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ARTICLE

Child sexual abuse and social identity loss: A qualitative analysis of survivors' public accounts

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Abstract

Emerging evidence suggests that social identities are an important determinant of adaptation following traumatic life experiences. In this paper, we analyse accounts of people who experienced child sexual abuse. Using publicly available talk of people who waived their right to anonymity following successful conviction of perpetrators, we conducted a thematic analysis focusing on trauma-related changes in their social identities. Analysis of these accounts highlighted two themes. The first highlights the acquisition in these accounts of unwanted and damaging identity labels. The second presents child sexual abuse as a key destructive force in terms of important identity work during childhood. Discussion of this analysis centres on the pathological consequences of social identity change. Both the loss of valued identities and the acquisition of aberrant and isolating identities are experienced and constructed as devastating by those affected by child sexual abuse. This has important implications, not only for those impacted by child sexual abuse but for how abuse is discussed in society, and how it is approached by policy makers, educators and individuals working with survivors and their families.

KEYWORDS

childhood sexual abuse, psychological trauma, SIMTIC, social identity, social identity loss

BACKGROUND

Increasingly, social psychologists in the field of trauma are finding that individual-level traumatic experiences are associated with changes in social identities (Muldoon et al., 2019). These trauma-driven identity changes are important potential processes in terms of subsequent psychological adaptation. However, despite the evidence emphasizing the role of contextual and relational factors in determining adult adaption following an abusive childhood (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008), social psychological analyses of the phenomenon remain limited. In this paper, we consider survivors' own descriptions of the social identity consequences of their childhood sexual abuse in publicly available confirmed cases of child sexual abuse in Ireland. We use a social identity lens to explore survivors' public accounts of their experience of childhood sexual abuse and consider how identity processes can help and hinder adaptation to trauma.

Trauma and the (re)construction of identity

The lived experience of child sexual abuse and its ensuing impact on identity is profoundly shaped by social processes (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985; Kennedy & Prock, 2018). There is also increasing acceptance that understanding trauma trajectories is aided by a social and community lens (Hobfoll, 2011; Norris et al., 2008). Using a group-based lens, the social identity approach of traumatic identity change (SIMTIC; Muldoon et al., 2019) highlights how identities are relevant to post-traumatic responses. For example, gaining new identities can foster growth and reduce PTS symptomology among those who have experienced traumatic brain injury (Griffin et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2011), have survived Australian bushfires (Craig et al., 2022) and experienced gender-based violence (Haslam et al., 2022). On the other hand, trauma that results in the loss of social identities or results in the acquisition of new stigmatized identities such as those often borne by those affected by child abuse (Lashkay et al., 2023) has a negative impact on PTS and resilience (Kellezi et al., 2019; Muldoon et al., 2021).

Group memberships and social identities are important resources that can mediate the relationships between traumatic experiences and post-traumatic stress, resilience and post-traumatic growth (Muldoon et al., 2019). Importantly, disconnection from family and social groups (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008), lower ability to identify with other survivors (Lashkay et al., 2023) and poorer social integration (McMahon et al., 2022) have adverse implications for health in those affected by adverse childhood experiences. In this way, the loss of social identity resources is particularly relevant to the study of both children and adult survivors of child abuse. Building on this approach we suggest that perceived change in social identities and related resources are central to post-traumatic trajectories in those affected by child sexual abuse.

In this study, we specifically chose to analyse public accounts of survivors. In Ireland, the location of this study, the identity of those accused of child sexual abuse is protected during a trial in large part to protect victims from social stigma. Waiving this anonymity after the successful conviction of a perpetrator is a public act and offers insight into survivors' subjectivity and material embodied lived experience (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). Speaking publicly is also significant identity work (Wetherell, 1998) and so public talk is an ideal place to explore how these individuals manage and construct their identity. Identity constructions are constrained and shaped by the context within which they take place and so speaking from the identity position, survivor of abuse, makes these public accounts particularly germane to our research question. Previous work has shown how exploring public constructions and management of identity is particularly informative of the experiences of those who have been through traumatic adverse life events (Giles, 2006; Muldoon et al., 2023). Furthermore, a review exploring the impact of stigma on female survivors of child sexual abuse highlights the constraints against seeking help because of the personal and stigmatized nature of the trauma (Kennedy & Prock, 2018). Exploring how these issues are managed in public statements by those who disclosed their experience of child sexual abuse is therefore an important addition to the literature.

