulting me in front of the world... verbal aggression”* (I5).

In conclusion, we can summarize that although the aggressors used different strategies to intimidate the victims, some of them dared to react, not to remain passive, and to look for solutions to get out of the abusive situation.

3.4. Method of disclosure and choosing the confidant(s)

Next, this study tries to answer the following questions: *„When did the first disclosure take place?”, „What was the context?”, „Who was the trusted person chosen?”*. Thus, out of the six respondents, two revealed the secret to a friend, respectively to the foster mother (mode of intentional disclosure), and two other young women confessed to the counselor/psychologist (mode of disclosure requested/supported), and a young woman spoke about abuse to her kindergarten teacher (random, accidental mode of disclosure). In particular, one of the participants talked about childhood sexual abuse, for the first time, during the present study (mode of intentional disclosure).

Arrived in the child protection system, with placement measure, I1 says that although it was not easy for her, feeling guilty for what had happened to her (sexual abuse by the biological father), after gaining trust in the foster family, she was able to reveal her secret: *„after I got attached to the people there, I went one evening and sat in my mother's arms and told her I wanted to tell her something. I did this with difficulty because I still had the impression that something was wrong with me and that I was to blame. That maybe after what I tell them, they won't want me anymore”*. Benefiting from the support of specialists (psychologist and psychotherapist), she managed to overcome the trauma and talk much more freely about what happened to her: *„After what I said, I had sessions with the psychologist, after with a psychotherapist, I did meetings for about 6 years and they know each other... I don't know if you notice, but when I talk, I can say lightly about this topic. I try not to let it affect me anymore or... I buried it in there somewhere and these sessions are important. It helps you. The more you talk, the more you open up, although it hurts at first, it helps a lot”* (I1).

Family members often question children's claims when it comes to domestic sexual abuse, so in the case of two of the respondents, the confidant for disclosure was chosen from among the group of friends they felt close to closer: *„I found a source of trust in someone and that's where it started... I confessed to a friend from high school (...) that friend had a cousin who was a lawyer, that lawyer took me to the police, and from there it all started the investigation that lasted until I reached the 11th grade, so there were some difficult years (...) there was no one with me from the family, because no one believed me”* (...) *I suspect that they were afraid of him because she (mother) also took a lot of beating.* (I2). Subject I6 was in the same situation: *„I raised some alarms at school (...) One of my best friends knew what was going on. Because I was bruised all the time and he saw me crying and suffering. Instead, he couldn't do anything, so I preferred to run away from home because I*

couldn't find any other solution. He is a very old friend with whom I grew up (...) we were the closest people (...) we had a lot of trusts, and it seems that sometimes the proverb also has a reality: a friend in need is a friend indeed" (I6).

The family was not offering support even in the situation of respondent I3, who admits that she could not rely on her mother to reveal the abuse, because she says: *„My mother was abusive, I didn't know how to talk with her about it (...) To talk to someone about this thing with the foster carer, I didn't. I don't think I ever talked to anyone.”* *„No. Nobody knows these events. I'm only talking to you now. That's it"* (I3).

A form of accidental disclosure can be observed in the case of one of the research respondents, who testifies the following: *„The person I told was in kindergarten, the teacher, educator, I only know her name, and as a result measures were taken. (...) Me, telling them then with some nonchalance, thinking it was something correct"* (I4).

Solicited disclosure occurs in response to direct questions, often prompted by specific child behaviour or nonverbal communication, and in supportive environments, was mentioned by one respondent. Arriving in the protection system, I5, attracted the attention of the people around her, the specialists at the moment when she ended up self-mutilating: *„I was going to a psychologist because I was depressed and in the end, I still talked with the psychologist and in the end the psychologist talked to someone from the police, something like that, some acquaintance and otherwise in return they helped me and I know that one day I went to the police to file a complaint. They also called him and his wife from work. He didn't wait for her. They didn't know anything about what was going to happen. That's how I managed to get out of there (...) The psychologist who deals with the children in the system (...) the psychologist (...) saw that something was wrong because I was depressed, I started cutting my hands, things like that"* (I5).

