



Review

The beliefs commonly held by adults about children's behavioral responses to sexual victimization

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Introduction

This article reviews the findings of empirical research on adult beliefs about how children commonly respond to sexual victimization. The question of how well adults understand the behavior of sexually abused children is important. For example, in the context of a criminal trial for child sexual abuse the admissibility of expert evidence related to the behavior of

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sexually abused children, usually adduced by the prosecution, may rest on whether the court deems that the behavior of sexually abused children is a subject matter well understood by the jury. If courts perceive that jurors are well informed about such behavior then there is no need for expert evidence on this subject and accordingly such evidence may be ruled inadmissible.

Courts in different jurisdictions have formulated this inquiry in varied ways, including for example, whether the behavior of sexually abused children is within the “common knowledge” of the trier of fact or relates to a “specialized” area of knowledge that is not readily understood by jurors without the assistance of an expert. Interestingly, courts in the United States and Australia for example have reached diametrically opposed views on this issue. Many courts in the United States have concluded that laypersons do not have a good understanding about the behavior of sexually abused children (e.g., *Commonwealth v. Hudson*, 417 Mass. 536, 631N.E.2d 50 [1994]). In contrast, courts that have considered this question in Australia have held that most adults do not require any assistance to understand such behaviors (e.g., *C v R* (1993) 60 SASR 467). Such divergent views on the same question is problematic particularly as courts in the United States and Australia have reached their respective conclusions about whether laypeople understand the behavior of sexually abused children without recourse to any relevant empirical research (Shackel, 2007). American and Australian courts alike have generally not provided any explanation for their respective stance on this issue. Certainly, as this review article highlights, the findings of relevant empirical research do not provide any support for the conclusion that Australian adults are better informed on the behavioral responses of sexually victimized children than are their American counterparts. Accordingly, it is difficult to understand the basis upon which American and Australian courts have reached their respective views on this issue and why such views are so at odds.

This article seeks to determine which of these opposing views (i.e., whether or not adults are generally well informed about how children respond to sexual abuse) is more consistent with existing research by undertaking a review of the findings of empirical research on adults' understanding of the behavioral responses of children to sexual victimization. There is currently no comprehensive review of this kind in the published literature. However, recent research conducted by Quas, Thompson, and Clarke-Stewart (2005) which examined the knowledge of actual and potential jurors regarding children's memory, suggestibility, and reactions to abuse suggests that adults have both some accurate and inaccurate beliefs about the behavior of sexually abused children. Clearly, more research in this area is warranted. An accurate picture of adults' knowledge and understanding of the behavior of sexually abused children is important in order to ensure that decision-making in child sexual assault cases is not grounded in misconceptions. In a legal context, an understanding of jurors' beliefs regarding how children respond to sexual victimization is important in order to assess the potential bias of misunderstandings about the behavior of sexually abused children on juror decision-making at trial. However, the implications of adult misunderstandings about the “typical” responses of children to sexual abuse extend beyond a legal context to a therapeutic context as well. For example, an understanding of how adults generally perceive children's responses to sexual victimization may be useful for mental health practitioners working with sexually abused children and their families.

The type of empirical studies reviewed in this article

Three types of empirical studies are reviewed in this article. First is a review of studies that have directly questioned jurors about their beliefs regarding the behavior of sexually abused children. Unfortunately, there are only a few studies of this kind. Second is a review of empirical studies that have examined lay people's beliefs generally on such behavior. Since jurors are representative of the lay community, arguably, the views of jurors generally reflect the views of laypersons and vice versa. Third a review is provided of empirical studies that have examined the beliefs and knowledge of the behavior of sexually victimized children among different professional groups such as medical practitioners, law enforcement personnel and psychologists.

The review undertaken in this article focuses predominantly on the beliefs of jurors and the broader community in relation to six specific facets of the behavior of sexually victimized children: (i) delay in disclosure of abuse; (ii) the medium of disclosure including the means by which and persons to whom disclosure has been made; (iii) recantation or retraction of the alleged abuse; (iv) inconsistent or incomplete disclosure of abuse; (v) the victim's continued relationship or contact with the alleged perpetrator; and (vi) the manifestation of overt signs of distress by the victim. These six facets of the behavior of victims of child sexual abuse have previously been identified by the present author (Shackel, 2005) through a review of relevant American and Australian cases as behaviors commonly focused upon in questioning by defense counsel at trial for the purpose of undermining the credibility of the complainant witness.

Relevant empirical research was identified by searching the following databases: Child Abuse, Child Welfare and Adoption; Expanded Academic Index ASAP, PsycArticles; and PsycINFO through to 2006. All research identified as relevant to adult understanding of the six behaviors outlined in the paragraph directly above have been included in this review. All sample types including child victims, adult survivors and experimental manipulations were included.