These data are highly appropriate for another reason. Social identities taken up and performed through talk are not inert – they are dynamic and world making (Reicher, 2004). In comparison to researcher-led interview data, these real-world data harvested from radio interviews and podcasts tell us what speakers themselves consider to be the most important aspects of their experience. It also offers a window into what speakers prioritize for the attention of the wider public. There is no doubt that our speakers are a resilient group having survived abuse, made a complaint as an adult and sought and secured justice. But there is more at stake for the speakers in this public arena (Potter, 1996) and so they often speak from an identity position which often seeks social change (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017; Reicher, 2004; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, 2001). For this reason, we believe our analysis of these accounts have the capacity to offer insight into social identity processes that have helped and hindered their adaptation to trauma.

The relevance of social identities to the study of childhood sexual abuse

Childhood sexual abuse is remarkably commonplace. Available international research indicates abusers are most often parents or other trusted adults in position of power in the victim's life (Cappelleri et al., 1993). While the definition of sexual abuse can vary within studies, best estimates based on 55 studies in 24 countries suggest prevalence ranges from 8% to 31% for girls and 3% to 17% for boys. Nine girls and three boys out of every 100 are victims of forced intercourse (Barth et al., 2013). In Ireland, among a representative sample, one in five women and one in six men reported experiencing sexual abuse (McGee et al., 2002). People who have experienced childhood sexual abuse must make sense of the contradiction between a world where they experience sexual violence routinely and wider social constructions that represent childhood sexual abuse and abusers as exceptional.

Despite the endemic nature of child abuse, abusers, particularly those who perpetrate child sexual abuse, are often represented as monsters in the public imagination (Kitzinger, 2004; Meyer, 2010). Constructing abuse in societal dialogue in this way can affect victims' own sense of themselves. Equally constructing abuse or abusers as exceptional isolates and 'others' those affected by childhood sexual abuse (Meyer, 2010). The violation of social norms and the silencing of conversations around sexual abuse particularly in front of children can exacerbate a sense that children may have that they are different, unusual and even stigmatized because of their abuse (Lashkay et al., 2023). In this way, child sexual abuse can be seen as a complex trauma (Kliethermes et al., 2014). Children subjected to abuse may over time come to accept their abusive situation as normative, leading children to passively accept the abusive situation adding to both the complexity and chronicity of the situation (Ellis, 2019). Feelings of shame and humiliation are not unusual (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012). This can lead to victims being blamed, by both themselves and/or others, for their own abuse. Being a survivor of child sexual abuse can therefore be seen as a stigmatized identity by the person themselves (Lashkay et al., 2023) and a mark of shame that is experienced as something to be hidden. A key challenge for those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse is to negotiate this stigmatized identity (Kennedy & Prock, 2018) which can be explored by examining their talk in social interaction. We consider these individuals cannot avoid negotiating the stigmatizing nature of the trauma they have experienced while speaking on a public platform.

Identities are not static aspects of our inner selves but rather change in response to time and experience. In this way, social identities can be understood to be evolving constructions, created and recreated through everyday social interactions and experiences (Willig, 2013). Discourse and survivors' narratives can be a useful window into these identity-related enactments and constructions (Muldoon et al., 2023). They offer a window into what it means to be a member of a particular group, be that a child, family or club member or a victim of abuse. As children mature into adulthood, their understanding of the constructions of their abuse, and any associated stigma, may in fact change. For example, though abusers may use the stigma of abuse to maintain control over their victims, the power of the (abusive) adult over the child may recede (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Equally being able to circumscribe a stigmatized identity into a delineated period of life can offer a form of psychological protection (Walter et al., 2015). A perception that traumatic experiences resulted in the loss of a valued identity-based period of life on

the other hand could have a very damaging effect. Whether or not such changes in social identity constructions arise because of the experience of childhood sexual abuse is an important gap in the literature and is explored here.

The present study

The social identity perspective is increasingly applied to understanding traumatic contexts (Drury, 2018; Muldoon et al., 2019). However, to date, no research has explored how changes in the construction of social identities are experienced and managed by affected groups such as survivors of child sexual abuse. The aim of this research therefore is to explore how the presence and presentation of social identity change is linked to the negotiation of traumatic experiences. In this study, we examine the identity dimensions of narratives of individuals who were victims of child sexual abuse. We do this for two reasons. Firstly, we believe resistance to stigmatizing labels and identities presents a challenge for those affected by child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse has significant negative individual consequences; however, the ability to harness social identities to mitigate the impact of abuse is hampered by the stigmatized nature of the trauma (Muldoon et al., 2021). Adopting a stigmatized label is also often resisted when ascribed to people in response to circumstances or events that arise from the actions of others (Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2020; Muldoon et al., 2023). Understanding how, from a position of trauma, victims of child sexual abuse who disclose their experience negotiate these identity processes offers a unique opportunity to contribute to our understanding of the social psychological foundations of trauma.

