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Professionals’ Criteria for Detecting and Reporting Child Sexual Abuse

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Professionals who are likely to come into contact with children play an essential role in the protection of children, thus we aimed to study the criteria they use to identify and report child sexual abuse cases. Based on the Factorial Survey design, we presented 974 Spanish (90%) and Latin American professionals from six fields (Psychology, Social Services, Education, Health, Law and Security) with hypothetical situations of sexual interaction with minors (systematically varying the type of sexual act, the child’s and the other person’s sex and age, the use of coercion and the type of strategy employed to involve the child), in order to examine their perception of abuse and willingness to report. According to results, the factors or criteria that most impact assessments are age asymmetry and use of coercion. Specifically, professionals are significantly more likely to perceive abuse and intend to report it if the other person involved in the interaction is much older than the minor and/or uses a coercive strategy, especially force, drugs or blackmail. Another relevant criterion is the type of sexual act, since acts involving intercourse, digital penetration or oral sex are significantly more likely to be deemed as abuse and reported.

Keywords: sexual abuse, minors, professionals, perception, Factorial Survey.

Los profesionales de disciplinas que favorecen el contacto con niños/as juegan un papel esencial en la protección de la infancia y por ello, estudiamos cuáles son los criterios que aplican para detectar y denunciar casos de abuso sexual. Basándonos en la Encuesta Factorial, preguntamos a 974 profesionales españoles (90%) y latinoamericanos de seis ramas distintas (Psicología, Servicios Sociales, Educación, Salud, Justicia y Seguridad) si consideran abusivas y si denunciarían diversas situaciones hipotéticas de interacción sexual (variando sistemáticamente el tipo de conducta sexual, el sexo y la edad del menor y la otra persona, el uso de coerción y la estrategia usada para implicar al menor). Los resultados indican que la asimetría de edad y el uso de coerción son los criterios que más tienen en cuenta los profesionales; en concreto, la probabilidad de percibir un abuso y denunciar es significativamente mayor si la otra persona en la interacción tiene mucha más edad que el menor y/o usa una estrategia coercitiva, especialmente, las drogas, la fuerza o el chantaje. Otro criterio importante es el tipo de conducta sexual, dado que los actos de coito, penetración digital, y sexo oral tienen una probabilidad significativamente mayor de percibirse como abusivos y ser denunciados.

Palabras clave: abuso sexual, menores, profesionales, percepción, Encuesta Factorial.

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Nowadays, a wide range of professionals (social workers, police officers, teachers, psychologists, pediatricians, lawyers, etc.) frequently come into contact with minors. Due to such a privileged position, these professionals often encounter cases of child sexual abuse (CSA), thus playing a critical role in child protection (Faller, 2003). In fact, the majority of countries instill in them an obligation to report any behavior or situation which they may consider abusive or suspicious.

As a result of this great responsibility, a growing number of authors have warned that professionals’ perceptions and decisions regarding diverse sexual behaviors and interactions with minors could have relevant implications. According to Griffith (2001), investigated cases of CSA depend largely on which situations are believed to be abusive or reportable by professionals.

Currently, however, the lack of agreement on the scientific definition of CSA, the diversity of socio-cultural contexts, the shortage of normative data about child sexual development and the variety of training levels, work experience, etc., probably result in professionals relying on their own criteria, many of which are based on their own childhood sexual experiences, religious beliefs, family attitudes towards sexuality, etc. (Johnson, 2002). In fact, reporting a CSA case is the last step in the decision making process whereby professionals’ own opinions come into play under the influence of a complex socio-cultural, legislative network etc. of expectations, definitions, norms and values regarding child sexuality (Ashton, 1999).

The first problem that we are confronted with is indeed the absence of a precise and agreed definition of the concept of CSA by the scientific community. Finkelhor (1994) and López (1995) conceptualize sexual interactions which are accompanied by age asymmetry, coercion or both conditions at the same time as abuse. Similarly, the majority of the authors consider three factors to be important when defining (and therefore, detecting) sexual abuse (López, 1995): the age of the minor and the age of the other person, the strategies employed by the person to involve the minor, and the sexual act in which they engage. Despite relative agreement on these criteria, however, there are discrepancies regarding concrete limits which define what and what is not abuse.