4. Discussions and conclusions

Synthesizing the information for each of the four research questions, it can be stated that regarding the socio-familial profile of sexually abused children and young people, they come from disorganized families (alcohol consumption, domestic violence), with poor economic situations, single-parent families as a result of parents' separation, one of them going to work abroad or even death. All respondents ended up in the child protection system because of neglect and/or various forms of abuse to which they were subjected.

The second research question concerned the specifics of sexual abuse, namely: age of onset, duration, and type of abuse. In all six cases of the interviewed respondents, the form of abuse they were subjected to was intrafamilial sexual abuse. But it can be concluded that the subjects of the research also suffered other forms of abuse such as physical and emotional as well as neglect. In four cases sexual abuse was done by the biological father, in one case the perpetrator was the victim's cousin and the nanny's husband, and in one case, the aggressor was the young woman's uncle. If we refer to the age of onset of sexual abuse, it took place in early childhood 4-6 years old (two cases), in middle childhood 10-11 years old

(two cases), but also in adolescence 13-14 and 17 years old (two cases). In the present study, one of the aggravating factors of sexual abuse, namely the duration, varied from a few months (in the case of one of the respondents) to a year (in the case of two of the respondents) and more than 5 years (in the case of three of the respondents).

Regarding the strategies used by the aggressors to keep the secret, the following were identified: threat, intimidation, inducing feelings of fear and shame, spying, offending, manipulation, and even physical violence.

A final question of the study referred to the patterns of disclosure of sexual abuse (accidental, solicited, or sustained and accidental) of the children and young people in the research group. The most frequently mentioned form of disclosure was intentional. Three of the young women disclosed the sexual abuse to a friend, respectively to the foster mother (intentionally), one young woman confessed what happened during counseling sessions, and therapy (requested/supported), and another young woman accidentally spoke to the educator, when she attended kindergarten (accidentally). One of the participants spoke for the first time about childhood sexual abuse during the present study (intentionally). This is in line with the results of some specialized studies which estimate that between 30-80% of victims do not intentionally disclose sexual abuse until adulthood (Alaggia, 2004; Alaggia, 2005).

Disclosure is an important act no matter if occurs in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. The present study highlights the importance of understanding how contextual and individual factors interact to inhibit or stimulate disclosure in a child's life, including the relationship with the perpetrator, the child's age, cultural issues, family dynamics, the availability of social support, and the responsiveness of those in the environment. On the one hand, disclosure can stop victimization from continuing, alleviate stress and associated symptoms, prevent hypervigilance around secrecy, and create new opportunities and perspectives for remediation. On the other hand, investigations into disclosures of sexual abuse show that they can have negative consequences, the victim can be blamed and/or accused of false accusations, and the reaction of those close to them can be inappropriate, which could lead to the exacerbation of the symptoms related to the abuse (Paine & Hansen, 2002; Summit, 1983).

Some of the cases presented above confirm that, especially if they are young, children do not understand the mistake and abuse that was committed against them (Katz and Field, 2020). Katz and Field (2020) also highlight the essential role that the type of relationship plays in the child-perpetrator dynamic in ensuring the continuation or cessation of abuse, which was also addressed in this article.

The study was conducted to provide a better understanding of the context and experience of sexual abuse disclosure and can be a starting point for initiating other research on this topic, conducted with a representative sample of subjects.

5. Limitations of the study

For a study involving only six participants, we do not claim to generalize the results obtained.

The biggest limitation of this study was its retrospective design. Asking people to recount childhood events can be prone to failure, especially when memories have been repressed for long periods. Event distortion can also be a potential problem in data collection. At the same time, talking about sexual abuse, about an uncomfortable, traumatic secret is an effort with a great emotional charge that can influence the accuracy of the information provided.

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