Secondly, there is increasing evidence that the perpetration of this violence is socially situated. This makes a social identity framework particularly appropriate as it attends to issues of power and positionality that often accompany stigmatized trauma (Kellezi et al., 2019). Perpetrators can use the power associated with their identity positions to enact the abuse (Chui & Dietz, 2014). This power is often derived from shared assumptions about identity-based relationships (such as adult and child, father and daughter, coach and player) where the perpetrators are cast as protectors (Levine & Manning, 2013). As a result, people fail to see victims' vulnerability (Levine, 1999; Manning et al., 2007). Although these identity processes are likely to be relevant, they are not amenable to quantitative metrification. This, and ethical concerns about the role of power and positionality in the construction of child sexual abuse, is the key reason we approached our work using a qualitative framework. Drawing on publicly available data, we completed a thematic analysis of survivors' talk where their abusers were convicted. This allowed us to take a reflexive approach that acknowledged and appraised our role and power in the analysis of this data corpus. The analysis pertains to those cases where the victims engaged with the public after forgoing their right to anonymity (Muldoon et al., 2019). As such survivors were constructing, performing and negotiating the social identities that were germane to their trauma, as well as to the wider national audience with whom they share their story. We use these accounts then to examine whether there is evidence of a social identity change in the narratives of survivors of child sexual abuse in Ireland.

METHOD

Ethics statement

All of the data that formed the basis of our study were in the public domain, so ethical approval was not required to source the data. Prior to commencing the study, we reviewed the ethical issues that arose with our project advisory group and our local ethics committee. Based on this review it was agreed that we could proceed with the study with due care and ethical sensitivity. As a courtesy and to ensure that our speakers were not unduly upset, we contacted all of the speakers cited in the paper once our analysis was complete. Feedback where received was positive.

Selection and inclusion of data

We searched for survivors of child sexual abuse who waived their right to anonymity and spoke publicly about their experience after successful prosecution of the perpetrator. In order to restrict the data corpus to a manageable size, the inclusion criteria were limited to cases of child sexual abuse brought to court within the Republic of Ireland since the first case in Ireland where a survivor of sexual violence waived her right to anonymity and spoke publicly in 1993. The definition of child sexual abuse is surprisingly ambiguous (Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). Hence, we drew on an international definition of child sexual abuse – 'includes sexual acts with a child under the age of 18 that involve direct physical contact and/or noncontact sexual acts, in which there is no or limited capacity to provide true consent' (Noll, 2021). This returned 12 cases which involved 25 individuals.

Once specific cases were identified that met the inclusion criteria, the search was expanded to retrieve recordings of interviews, documentaries and public statements made by these survivors. We retrieved a total of 9 hr, 17 min and 8 s of publicly available data before 30 August 2022. In all the cases uncovered, the perpetrators were already known to the victim and the abuse occurred within families, by a friend of the family or with institutions such as schools, religious organizations and sports groups. For more details of the data, individual cases, media platforms, date and length, see Table S1 in Supporting Information.

Analytic framework

This study employed a reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) approach, which situates people's meaning making and knowledge production within social, cultural and historical contexts and embraces the researchers' subjectivity as a resource for the interpretation of the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that generates themes based on patterns of shared understandings while also allowing for the recognition of material reality. Specifically, this analysis took a critical realist perspective that acknowledged an ontological reality that is independent of people's perceptions, theories and constructions, while also drawing on an epistemology that recognizes that our understanding of the material reality is mediated through shared discourses and influenced by social power (Pilgrim, 2020). This framework affords a deductive, top-down approach, which is theoretically informed by the social identity approach to trauma (Drury, 2018; Muldoon et al., 2019), combined with an inductive bottom-up focus on personal descriptions of survivors' constructions of their past and present social identities. Although epistemologically distinct, our analytic framework also borrowed from critical discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998). Hence, we explored the action orientation of the subjectivities taken up and the identities constructed and performed.

As noted, reflexive TA assumes the subjectivities of the researchers to be a valuable resource through which the data are interpreted. In this regard, we are a mixed-gender research team, who approached the data from an outsider position because none of us have spoken publicly about experiencing sexual abuse as a child or been in a position where we brought legal charges against a perpetrator. However, some of us may have undeclared adverse childhood experiences but we did not press each other to disclose personal information. In other words, we are naive about the experiences of those in the public spotlight because of a contentious and sensitive personal issue. We positioned ourselves as empathetic, respectful and interested in the speakers analysed here.