Empirical studies that have examined jurors' beliefs about the behavior of sexually abused children

Very few empirical studies have directly examined jurors' beliefs and knowledge of child sexual abuse. Morison and Greene (1992) compared the level of knowledge about child sexual abuse in jurors and experts and found jurors were not

adequately informed on many issues relating to child sexual abuse, including the behavior and responses of victims. Morison and Greene's study represents the most extensive and most frequently cited study of this kind. Respondents in this study comprised 150 jurors from Colorado Springs and 50 experts identified on the basis of both research and practical experience in the area of child sexual abuse. Jurors and experts completed a questionnaire consisting of 40 items designed to reveal their understanding of child sexual abuse. This questionnaire was developed from a review of current literature on child sexual abuse. The questionnaire was designed so that subjects were required to state, to the best of their ability, the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of 40 statements. A six-point Likert scale was employed where 1 = strongly agree and 6 = strongly disagree. Topics included definitions of "child sexual abuse"; prevalence; demographics; victim, offender, and offense characteristics; and typical symptoms of and reactions to abuse.

Morison and Greene (1992) concluded that relative to experts, jurors are not well informed on many issues relating to child sexual abuse for which there is consensus in the literature. For example, over half the jurors questioned believed that children are easily manipulated into giving false reports of sexual abuse, most children who are sexually assaulted sustain physical damage, and that consequently there should be physical evidence to corroborate the allegations of sexual abuse. Further, the study found that over a third of jurors believed that child sexual abuse allegations often prove to be false and that a victim would most commonly respond to sexual abuse by resistance, crying for help, or escape. Jurors were also not well informed about some of the characteristics of the victim and offender. For example, about one in five jurors supported the stereotyped image of a child sex abuser as a "Dirty Old Man." A significant number were also equally unaware that child victims often know the perpetrator, children of any age are potential victims, and males are frequently the target of sexual abuse.

Jurors were also not very knowledgeable about several issues relating to the typical characteristics of child sexual abuse. Compared to experts, jurors were not as well informed about the majority of sexual assaults that occur within the home, the lack of physical force or aggressiveness used, or that the most common form of child sexual abuse is fondling. More than 50% of jurors believed anal or vaginal intercourse to be the most common form. In addition, jurors were less likely to perceive that a serious offense is committed even where force is not used or to know that sexual abuse affects victims differently.

Using a strict criterion for scoring (i.e., items marked with "strongly agree" or "strongly disagree" in the direction consistent with research were scored as correct) the mean score for jurors was 24% correct. Using a less strict criterion for scoring (i.e., items marked "agree/disagree" and "strongly agree/strongly disagree" in the direction consistent with research were scored as correct) the mean juror score was 67% correct. In comparison experts scored 59% and 94% respectively.

While the findings of Morison and Greene (1992) clearly indicate that jurors are generally not well informed about child sexual abuse there are some indications that jurors may be better informed on a few specific issues. For example, Morison and Greene found that less than 10% of jurors believed that children invite abuse or that they are at all responsible for its occurrence. Further, 88% of jurors believed that damaging effects on the child might still occur even in the absence of force or physical injury. Jurors also knew that a child who does not display signs of distress might nevertheless be the victim of a sexual assault. However, despite juror understanding of these particular aspects of child sexual abuse, overall the findings of Morison and Greene strongly suggest that jurors are not well informed about many aspects of child sexual victimization and in particular about how children respond to sexual abuse.

Unfortunately, the Morison and Greene (1992) study has some limitations. First, this study is now 14 years old and a comparable extensive study has not been undertaken since. However, doctoral research conducted by Schneider (1994) supports the findings of Morison & Greene. Schneider reported that jurors did not know that children's failure to report, recantation, difficulty with dates and times, and inability to recall specific details of the abuse did not suggest fabrication. In addition, Schneider reported that jurors did not know that many victims do not show fear of the offender.

A second limitation of the Morison and Greene (1992) study is that jurors who participated in this study all lived in one fairly conservative mid-sized city in the United States. This raises the question of whether knowledge and attitudes about child sexual abuse may vary by location. Another issue is whether the knowledge of jurors on this topic has developed since this study and the Schneider (1994) study were undertaken. However, as discussed below, the validity of the findings in these two studies is also supported by more recent studies that have explored the knowledge and attitudes of lay people and the general public to child sexual abuse. It appears from such other studies that many people today continue to be misinformed about the behavior of sexually abused children.

The recent study published by Quas et al. (2005) also confirms that some jurors may be misinformed about aspects of the behavior of sexually abused children. The subjects used in this study included a group of 169 jury-eligible undergraduate students and 148 individuals just dismissed from jury duty at a county courthouse in Southern California. Subjects were administered a questionnaire to assess their beliefs about children's memory, suggestibility, and reactions to sexual abuse including disclosure of sexual abuse. This research suggests that some jurors may not know that sexually abused children do not always disclose their abuse right away (16%); inconsistencies or gradual disclosure in children's claims of sexual abuse do not indicate that such claims are necessarily false (33%); and that retracting claims of sexual abuse does not mean a child's claims are probably false (31%). Additionally, a majority of subjects in this study did not know that a victim of child sexual abuse may deny having been molested even when asked by a trusted adult (57%). Fifty-one percent of respondents specifically stated that children who have been sexually abused will not deny such abuse if asked by a trusted adult. The findings of this study emphasize that jurors' knowledge about the behavior of sexually abused children may be variable, that is, jurors may possess both some accurate and some inaccurate beliefs on the subject. However, the findings of this research certainly confirm that some jurors are likely to hold some misconceptions about the behavior of sexually abused children.