With regard to age, the majority of authors consider the beginning of adolescence or the legal age of consent as a reference point in order to establish the maximum age of a victim. Nonetheless, these cut-off points oscillate between 13 and 17 years (Graupner, 2004; Posner & Silbaugh, 1996). On the other hand, some authors establish that an abuser should be over the legal age (Fritz, Stoll, & Wagner, 1981), while others maintain that anyone can commit abuse be it an adult or minor (Finkelhor, 1994; López, 1995). In relation to age asymmetry, some believe that a difference of 5 or 10 years (depending on whether the minor is pre adolescent or adolescent) should exist in order to perceive an abuse (Fromuth & Burkhart, 1989; Goldman & Goldman, 1988), whereas others consider that sexual acts between minors of a similar age may also be abusive (Finkelhor, 1984; López, 1995).

With regard to sexual activity, many authors believe that a wide range of interactions are potentially abusive regardless of whether they entail any physical contact or not (Finkelhor, 1984; Fromuth & Burkhart, 1989; López, 1995). A minority, nevertheless, do not consider sexual acts to be abusive if there is no contact (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Fritz et al., 1981). On the other hand, some believe intercourse to be the most severe form of abuse preceding oral sex or digital penetration (Faller, 1993), but others place such sexual interactions at the same degree of severity (Finkelhor, 1994; English & the LONGSCAN Investigators, 1997).

Finally, the application of the criterion of coercion also raises controversy, given the need to delimitate concrete strategies that are coercive. Some authors adopt the same criterion (pressure, force, etc.) for cases of abuse that affect children, adolescents or adults (Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1987), while others only consider those strategies which suppose force or threat of force in cases committed by minors (Edwards & Alexander, 1992; Preuss, 1988).

The subjective experience of the minor, likewise, is a crucial criterion for many authors (Constantine, 1981; López, 1995; Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998). In fact, the involvement of a child in non-consensual or undesired sexual acts is generally considered abuse. Nonetheless, as Finkelhor (1979) and López (1995) highlight, the consent of minors is subject to their age and degree of development. In other words, it is necessary to take into consideration a minor’s capacity to decide freely and responsibly, and whether the other person involved is in a position of superiority, be it by age, status or development, that counteracts any possibility of equality within the relationship.

In short, this is the approach of literature, yet in practice, do professionals take into account all these factors to detect and report sexual abuse?. In our opinion, it is possible that the aforementioned criteria are generally accepted, yet their imprecision could generate difficulties and disagreements in concrete cases: what are the age limits and differences that are used as references by professionals? Do they take into account physical contact in sexual interaction? Do they more often label acts that involve penetration as abuse? What strategies do they believe to suppose a power asymmetry, and therefore, coercion? Do they consider all coercive strategies to be just as severe?

Within the scientific field, some of these questions have raised a growing interest over the last few decades. The first studies were carried out in the United States, the objective being to examine the way that professionals (Arteberry-Bennet, 1987), adults (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984) or both populations (Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979) perceive or define sexual abuse, and to explore both the
situational and personal characteristics which most influence their perspective or conceptualization.

Within the first type of characteristics, researchers have paid more attention to three situational factors. Firstly, one of these is sexual activity. In particular, studies of professionals (Eisenberg, Owens, & Dewey, 1987; Ko & Koh, 2007), university students (Tang, 2002) and general public (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984) have consistently found that sexual acts involving vaginal or anal penetration with a minor (intercourse) are significantly more likely to be deemed abusive and considered more serious.

Secondly, another factor studied extensively is sex. Although no revised study has found the sex of the minor (possible victim) to be a criterion that professionals or students take into account—with the exception of the study by Bornstein, Kaplan, & Perry (2007) whose participants considered abuse of young girls to be more serious—many studies have observed that the sex of the other person (possible abuser) is important, since both aforementioned populations regard sexual acts to be less abusive when they involve a woman (Bornstein et al., 2007; Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Hetherton & Bearsall, 1998; Kite & Tyson, 2004; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Wagner, Aucon, & Johnson, 1993). With regards to sexual orientation, the few studies carried out with adults and students suggest that sexual interactions between minors and people of the same sex are considered more abusive and serious, especially when both participants are male (Bornstein et al., 2007; Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, & Holth, 2004; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997).