Procedure

All recorded talks and interviews were downloaded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo12. The analysis followed five iterative steps. Firstly, the lead analyst immersed themselves in the data by watching the videos, listening to the recordings and reading and re-reading the transcripts until they were highly familiar with their content. Secondly, codes were allocated to the data primarily exploring the identity work done

through the discourse, how the speakers positioned themselves and constructed their group memberships and social identities. Initial notes, broader thoughts and annotations were also generated and compiled across the data. Thirdly, examples relevant to the research question, of social identity construction, positioning and talk about group memberships, were extracted from the data and were shared and reviewed by the full team. These provisional extracts were labelled and compiled in a separate document and formed the basis for the final themes. Fourthly, comparisons between the extracts, across the talk of individual speakers and between speakers, were made by the first and second authors. Although the intention was to highlight commonalities based on the codes, we also explored idiosyncratic themes. Hence, the data were further interrogated for deviant cases that contradicted analytic narrative (Wiggins & Potter, 2020). Finally, the research team discussed and explored the broader social-cultural and political context pertaining to child sexual abuse in Ireland and considered these specific cases. The themes and strongest supporting extracts were then agreed upon by consensus with due regard to the overarching analytic interpretation.

RESULTS

This analysis highlighted two entwined themes. The first highlights how child sexual abuse is bound up in the acquisition of unwanted and damaging identity positions. The second theme highlights how sexual abuse is perceived to have undermined participation and engagement with identities during childhood and how this leads to a construction of childhood as an identity period lost to survivors.

Theme 1: 'It was spoken about so casually': Acquisition of a devalued group membership

The first theme '*It was spoken about so casually: acquisition of a devalued group membership* speaks to how unwanted identity labels and dysfunctional group processes lie at the heart of survivors' experience and negotiation of their abuse. Those abused recall wider social acceptance of abuse practices within their familial and social groups. The negative effects of their abuse were presented as having been compounded by a shared understanding among victims, perpetrators and witnesses that they were willing participants in or at least failed to resist, their own abuse. In so doing, the person who was abused was constructed as the problem and the situation that gave rise to the abuse was unremarkable.

Extract 1 is taken from an interview with a survivor Fiona Doyle who was sexually abused for 10 years from the age of 6 by her father Patrick O'Brien. The extract shows how Fiona's mother drawing on a patriarchal construction of women and girls imposed an identity label which depicted Fiona as an active participant in the abuse.

Extract 1 (Fiona Doyle on East Coast FM 2nd June 2015):
1. F: You see my mum was always saying it to me. My mum would say to me
2. from the from the age of very young you're sleeping with your father.
3. I: what.
4. F: Yeah, you're your father's whore. She'd kick my father out and she'd say
5. take your whore with you.

Fiona recalls the derogatory term – 'whore' – used by her mother to describe her. Fiona recalls her sexual abuse with her father as something, at least by her mother's account, that she was an active participant in: 'you're sleeping with your father' (2). Fiona recollects her father was, at times, kicked out of the family home by her mother. Notably her recall of her mother's anger towards her father seems to be more akin to anger over infidelity, rather than anger over incestuous relationship with his young daughter. Indeed, Fiona's identity as a daughter to her mother appears to be lost to her. A patriarchal script is recalled that paints her as a sexual being in competition with her mother for

her father's attention. This construction of Fiona's situation minimizes her father's actions while at the same time justifies Fiona's categorization with the misogynistic slur of 'whore'. The strategic deployment of this derogatory group or category label to encourage her father to take 'his whore' embeds and normalizes this unwanted label understood and shared by both her parents. Fiona did not only experience traumatic sexualization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) but she was also burdened with an inappropriate and offensive label-based shared social identity-based understanding of gender relations. This identity construction reshapes the deviant and abusive situation to misattribute blame to the powerless child victim.

In another interview, Fiona went on to recount how her father framed her sexual abuse for the rest of the family. In so doing his abusive behaviour became unremarkable and hidden in plain sight.

Extract 2 (Fiona Doyle on Shattered Lives, Irish Mirror Newspaper Podcast 4th June 2021)*:*
1. Yeah, he spoke about it like it was so casual, but that's how, that was how it
2. was spoken about in our house. It was spoken over the kitchen table. It was
3. spoken about so casually like um it was nothing and his attitude um was the
4. same attitude that was bred into everybody in my family as in my brothers and
5. sisters. So, nobody saw it as rape of a child.