An earlier study conducted by Corder and Whiteside (1988) also suggests that jurors may have some beliefs about child sexual abuse that may prejudice their decision-making in the courtroom. This study administered questionnaires to 101 jurors in a selected county court system in North Carolina. Two findings were particularly significant. First, 85% of jurors believed that a person who sexually abuses a child younger than 5 years of age would probably have to be “mentally-ill” to do so. Second, most jurors stated they would feel more comfortable in reaching a guilty verdict if “any type of concrete, physical evidence” of the abuse were present.

The results of a study conducted by Gabora, Spanos, and Joab (1993) involving mock jurors may not be consistent with the findings of Morison and Greene (1992) and those of Schneider (1994). Gabora et al., in a study that was designed to test the effects of complainant age and expert psychological testimony on juror perceptions of complainant credibility and juror verdicts, administered a questionnaire (Child Sexual Abuse Belief Scale) that primarily assessed whether mock jurors believed that children fabricate false allegations of sexual assault. On the basis of results from the questionnaire the study concluded that while mock jurors, particularly males, held some misconceptions, subjects had relatively few misconceptions about child sexual abuse. Unfortunately, it is not possible to evaluate the findings of this study in a meaningful way as the results relating to the Child Sexual Abuse Belief Scale were not published in any detail.

Findings reported by Gray (1993) are also inconsistent with some of the findings of Morison and Greene (1992) and also Schneider (1994). Gray collected data from 108 jurors, representing 17 cases in five jurisdictions in the United States. Juror attitudes were investigated in this study with a survey developed to measure attitudes and beliefs about certain aspects of child sexual victimization. Response was indicated using a six-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Gray concluded that generally there were few indications of bias evident in the jurors’ responses to the attitude questionnaire administered (if bias is defined as a departure from the current understanding by child abuse researchers and treatment professionals of the issues covered by the questionnaire). In relation to the behavior of sexually abused children specifically, jurors knew that if a parent sexually abuses a child, the child would still show love for that parent. They also knew that delays in reporting child abuse are quite common and did not believe that children who retract an allegation of sexual abuse are likely to have been lying in the first place. Jurors also understood that most child sexual abuse cases involve a relative or someone the child knows and trusts.

The findings reported by Gray (1993) must be viewed extremely cautiously as the respondents in this study completed the questionnaire *after* they had served on a child sexual abuse jury; in every case expert testimony was called. In contrast, the respondents in the Morison and Greene (1992) study completed the questionnaire while awaiting jury selection. Accordingly, it is questionable to what extent the findings in the Gray study reflect beliefs typical of the beliefs held by the respondents prior to their tenure on the jury. The inconsistency between the findings of the Gray study and the findings reported by Morison and Greene may indicate that respondents in the Gray study were better informed about the behavior of sexually abused children because of the educative impact of serving on a child sexual abuse jury and hearing relevant expert testimony. This view is also supported by the findings of a random population survey conducted by Gray at the same time the jury questionnaire was conducted. The random population survey revealed considerable discrepancies between the beliefs of respondents who had already served on a child sexual abuse jury and the general public, the prevailing pattern being that the juror sample was better informed than the general sample.

Empirical studies that have examined lay people’s beliefs about the behavior of sexually abused children

Empirical studies that have examined lay people’s understanding of child sexual abuse suggest, consistent with the findings of Morison and Greene (1992), that there are important aspects of child sexual abuse that are not well understood by the general public. These studies are varied. The majority of studies have focused on selected samples, for example, college students. However, some studies have focused on broader public perceptions and knowledge of child sexual abuse. The generalizability of the results of any one study, particularly where data are taken from a limited demographic sample and geographical area to the general population must always be borne in mind.

Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) examined attitudes and the knowledge of the general public in a rural community about child sexual victimization. This study used a population-based survey to determine the attitudes and beliefs about child sexual abuse in a representative sample of the population of rural Klamath County in Oregon. Interviews were conducted in shopping malls, educational facilities, locations for state and county services, and child and parent centers. Klamath County has consistently been rated by the state of Oregon as having one of the poorest qualities of life for children of any Oregon county because of the high rate of social problems such as teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, child neglect, and child abuse. This study found some deficits in the public’s knowledge of child sexual abuse. The study also found the level of knowledge varied depending on certain demographic characteristics. The groups with the most accurate information about child sexual abuse included women, married persons, parents, older respondents, Anglos and Native Americans, highly educated respondents, and respondents with high incomes.