Finally, when considering age, most studies suggest—barring rare exceptions (Jackson & Nuttal, 1993; Ko & Koh, 2007)—that sexual acts involving prepubescent minors as possible victims (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Hartman, Karlson, & Hibbard, 1994; Hicks & Tite, 1998; Jackson & Nuttal, 1993; Kennel & Agresti, 1995; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Wagner et al., 1993) and/or adults as possible abusers (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Ko & Koh, 2007) are more frequently perceived as abuse.

In our opinion, these conclusions are valuable yet insufficient. Moreover, the studies they rely on have certain limitations. One is the reduced geographical diversity of studied samples, the majority recruited in the United States and the United Kingdom (Eisenberg et al., 1987; Hartman et al., 1994; Jackson & Nuttal, 1993; Kennel & Agresti, 1995; Wagner et al., 1993), that discourages cross-cultural comparisons and highlights the need to study more countries. Another limitation is the reduced size of the samples, which generally are comprised of 100 to 400 people, and only exceptionally include a higher number of participants (Jackson & Nuttal, 1993; Ko & Koh, 2007).

Likewise, it is worth noting that the number of situational factors and levels is usually low in studies (Eisenberg et al., 1987; Hicks & Tite, 1998; Kalichman, Craig, & Follingstad, 1989; Kennel & Agresti, 1995), generally in order to avoid designing and presenting participants with a large amount of hypothetical situations (in the vignette method, the situations arise from a combination of the levels of the factors of interest). This strategy, however, reduces the possibilities of generalizing results to a wide range of real life situations and limits the variety of contextual information that is provided to participants through the vignettes (Ludwick & Zeller, 2001).

Finally, attention is drawn to the fact that no revised study has attempted to analyze whether the detection and reporting of CSA is influenced by the existence of coercion and/or age asymmetry in the sexual interaction, although some studies have hinted at the impact of the latter factor by varying the age of the minor and treating the age of the other person (generally an adult) as a constant variable within the vignettes. This limitation prevents us from knowing whether sexual acts between minors are considered to be abusive in certain cases, and implies disregarding two key criteria in the scientific definition of sexual abuse.

In light of the aforementioned theoretical approaches, and the findings and limitations of previous research, the main aim of this study is to examine what criteria are used by professionals to detect and report a possible case of sexual abuse (that is, what situational factors are considered to be the most important), and the specific aim is to analyze the concrete impact of such relevant factors on judgments and decisions.

Based on the revised literature, it is hypothesized that professionals consider the use of coercion and the existence of age asymmetry to be the two most relevant factors for detecting and reporting CSA (the most supported criteria in the scientific literature). In particular, it is predicted that professionals are more likely to perceive CSA and report when: a) sexual interaction is coercive (especially if forced); b) sexual interaction is asymmetric (especially if the age difference is larger); c) the minor is young or the other person is old (regardless of age asymmetry between both); d) physical contact occurs (in particular if there is penile penetration); e) the minor is female or the other is male; and f) the interaction is homosexual (especially when two males are involved).

Method

Participants

The target population consisted of adult professionals residing in Spain or Latin America, all of which work in fields where contact with minors and/or CSA cases is likely: Psychology, Social Services, Education, Health, Justice and Security Forces. Unfortunately it is not possible to calculate the exact participation rate as the snowball sampling prevents us from knowing the number of survey recipients, that is to say the number of potential participants in the study. In addition, the anonymity of the survey means that members of a
particular organization are unknown, thus being not possible to specify the participation rate of organizations approached. We are only able to indicate the participation rate of those invited to use the paper form, whereby 60% of surveys were filled in and returned. This figure is similar or superior to those attained by similar studies via paper questionnaires (Finlayson & Koocher, 1991; Hartman et al., 1994; Hicks & Tite, 1998; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993; Wagner et al., 1993).