Fiona recalls her abuse being 'spoken over the kitchen table'. This suggests that it was an accepted part of family life, so much so that it could be talked about 'casually' and was not secret or hidden from other family members. Fiona describes how her father's view of her sexual abuse being 'nothing' was 'bred into everybody in my family'. As she recounts her family's casual minimizing of her rape and abuse, she states that she believes that all her family had 'the same attitude'. Her claim that no one in the family viewed it as 'the rape of a child' is something that she claims was pervasive because of her father's influence. So, as she looks back, she realizes it was not that the rest of the family did not see it, it was that none of them saw her rape for what it was. Indeed, this speaks to the dysfunctional dynamics that Fiona believes were in play in this family group. Although previous research has shown how patriarchal family structures with rigid gender roles function to maintain the silence of the victims of child sexual abuse (Alaggia et al., 2019), here we see that shared social understandings, 'bred into them' as it were, within a family unit is perceived by the victim as minimizing their traumatic experiences at the same time as camouflaging the abusive behaviour of the perpetrator. Her family group is devalued, at least in hindsight.

In the next example, we can see how those who are sexually abused also recounted a distorted and damaged sense of non-family groups of which they were part. A sports coach, Bill Kenneally, sexually abused at least 10 teenage boys at times, carrying out the sexual abuse in groups of four (extract 7). Again, his victims, who were members of a basketball group of which Kenneally had oversight, recall a normative or shared acceptance of the sexual abuse.

Extract 3 (Paul Walsh on Prime Time RTE 3rd May 2016):
1. you were after hearing the rumours from older fellows in the club that this
2. went down so I think it was kind of normalised it. Wasn't just us, it was
3. what he did.

In extract 3, Paul Walsh, who was systematically sexually abused as a teenager over a number of years, describes how 'normalized' (2) sexual abuse was in the club. The abuse was lore, older boys passing the 'rumours' to younger boys as they came through the ranks. Notably, this 'rumour' which normalized the abuse was only one part of the process, this normalization of the abuse was also painted as something intrinsic to the behaviour of the abuser – 'wasn't just us, it was what he did' (2–3). Again, these accounts suggest that the abuse was known about among club members and though Kenneally was responsible for the sexually abusive behaviour, the silence was maintained because within the club the sexual abuse was almost acceptable or at least unremarkable. In this way, the boys silently acquired membership of that abusive group under the auspices of their sporting interests.

Colin Power, who was also sexually abused as a teenager by Bill Kenneally, describes in extract 4 how they were often abused in groups of four. He wonders aloud if this was purposeful on Kenneally's part as a means to 'normalize' the behaviour (1).

Extract 4 (Colin Power on Prime Time RTE 3rd May 2016):
1. He did it in groups of four and I think that was to somehow normalize things
2. you know.

Colin Power wonders if Keneally's abuse of four boys together was purposeful and indeed it may well have been. Regardless, it left Colin Power with a sense that the shared experience of abuse made it almost commonplace. It allowed him 'to somehow normalise things'. This not only decreased the likelihood of the boys sharing their abusive experiences with those who might intervene but also it meant that they were in a far less valued group of boys – one that shared experience of sexual abuse. In this way, they acquired an undesirable group membership where a valuable, positive and healthy sports group membership (Häusser et al., 2020) ought to have been.

Theme 2: 'I was an adult before I was even a child': Forsaking valued identity possibilities

The second theme outlines how survivors recall being aware that their sexual abuse marked them out. In response, and to prevent labelling articulated in theme 1 some survivors self-silenced. They recalled instances during their childhood, where this made enactment of valued identities difficult or impossible. There were also occasions where, because of the abuse, they enacted behaviours which undermined their credentials as a group member in highly valued social groups. This made identity enactment unsustainable and resulted in the loss of positive group membership***s.***

Extract 5 is the voice of Jason Clancy who was regularly sexually abused at the age of 15 by the sports coach, Bill Kenneally. The extract highlights how Jason socially situates the occurrence of his abuse and he draws attention specifically to how his abuse disrupted a key moment of triumph, replacing it with humiliation.