The findings of Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) are largely consistent with the findings of other studies, although some inconsistencies are apparent with regards to the relationship between knowledge of child sexual abuse and demographic characteristics. For example, Morison and Greene (1992), consistent with Calvert and Munsie-Benson, found women jurors were better informed about child sexual abuse overall and about particular aspects of child sexual abuse than were men. Well-educated jurors were more knowledgeable about child sexual abuse overall and about specific issues than were jurors with a high school education or less. In contrast to Calvert and Munsie-Benson, Morison and Greene found younger jurors

tended to be more knowledgeable on particular issues than were older jurors, although this was not a uniform trend. [Hubbart and Singg \(2001\)](#) and [Trute, Adkins, and McDonald \(1992\)](#) also found women tended to be better informed in relation to child sexual abuse than were men. For example, men seemed to accept the myth that child sexual abuse occurs infrequently and is usually initiated by socially abnormal or deviant individuals.

In a more recent study, [Price et al. \(2001\)](#) also found significant deficits in public perceptions of child abuse generally in a Midwestern urban community. Price et al. found that men were more likely than females to correctly perceive children who were at higher risk of sexual abuse. Further, [Elrod and Rubin \(1993\)](#) found parents were lacking in knowledge on many important facts about sexual abuse. This study found no significant differences between men and women's knowledge of child sexual abuse overall or in relation to specific issues. Interestingly, as [Moser \(2000\)](#) has suggested lay people themselves, may perceive that misconceptions about child sexual abuse abound.

Lay people's beliefs about how children disclose sexual abuse

A study conducted by [Peters \(2001\)](#) supports the view that how children disclose sexual abuse strongly influences perceptions of whether the abuse actually took place. In particular, whether a child delays in disclosing abuse and whether disclosure contains inconsistencies have been identified as particularly influential factors in making an allegation more or less believable ([Berman, Narby, & Cutler, 1995](#); [Ross, Dunning, Togli, & Ceci, 1990](#)).

Research suggests that lay people tend to believe that victims of child sexual abuse will disclose the abuse soon after it has occurred. [Calvert and Munsie-Benson \(1991\)](#) reported that half the respondents in their study believed a child would disclose sexual abuse within a year of such abuse having occurred. Also, respondents in a study conducted by [Finkelhor \(1984\)](#) believed that over a third of sexually victimized children would report their experience soon after the event. Moreover, [Kovera, Borgida, Gresham, Swim, and Gray \(1993\)](#) reported that while only 3% of a student sample believed that delays in reporting child sexual abuse were uncommon, 14% of a community sample believed this to be the case. This difference was statistically significant. This finding suggests that empirical studies which have utilized selected samples such as college students may not be altogether representative of the beliefs and understanding of the broader community. A higher general level of education among students may account for such differences. If this is correct, the broader community may be even less informed on certain aspects of the behavior of sexually abused children than is suggested by empirical research, which has utilized a selected sample only. [Kovera et al.](#) concluded that student responses did provide an adequate representation of community beliefs as well. This conclusion was based on the finding that for 10 out of 17 questions answered in their study there was no significant difference between the responses of both samples. Further, for the remaining seven questions there was only one for which there was high consensus in one group but not the other. More specifically, a greater number of students believed there was uniformity in the psychological reactions and symptoms of sexually abused children than did community members.

Beliefs about the medium of disclosure of child sexual abuse and retraction of allegations

In child sexual assault trials defense counsel frequently questions the complainant's method of disclosing the alleged sexual abuse. This may include suggesting that the way the child disclosed (e.g., over the telephone) and to whom they disclosed (e.g., to a teacher) is not consistent with the alleged sexual assault. There is currently no empirical data available that has specifically examined lay people's beliefs about the methods children might use to disclose sexual abuse and to whom they are most likely to disclose such abuse. Clearly, this area requires some empirical investigation.

There is also little empirical data regarding lay people's beliefs about retraction and recantation of allegations of sexual abuse by children. [Ruben and Thelen \(1996\)](#) found that retraction by the alleged victim reduces the credibility of the alleged victim's report of child sexual abuse. This is consistent with the findings of [Attias and Goodwin \(1985\)](#) that physical and mental health professionals were substantially less likely to report an alleged case of child sexual abuse if the report was subsequently retracted. [Rubin and Thelen](#) suggest that their study may explain the findings of [Attias and Goodwin](#) on the basis that when an alleged victim retracts, adults may have doubts about the veracity of the report of child sexual abuse. [Kovera et al. \(1993\)](#) reported that only 5% of a student sample and 10% of a community sample believed that children who retract their allegations were probably lying in the first place. In comparison only 1% of experts believed this to be the case. However, over half of the student sample believed that children were easily manipulated into giving false reports. Other research also suggests that some people may be sceptical about the truthfulness of allegations of child sexual abuse. For example, 14% of the respondents in the [Calvert and Munsie-Benson \(1991\)](#) study believed children do not usually tell the truth about having been sexually abused. [Quas et al. \(2005\)](#) recently reported that 33% of their sample believed children sometimes make up false claims of sexual abuse to get back at an adult.