The final sample comprised of 974 professionals, the majority participating via Internet (80.5%) and the rest on paper. Participants’ age ranges from 19 to 69 years old, with the average age being 35 years (SD = 10.01). It was noted that 64.6% are female and 89% reside in Spain. The rest of participants reside in Latin America (specifically, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, El Salvador, Honduras, Venezuela, Panama, Paraguay or Nicaragua).

It was also noted that 83% have university studies. Almost 60% work in the following fields: Psychology (21.5%), Social Services (24.7%) – as a social worker or educator- and Education (13.3%). The remaining work in Security Forces (19.4%) – as a police officer or civil guard-, Health Services (16.3%) – as a nurse, doctor, pediatrician, psychiatrist or midwife-, and Justice (4.7%) – as a lawyer, public prosecutor or judge-. Even though 77.4% work with minors, less than half of these have work experience with cases of sexual abuse (42.3%) or training in child sexuality and/or abuse (44.4%).

**Design**

Typically, this line of research has applied the vignette methodology as it is the most useful tool for analyzing perceptions, judgments and/or decisions concerning a variety of social behaviors and concepts (Ludwick & Zeller, 2001), particularly those related to controversial or sensitive subjects such as child abuse (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984) or sexual aggression. The vignettes consist of “short descriptions of a person or a social situation which contain precise references to what are thought to be the most important factors in the decision-making or judgment-making processes of respondents” (Alexander & Becker, 1978; p. 94). The vignette method is deemed beneficial because: a) it allows to study a greater number of people’s judgments concerning a greater variety of real-life situations (Hughes & Huby, 2001); b) it reduces social desirability bias that is typical of self-report measures (Alexander & Becker, 1978) by eliciting responses more automatically (Hughes & Huby, 2001); and c) it enables to control multiple situational factors as well as to estimate these factors’ impact on judgments and decisions with greater reliability and precision (Alexander & Becker, 1978).

Concretely, the design of this study is based on the Factorial Survey method (Rossi & Nock, 1982). Through control and random strategies (Taylor, 2006), this technique enables to apply the vignette method with large samples and thus analyze judgements on real-life situations and their influencing factors without having to limit the number of variables in the design or present the vignette universe to each participant (Steiner & Atzmüller, 2006). The Factorial Survey, besides, facilitates the identification of factors which are considered to be the most relevant for the definition of a certain social reality, and those which cause the most controversy, by benefiting from the internal validity of experiments and the external validity of surveys (Ludwick & Zeller, 2001; Sniderman & Grob, 1996).

Aware of these advantages, some studies within our field of research have opted to use this technique (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Ko & Koh, 2007).

The specific steps of the method used in this study were the following:

First of all, two types of hypothetical situations to be presented to participants were defined: consensual sexual interactions with minors, and attempts of sexual interaction with minors that may or may not be coercive. Following this, factors and levels to be used to define these situations were selected (see Table 1). Then levels were systematically combined with the SPSS 18 software in order to obtain two factorial universes of 400 situations each. Combinations defining impossible scenarios were then removed (i.e. a girl penetrating with a penis). From the resulting universes of 360 and 270 situations each, samples to be presented to participants were randomly obtained; specifically, twenty samples of eighteen situations of consensual sexual interaction and eighteen samples of fifteen situations of attempt of sexual interaction. Finally, two vignette tasks (consisting in randomly selected samples of situations) were designed and presented to participants.

**Instruments and measures**

These two vignette tasks were indeed used as measuring instruments. “Vignette task 1” presented participants with eighteen situations in which “a minor consensually participates in a sexual act with another person”, and “Vignette task 2” presented fifteen situations whereby “a person tries to involve a minor in a sexual act” (see Appendix 1). The former instrument was designed with the objective of analyzing which factors are believed by professionals to convert a consensual sexual act into an abusive one (Do they consider, in agreement with literature, that the minor’s age and the age asymmetry are factors that invalidate the consent given? Is their judgment influenced by the type of sexual act carried out or the sex of those involved in it?). The latter instrument, instead, was designed to evaluate the extent and the way in which professionals take into account the use of coercive strategies (along with age limits and differences, another of the factors that literature consider to be key in the definition of a CSA) and the degree to which other factors are considered (type of interaction, age and sex of those involved).
With regards to each situation presented, participants were asked to judge: a) whether they consider it abuse; and b) whether they would report it to the authorities.