Extract 5 (Jason Clancy on Prime Time RTE TV 3rd May 2016):
1. The incident in Kilkenny to be honest devastated me. I was playing a tennis
2. tournament. I was playing the under-16s. I was 15 at the time and I got to the
3. finals of the boys' singles. And I won. I won the tournament. And I was
4. absolutely thrilled. But I came off the court and he [Bill Kenneally] just said
5. to me get in the car. So down in the car…abused badly. And to be honest with
6. you that wasn't the worst. The second part of the day what happened was.
7. I came back to the tennis club. The presentation was over. The lady who was
8. on the committee and organized the tournament she ate me. And just said like
9. that you know such bad manners that you didn't even have the manners to turn
10. up to the presentation. And I I was standing there in my tennis shorts and
11. with a semen soaked underpants and I just couldn't couldn't tell her like.

What is notable from Jason's account, in extract 5, is that his appraisal of this social occurrence of sexual abuse was particularly distressing because it prevented him from fully participating in a valued social group – the tennis club. He missed the opportunity to celebrate his sporting achievement with fellow group members due to being sexually abused at the time which 'devastated' him (1). He was understandably 'thrilled' (4) to win the tennis competition, but Bill Kenneally immediately undermined this positive sporting experience by ordering him into his car to be 'abused badly' (5). Importantly Jason describes how the abuse alone was not the worst part of the experience on that day (6). What is highlighted in his memory of the day is the

impact that the sexual abuse had on his social world as he suffered the distress and humiliation of being berated by the organizer for his unexplained absence from the awards ceremony (6–11).

Recalling too as he does 'his tennis shorts', the picture he paints ties the abuse to the depletion of this valued identity. Notably, this specific instance, out of sustained regular sexual abuse over a number of years, was the one that Jason reports as one of the hardest to come to terms with many years later. Instead of being a celebrated underage tennis player, the fallout of the abuse painted him to relevant others as an ungrateful, unworthy, adolescent winner. It undermined his connections to those organizing competitions and derailed his sense that others might value him as a sportsperson or tennis player. The abuse meant that Jason took defeat from the jaws of victory.

Our sixth extract is from Terri Mullarney who was sexually abused from the age of 6 by her stepfather, Thomas Mullarney. In a short video statement, Terri outlined how her sexual abuse led to the loss of important childhood social identities.

Extract 6 (Terri Mullarney video statement made to the Independent Newspaper 24th October 2019):
1. When I was about eight or nine. I was in a dance group. I loved dancing I
2. loved hip-hop. A relief from what my dad was doing to me. From making
3. me watch pornographic videos to having sexual instruments in front of me. It
4. disfigured me. When I was about eight and dancing, I started dancing like the
5. girls in Dad's video and stuff like that. And that excluded me from the whole
6. group.
(…)
7. The abuse consumes a lot of you. It changes a lot of your like…like it it chips
8. away and eats away at you like. It takes all of your hobbies, your education,
9. your friendships, your trust, everything like.

In extract 6, Terri highlights that the sexual abuse had implications for her social world as her inappropriate sexualized behaviour impacted her membership of the dance group and in her words 'excluded me from the whole group' (5–6). She adds that the sexual abuse stole her membership of and participation in other valued social groups associated with hobbies, education and friendships (9–10). The distress caused by the sexual abuse was exacerbated by her appraisal of it contravening social norms and the sexualized behaviours forced upon her, 'disfigured' her (4) and consequently shrank her social world. She emphasizes how the sexual abuse and the subsequent loss of group memberships and identity possibilities 'eats away at you like' (8). She presents her abuse as a disfiguring experience that impacted her membership and participation in valued social groups across many life domains which were the only relief she had had from the abuse she was suffering (2).

Extract 7 is drawn from Sophia Murphy' who was sexually abused by her father from the age of 3. In this extract, Sophia describes one of her first memories of being sexually abused by her father on a city bus. Although the sexual abuse had become routine, Sophia's appraisal of this particular occurrence was additionally distressing because of the social context – her potential humiliation in public, in front of her peers – and therefore, remains at the forefront of her memory to this day.

Extract 7 (Sophia Murphy on Finne TG4 2nd October 2019):
1. There was lads standing outside the bus and I was a bit nervous that they'd
2. see what Dad was doing. And I just remember he slid my underwear to one
3. side and started fondling me on the bus and all I kept thinking was that
4. they're going to see him. I knew it was wrong because I was more worried that
5. they'd see him. I wasn't even thinking about what he was doing to me. So in
6. my head it's obvious that that wasn't the first time. That was my first
7. memory.
8. Like I was an adult before I was even a child.