Adult expectations of the victim's response to the perpetrator

[Manning and Cheers \(1995\)](#) have confirmed [Schneider's \(1994\)](#) finding that many people are unaware that victims of child sexual abuse do not always show fear of the perpetrator. Manning and Cheers asked respondents what would lead them to think a suspected case of child abuse was not actually a case of abuse. The most common answers included: the respondent knows the family and believes it could not be abuse; the parent-child relationship appears good, and the family presents as

happy and healthy; and the child is behaving normally and looks happy. These findings also suggest that people expect a child who has been sexually abused to display some demonstrable sign of the abuse. Kovera et al. (1993) found that 14% of student and community samples did not believe that if a parent has sexually abused a child the child would still show love for that parent.

Adult beliefs concerning physical, emotional and behavioral indicators of child sexual abuse

Studies of lay people's understanding of child sexual abuse have found that most people believe that sexual abuse will usually be accompanied by physical trauma and behavioral manifestations. For example, 61% of respondents in the Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) study thought physical signs would most often or always be present; and 72% of respondents thought that sexually abused children would always have behavioral changes. Further, 71% of respondents believed that a parent would usually know that their child had been sexually abused. These findings are consistent with those of Quas et al. (2005) who found that 57% of subjects believed that a physical examination by a doctor will almost always show whether or not a child has been sexually abused. Moreover, 41% of subjects in this study believed most children who have been sexually abused display bizarre sexualized behavior (a further 26% of subjects were unsure as to whether most sexually abused children display such behavior).

Peters (2001) reported that 70% of college students studied believed that child sexual abuse always involves intercourse and leaves physical evidence. Additionally, Finkelhor (1984) in a much earlier study reported that 41% of respondents interviewed thought force was involved in most cases of child sexual abuse. McKinsey (1993) reported that when medical evidence was absent, laypersons believed significantly less often than did psychologists or child sexual abuse experts that the abuse had occurred. Further, Jackson and Nutall (1993) found that subjects were more confident that abuse had taken place where the child demonstrated behavioral changes deemed to be consistent with sexual abuse. Also, Manning and Cheers (1995) reported that a majority of respondents who were asked to identify what would lead them to think that an alleged case of abuse was an actual case of abuse looked for either physical or behavioral/emotional indicators. These findings are consistent with recent research which indicates that adults tend to expect victims of child sexual abuse to respond in a negative way to the abuse and to display overt changes in their emotional and behavioral functioning following such abuse including sadness, anger, fear, and nervousness (Holguin, 2003). Moreover, Ruben and Thelen (1996) reported considerable confusion among respondents as to why victims of child sexual abuse do not resist such abuse. These findings lend further support to the view that lay people do not understand sufficiently well the unique nature of child sexual abuse, its underlying dynamics, and the likely responses of children to such abuse.

Empirical studies that have examined the beliefs and knowledge of professionals regarding the behavior of sexually abused children

Several studies have examined beliefs and attitudes regarding child sexual abuse among different professional groups. These studies reveal that beliefs and knowledge about how children respond to child sexual victimization among professionals is mixed. However, many professionals are not well informed on this issue. Arguably, if many professionals (particularly those that have had some training in child sexual abuse or related fields) are poorly informed about the behavior of sexually abused children, there is no reason to believe that lay people would be any better informed on this issue. As expected, research indicates that professionals who work in the field of child sexual abuse are the most knowledgeable group in the community regarding child sexual victimization. Peters (2001) for example, found child sexual abuse experts were more aware of up-to-date research on child sexual abuse than were lay people. An expert was defined as a mental health professional with a Master's degree or higher who had conducted at least 50 child sexual abuse evaluations in the past 5 years, or 100 or more in his/her lifetime.

Other health and human services professionals may not be so well informed on this subject. Hibbard and Zollinger (1990) examined knowledge about child sexual abuse among physicians, nurses, child protective workers, lawyers, law enforcement officers, and psychologists who professionally interact with child sexual abuse cases. On several of the items, more than 20% of the professionals were incorrectly informed. For example, 28.4% of the professionals incorrectly thought most sexual abuse involved physical force; over 25% incorrectly indicated that most sexual abuse of children involved intercourse; and many professionals did not know that many sexually abused children have no abnormal findings on physical examination. Psychologists and social workers tended to be better informed than other professionals. This latter finding is consistent with the findings of Morison and Greene (1992) discussed below, who also found that mental health experts working in the field of child sexual abuse were well informed on many aspects of such abuse. Holguin (2003), however, reported that many professionals (including mental health professionals, and law enforcement investigators, physicians, child protection service workers, attorneys, and judges) believe that victims of child sexual abuse will manifest negative emotional and behavioral symptoms in response to such abuse.