Sophia presents this specific socially situated occurrence of child sexual abuse as a distressing contravention of society. She highlights how the abuse was particularly distressing (4) due to the potential for humiliation in front of the group of 'lads' outside the bus (3–5). She describes being less concerned about the sexual abuse (5) and more concerned about these peers – 'lads' being a word often used in Ireland to refer to young people – seeing the sexual abuse she was experiencing. It is noteworthy Sophia presents an ease with which her father in a public space 'slid my underwear to one side' (2). She remembers not reacting to his behaviour, which she interprets as meaning that this probably was not the first occasion, or indeed it may have been a regular occurrence. Although this experience can in part be interpreted as evidence of traumatic sexualization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1985) and loss of interpersonal agency often evident in those affected by abuse (Ebrahim et al., 2021), the specific social elements of the account that Sophia highlights also merit interpretation. The abuse(r) is again brazenly hiding in plain sight (see extract 2), and Sophia is by the habitual nature of the assault and the social fears associated with discovery (5–6): Sophie's fear of the 'lads' responses are a central concern to her awareness even at a young age that the abuse was norm violating and 'wrong'. This public deviation from established norms of the parent–child relationship is thus constructed as problematic. Equally, her worry about the sexual abuse is altered by its occurrence in a particular context rich with the potential for social humiliation. In this way, Sophie works up to her claim that her identity as a child was forsaken because of the abuse she experienced. She believes her identity as a child was taken by the abuse; a view represented by her closing thought (8) 'like I was an adult before I was a child'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first theme highlights survivors in these public contexts and describe how their experience of child sexual abuse was bound up in the acquisition of unwanted and damaging identity positions. They described how their perpetrators, and those who were complicit, strategically imposed deviant social categories. These categories positioned them, as children, as agentic, willing participants in their own abuse. The accounts illustrated how this positioning also served to normalize the abuse around the kitchen table or between boys at a sports club. Noteworthy, is that these groups typically have positive associations (family groups and sports clubs) and so can be used to hide the abuse in plain sight. The second theme highlights how these survivors, in a public context, present the sexual abuse as undermining their participation and engagement with positive identities during childhood. These individuals' accounts claim that even as children, victims understood their sexual abuse contravened social norms. This was recalled as making membership in positive social groups unsustainable. Accounts highlighted the impacts of abuse on participation in a tennis club, dance club and hobby and friendship networks as well as limiting future identity possibilities by adversely affecting education. This was used to work up a claim that childhood sexual abuse resulted in feelings of having lost their childhood – a complete erasure of that age-related identity.

Using first-hand accounts, this study highlights the way in which survivors link sexual abuse, group memberships and associated social identities. Survivors recall and present their abuse as something that positioned them as different from others. This sense of being different arose in part from their understanding that the abuse contravened social norms. This positioning was recalled as isolating and often resulted in the victim being disconnected from the people and activities in groups they valued. Rather than being hidden, there was a shared understanding, led by the abuser, that the victim was complicit or an active participant in the abuse and therefore it was in their best interest to remain silent. These shared understandings of relationships and contexts were also presented as resources that perpetrators used to hide the abuse in plain sight.

Our findings evidence how child sexual abuse is bound up in the acquisition of unwanted and damaging identity positions. While constructing a stigmatized identity as temporary might be beneficial for individuals to distance themselves from the categorization and labelling of a damaging identity, thus protecting their sense of self (Walter et al., 2015), in the long term, the perceived devaluation of oneself

in the eyes of others can have adverse effects on childhood development, trauma trajectories and health. Importantly, however, this narrative in survivors' stories is distinct from the common narratives of sexual abuse as a furtive and secretive activity. In this way, the abuse rather than being extraordinary was something survivors presented as being facilitated by witnesses' and bystanders' normative beliefs about adult–child relations in their particular social context, be that family or sports club. Survivors present child sexual abuse as arising from a social context where the actions and rights of the perpetrator are assumed and go unchecked. Perpetrators were described as aware and capitalizing on these dysfunctional identity-based dynamics.

As well as acquiring unwanted identity positions, our analysis of these accounts indicates that child sexual abuse impacts the ability to engage and perform valued social identities. This loss of social identities was presented as deeply damaging, sometimes even presented as having been felt more deeply than the abuse itself. Generally, social identities during childhood can facilitate the enactment of future selves: daughter, tennis player, dancer and educated, as well as offering access to developmentally important peer networks. In these accounts, sexual abuse was presented as a barrier to these positive identities and access to valuable peer networks. The depletion and erasure of childhood possibilities to enact positive and affirming identities were presented as permanent, irretrievable losses arising from child sexual abuse. This type of identity loss is not evident in an analysis of public accounts of women who waived their anonymity after rape trials in Ireland (Muldoon et al., 2023). We suggest that adult survivors of child sexual abuse see the loss of identity-defining periods and opportunities as particularly destructive. Overall, the findings, across both themes, are very much consistent with SIMTIC which suggests that the loss of valued identities is associated with poorer health and adjustment after trauma.

These findings also have important implications for all of us, not least from a theoretical point of view. These findings highlight the value of examining trauma, and childhood sexual abuse, through a social identity lens. This research provides a unique insight into understanding how victims of child sexual abuse negotiate identity processes, thus, contributing to our understanding of the social psychological foundations of trauma. Indeed, it builds on the SIMTIC model to demonstrate that perceived changes in social identities are central to post-traumatic trajectories. Furthermore, we suggest that the particularly strong effect of childhood sexual abuse on adult psychopathology (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008) may arise from the strong sense of social identity loss, a key pathway in the SIMTIC model. Survivors report losing childhood-related identities as well as their identity as children.

Second, from a practical viewpoint, at a societal level, we need to think about how media, educators, health and social care workers talk about child sexual abuse. Presenting abusers as monsters facilitates the actions of abusers in families, sports clubs and positions of trust to operate and act with impunity and in plain sight. It allows abusers to take advantage of shared social understandings of adult–child relationships and contexts to enact abuse. Children may not be willing or able to articulate what is happening and may accept their situation as unremarkable as others around do the same (Alaggia et al., 2019). And bystanders' use of a social identity lens can mean that assumptions are made about the social relationships between the victim and perpetrator that obscure our ability to detect abuse (Levine, 1999; Levine & Manning, 2013). A child acting inappropriately or badly may be the only sign of their abuse for example (McElvaney, 2015; Ullman, 2002). Training for teachers, parents, health and social care workers should cover children's behaviour as a response to child abuse and how bystanders' beliefs about abusers – and that the abused can enable and maintain abusive situations is warranted. Mandatory reporting of all disclosure and suspicions of abuse is also helpful where it facilitates further appraisal or scrutiny of potential risks to children.

Our study also highlights the value of using publicly available accounts to understand how people negotiate and manage unspeakable trauma. Public accounts are an important resource for understanding identity management and construction not least because when people speak publicly, they are doing significant identity work potentially in an attempt to achieve social change (Reicher, 2004). It takes courage for individuals to speak publicly about such a sensitive and personal trauma and this implies that survivors want others to take note of their accounts. So as well as being ecologically valid, data such as these avoid the twin risk of retraumatizing survivors and data that are determined

by a researcher's agenda. That said, people who waive their right to anonymity after a successful prosecution are not representative of the wider population of those traumatized by childhood sexual abuse. If individuals waive their right to anonymity and speak publicly, they are to a certain degree contravening social censorship. Survivors of child sexual abuse, however, are known to self-censor in survey and interview studies (Gnambs & Kaspar, 2015). Importantly, our use of the social identity perspective allowed us to work around these concerns about self-censorship, as we were about the management of social identities related to the abuse. It is this self-censoring in a public context that shapes the management and construction of social identities, making these data arguably particularly appropriate. This use of a social identity lens offers new insights, and the strength of our analysis is based on authentic real-world narratives of child sexual abuse. However, there is no question that more evidence, including quantitative data, would be useful and should be the focus of future research efforts.

Our analysis demonstrates two important new findings. The first is that victims recall perpetrators using shared social understandings of adult–child relationships and related identity positioning to enact abuse in plain sight. This positioning reduces the likelihood of reporting and leaves victims with a damaging sense of complicity in their own abuse. Second, childhood sexual abuse is recalled as damaging victims' ability to engage in the identity work of childhood. It depletes valued social identity resources, isolates victims from valued groups and leaves a sense of identity loss. Taken together, this study highlights, using first-hand accounts, that the social psychological foundations of this trauma are major, and the social identity approach can inform prevention and response to childhood sexual abuse.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Orla T. Muldoon: Conceptualization; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology; formal analysis; supervision. **Alastair Nightingale:** Writing – original draft; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; conceptualization. **Grace McMahon:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Siobhan Griffin:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Daragh Bradshaw:** Methodology; validation; formal analysis; writing – review and editing. **Robert D. Lowe:** Conceptualization; validation; writing – review and editing. **Katrina McLaughlin:** Writing – review and editing; validation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no known conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study were derived from multiple sources available in public repositories all of which are indicated in Table S1 of the Supporting Information.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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