Child sexual abuse experts

Morison and Greene (1992) examined the level of knowledge and understanding of child sexual abuse among mental health experts working in this field. The names of experts were obtained through a review of relevant literature and mental

Table 1
Summary of research findings on adult beliefs about the behavioral responses of children to sexual victimization

Behavior	Jurors	Laypersons	Professionals
1. Delay in disclosure of abuse	<p>Poorly informed Many jurors may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> believe delay in disclosure is uncommon and is indicative of fabrication not be aware that children are reluctant to report sexual abuse <p>Morison and Greene (1992) Schneider (1994) Quas et al. (2005) (to a lesser extent)</p>	<p>Poorly informed Many lay people may believe that delay in disclosure is uncommon</p> <p>Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) Finkelhor (1984) Kovera et al. (1993) (to a lesser extent) Quas et al. (2005)</p>	<p>Poorly informed Some professionals may believe that delay in disclosure is not common</p> <p>Hibbard and Zollinger (1990)</p>
2. Medium of disclosure of abuse	<p>Not examined empirically Research is needed</p>	<p>Not examined empirically Research is needed</p>	<p>Not examined empirically Research is needed</p>
3. Recantation or retraction of alleged abuse	<p>Poorly informed</p> <p>Many jurors may believe retraction or recantation is not common and is indicative of fabrication Morison and Greene (1992) Schneider (1994) Quas et al. (2005)</p>	<p>Insufficient data</p> <p>Further research is needed Some lay people may believe that retraction is indicative of fabrication Ruben and Thelen (1996) Kovera et al. (1993) Quas et al. (2005)</p>	<p>Not examined empirically</p> <p>Research is needed</p>
4. Inconsistent or incomplete disclosure	<p>Poorly informed</p> <p>Many jurors may believe inconsistent or incomplete disclosure is not common and is indicative of fabrication Morison and Greene (1992) Schneider (1994) Quas et al. (2005)</p>	<p>Poorly informed</p> <p>Many people may believe that inconsistencies in disclosure of sexual abuse suggest fabrication Ross et al. (1990) Quas et al. (2005)</p>	<p>Not examined empirically</p> <p>Research is needed</p>
5. Victim's relationship with perpetrator	<p>Insufficient data</p> <p>Further research is needed Many jurors may not know that children often do not show fear of the alleged offender</p> <p>Schneider (1994)</p>	<p>Poorly informed</p> <p>Many people may not be aware that victims of child sexual abuse do not always show fear of the perpetrator Manning and Cheers (1995)</p> <p>Kovera et al. (1993) (to a lesser extent)</p>	<p>Insufficient data</p> <p>Further research is needed Many professionals may believe that a victim who is sexually abused by a parent will not show love for that parent Morison and Greene (1992) (but compare Lentsch and Johnson (2000) who reported that a majority of physicians believed sexually abused children do not want to leave home or break up the family)</p>
6. Overt manifestations of distress	<p>Partly informed Many jurors may know a victim of child sexual abuse need not necessarily show signs of distress. However, many jurors may believe that children typically react to abuse by trying to resist, cry for help or escape Morison and Greene (1992)</p>	<p>Poorly informed Many people may believe that sexually abused children will always have behavioral changes</p> <p>Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) Jackson and Nutall (1993) Manning and Cheers (1995)</p>	<p>Poorly informed Many professionals may believe victims of child sexual abuse will manifest negative emotional and behavioral symptoms Holguin (2003)</p>

Table 1 (Continued)

Behavior	Jurors	Laypersons	Professionals
7. The dynamics & nature of child sexual abuse generally	Partly informed Corder and Whiteside (1988) Price et al. (2001) Morison and Greene (1992) Gray (1993) Schneider (1994) Quas et al. (2005)	Partly informed Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991) Elrod and Rubin (1993) Kovera et al. (1993) Gray (1993) Hubbarrt and Singg (2001) Trute et al. (1992) Quas et al. (2005)	Partly informed Mental health professionals tend to be better informed than other professionals. Some research findings suggest that there are some areas in which professional knowledge of child sexual abuse is lacking Boat and Everson (1988) Hibbard and Zollinger (1990) Trute et al. (1992)

health directories. Only those persons who had published at least three articles within the last 5 years and/or whose primary focus of study or clinical experience was sexually abused children were selected. Morison and Greene found experts were well informed and demonstrated strong consensus in their views on most issues related to child sexual abuse. Of the 40 items on the Child Sexual Abuse Questionnaire utilized in this study, the majority of items (29) reflected considerable consensus among the experts. Of these 29 items, 20 attained a consensus level of 96% or better and 9 were unanimously supported (100% consensus). In particular, experts demonstrated a high level of consensus in their beliefs regarding the behavior of sexually abused children.

Experts in this study unanimously agreed that the majority of attacks against children did not occur on the streets or on school grounds, the stereotyped “Dirty Old Man” is an inaccurate description of the typical abuser, the sexually abused child is not usually physically damaged as a result of the force used in the assault, a serious offense may have been committed even if the perpetrator did not use force, and retraction of allegations of sexual abuse is not indicative of fabrication. There was also strong agreement among experts with respect to the fact that (i) many children are reluctant to report an incident of sexual abuse and that many children delay in reporting the abuse; (ii) a complainant who provides inconsistent testimony about the alleged abuse should not consequently be considered an unreliable witness; (iii) a child who has been sexually abused will not always display signs of distress; and (iv) children do not typically respond to sexual abuse by forcible resistance, crying for help, or attempted escape.

Further, experts generally agreed that child sexual abuse impacts upon victims differently, allegations of sexual abuse are infrequently proved false, the majority of child sexual abuse offenses occur in the home and that the majority of victims are abused by someone who is familiar to them, the majority of child sexual abuse cases do not involve some form of violence or aggressiveness on the part of the abuser, and that in most cases of child sexual abuse there is no physical evidence to corroborate the allegation.

Kovera et al. (1993) also reported a high level of consensus in the beliefs of experts regarding the behavior of sexually abused children. Respondents in this study were members of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies who self-reported as experts on the basis of their familiarity with literature on child sexual abuse. One hundred and fifty six experts participated via a mail questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 35 statements covering topics such as child abuse and the family, offender characteristics, children’s eyewitness memory, the prosecution of child sexual abuse, and general attitudes about child sexual abuse. Twenty six of these statements dealt with issues experts may be asked to address in child sexual abuse cases. Respondents indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement with each statement on a six-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Expert consensus on an issue was determined by examining whether 80% or more of the sample agreed with a statement. In this study, experts unanimously agreed that the clear majority of child sexual abuse cases involve a relative or someone the child knows and trusts. There was also general acceptance among the experts that delays in reporting child sexual abuse to the police or other authorities was quite common; if a child is sexually abused by a parent, the child will still show love for that parent; and that retraction of an allegation of sexual abuse by a child is not indicative of fabrication.

A high level of consensus among child sexual abuse experts on many issues relating to child sexual victimization, and more specifically, the behavior of sexually abused children suggests that there is a high degree of professional acceptance of this knowledge. This is important in establishing the reliability, in a forensic setting, of expert evidence on this subject. However, experts may not be aware that other professionals and laypersons generally do not clearly understand the dynamics of child sexual assault, and this may impact the work of such experts within a legal and therapeutic context.

Medical and health professionals

A few studies have examined beliefs about child sexual abuse among physicians and other medical and health professionals. The findings are somewhat mixed. Marshall and Locke (1977) found a lack of consistency in understanding among

Table 2
Geographical distribution of studies reviewed in this article

Study	Issue(S) examined in study	Geographical origin of sample studied
Attias and Goodwin (1985)	Knowledge of private practice professionals on incest and management strategies in such cases	Large Southwest City, U.S.A.
Boat and Everson (1988)	Professional use of anatomical dolls and their interpretation of children's interaction with such dolls in child sexual abuse evaluations	North Carolina, U.S.A.
Calvert and Munsie-Benson (1991)	Knowledge of general public about child sexual victimization	Klamath County, Oregon, U.S.A.
Corder and Whiteside (1988)	Juror beliefs regarding child sexual abuse	North Carolina, U.S.A.
Elrod and Rubin (1993)	Parental knowledge of child abuse	Montgomery County, Maryland, U.S.A.
Everson et al. (1996)	Professionals' beliefs regarding the truthfulness of allegations of child sexual abuse	North Carolina, U.S.A.
Gabora et al. (1993)	Effects of complainant age & expert psychological testimony on juror perceptions of complainant credibility and juror verdicts	Ottawa, Canada
Gray (1993)	Juror attitudes and beliefs to child sexual victimization	Five jurisdictions across U.S.A.
Hibbard and Zollinger (1990)	Knowledge on child sexual abuse among physicians, nurses, child protective workers, lawyers, law enforcement officers & psychologists	Indiana, U.S.A.
Hicks and Tite (1998)	Professionals' views about the characteristics and credibility of sexual abuse victims	Newfoundland, Canada
Holguin (2003)	Professionals' expectations of sexually abused children across various domains	Throughout U.S.A.
Hubbatt and Singg (2001)	Attitudinal differences between legal & social science professionals regarding child sexual abuse	Georgetown, Texas, U.S.A.
Jackson and Nutall (1993)	Impact of specific personal and case factors on clinicians' judgments about child sexual abuse allegations	Throughout U.S.A.
Kovera et al. (1993)	Beliefs held by experts about child sexual abuse and children's capabilities as witnesses	Throughout U.S.A.
Lentsch and Johnson (2000)	Whether physician knowledge and biases regarding child sexual abuse had changed since 1986	Columbus, Ohio, U.S.A.
Manning and Cheers (1995)	Knowledge and attitudes to various aspects of child abuse notifications	Small remote town, central western Queensland, Australia
Marshall and Locke (1977)	Physician attitudes and practices in controversial areas of child abuse and neglect	Arizona, U.S.A.
McKinsey (1993)	Beliefs about child sexual abuse among laypersons, psychologists and child sexual abuse experts	Florida, U.S.A.
Morison and Greene (1992)	Juror & expert knowledge of child sexual abuse	Colorado Springs, U.S.A.
Peters (2001)	Effect of certain variables including disclosure on decision-making by experts and laypersons when confronted with an abuse allegation	Metropolitan New York, U.S.A.
Price et al. (2001)	Public perceptions of child abuse	Midwestern urban community, U.S.A.
Quas et al. (2005)	Juror & college students' beliefs of children's memory, suggestibility and reactions to interrogation and child sexual abuse	California, U.S.A.
Ruben and Thelen (1996)	Factors that impact community attitudes towards allegations of child sexual abuse	Small city and surrounding rural areas in Missouri, U.S.A.
Saunders (1988)	Beliefs held by different professionals about perpetrators and victims of child sexual abuse	Large urban county in an eastern state, U.S.A.
Schneider (1994)	Judicial, juror & expert knowledge on typical reactions to child sexual abuse	Pennsylvania, U.S.A.
Trute et al. (1992)	Attitudes of police, child welfare & A community health professionals to professional responses to child sexual abuse	Rural area, Manitoba, Canada

physicians in relation to physical findings in cases of child sexual abuse. Respondents in this study estimated that physical examinations would yield positive findings of sexual abuse over 35% of the time. The range of responses on this issue was 2 to 95%. Hibbard and Zollinger (1990) reported that 32% of nurses believed that most sexual abuse involves force and almost 27% believed that most sexual abuse of children includes intercourse.

On the other hand, Lentsch and Johnson (2000) reported that the vast majority (96.7%) of physicians surveyed believed that sexually abused children do not wish to leave home and break up the family. Lentsch and Johnson also reported that 80% of the physicians surveyed believed that the majority of fathers who sexually abuse their children are mentally ill.

Law related professionals

Research suggests that law enforcement and legal professionals' knowledge and attitudes about child sexual abuse are varied. Hartman, Karlson, and Hibbard (1994) found, that defense lawyers and prosecutors have different attitudes concerning acts associated with child sexual abuse. Prosecuting lawyers were more likely to describe behavior as sexual abuse than were defense lawyers. This difference is explicable in light of the opposing roles of prosecuting and defense counsel.

Saunders (1988) compared attitudes among child welfare workers, police officers, district attorneys, public offenders, and judges toward child sexual abuse. This study found that respondents believed that child victims are not to be held blameworthy for sexual assaults made against them. However, Everson, Boat, Bourg, and Robertson (1996) reported that judges and law enforcement officers were significantly more sceptical of children's reports of child sexual abuse than were mental health and child protection service workers. Hicks and Tite (1998) also reported that police found children's allegations of sexual abuse less credible than did social workers. Trute et al. (1992) found that police officers, compared to other human service professionals, tended to believe that perpetrators of child sexual abuse were individuals who stood out in some way from the general population and were perceived as coming from deviant sectors of the population. Since the bulk of police officers in the study were male and the bulk of other human service professionals, for example social workers, in the study were female, the interdisciplinary differences with respect to this issue could in part be explained by gender differences. Even when controlled for gender this difference although moderated in part was still statistically significant.

Research findings suggest law enforcement personnel may be seriously misinformed on some aspects of child sexual abuse. Hibbard and Zollinger (1990) reported that over 32% of law enforcement professionals believed that most sexual abuse of children involves physical force. Over 25% believed that children who have been sexually abused usually tell someone soon after the abuse. Over 32% believed that most sexual abuse of children includes intercourse and over 60% did not know that a sexually abused child can have a physical examination with no abnormal findings. Further, Boat and Everson (1988) reported that child protection and law enforcement professionals viewed behavioral and emotional symptoms as "very convincing" evidence of child sexual abuse.

Conclusions and implications of the findings of empirical research

This review shows that many people in society, including some professionals, believe that delay in disclosure, retraction, and inconsistent reporting of sexual abuse are uncommon and are indicative of fabrication of allegations of sexual abuse; usually victims of child sexual abuse are fearful of the perpetrator; and most children will display clear behavioral indicators of sexual abuse. Further, many people also believe that most cases of child sexual abuse involve physical force and sexual intercourse, and that physical findings will usually exist. These findings are consistent with the view that many adults, including judges and jurors within a legal setting, may lack knowledge of the behavior of sexually abused children.

The existing empirical research provides important insights into the beliefs and knowledge of the community at large about the dynamics of child sexual abuse. However, it is also clear that current research in this area is far from exhaustive and that more research needs to be undertaken in order to further clarify some dimensions of adults' understanding of child sexual abuse. For example, the available empirical research reveals very little about people's knowledge of the medium of disclosure of child sexual abuse. Also, the majority of studies that have been conducted in this area are now at least 10 years old so there is also a need for more up to date research in this area that confirms the current beliefs held by adults. Nevertheless, the review undertaken in this article tells us a lot about the beliefs of adults concerning the behavior of sexually abused children and certainly that misunderstandings on this subject are pervasive (Tables 1 and 2).

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