The dependent variables are the judgments made by participants, specifically:

– The perception of abuse, in terms of “abuse” (1) or “no abuse” (0).

– The intention to report in terms of “report” (1) or “not report” (0).

According to Walsh, Farrell, Schweitzer, & Bridgstock (2005), when faced with a situation that could constitute abuse, we first of all evaluate our suspicion and later decide if we will or will not report it.

The independent variables or situational factors analyzed in relation to Vignette Task 1 were the following (see Table 1):

– Type of sexual act. Based on the taxonomy used by Faller (1993, 2003) to classify sexual behaviors which may constitute abuse, five different types of sexual acts were analyzed and coded from 1 to 5 in accordance to their theoretical level of severity: genital exposure (“showing the vulva/penis” to the minor); genital touching (“touching the vulva/penis”); digital penetration (“introducing a finger in vagina/anus”); oral sex (the minor “carrying out cunnilingus/fellatio”); and penile penetration (“intercourse”).

– Sex of the minor and sex of the other person. In order to specify this dichotomous factor (male/female) in the vignettes, the terms “boy/girl child” (for prepubescent) or “boy/girl” (for post-pubescent) were used.

– Sexual orientation of the interaction. This factor results from combining the two latter factors (minor’s sex and the

Table 1
Situational factors and levels in Vignette Tasks 1 and 2. Coding system in logistic regression analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTORS</th>
<th>VIGNETTE TASK 1</th>
<th>VIGNETTE TASK 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of sexual act</td>
<td>Genital exposure (1)</td>
<td>Genital touching (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Genital touching (2)</td>
<td>Penile penetration (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Digital Penetration (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral Sex (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penile penetration (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of the minor</td>
<td>Male (0)     Female (1)</td>
<td>Male (0) Female (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of the other person</td>
<td>Male (0)     Female (1)</td>
<td>Male (0) Female (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation of interaction</td>
<td>Heterosexual (0)</td>
<td>Heterosexual (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homosexual (1)</td>
<td>Homosexual (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of the minor</td>
<td>5 years     8 years      11 years</td>
<td>5 years     8 years      11 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 years     17 years</td>
<td>14 years     17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age asymmetry</td>
<td>+0 years     +5 years     +10 years</td>
<td>+ 0 years     +13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of strategy</td>
<td>Request for consent (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual stimulation (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional manipulation and lies (3)</td>
<td>Drug intoxication (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drug intoxication (4)</td>
<td>Physical force (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of coercion</td>
<td>No coercion (0)</td>
<td>Coercion (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The expression “kissing vulva/penis” substituted the term “cunnilingus” and “fellatio” in cases where the vignette referred to a preadolescent minor.
other person’s sex), and it has two levels: heterosexual (male-female, female-male) and homosexual (male-male, female-female).

– Age of the minor. The five age levels examined refer to two different stages of development: preadolescence and adolescence. Within the first, selected ages (5, 8 and 11 years old) refer to three representative stages of sexual development, and within the second, selected ages (14 and 17 years) represent early and late stage of development.

– Age asymmetry. A wide range of levels of age difference between the minor and the other person (0, 3, 5, 10 years) and thus diverse degrees of developmental asymmetry (preadolescent-adolescent, preadolescent-adult, adolescent-adult, etc.) were examined. According to literature, a 5 or 10 year age difference in the sexual interaction denotes abuse, depending on whether the minor is preadolescent or adolescent respectively.

The independent variables or situational factors examined in relation to Vignette Task 2 were the same with the addition of the following two (see Table 1):

– Type of strategy used to involve a minor in sexual acts. Five strategies were examined: request for consent (“asking” the minor); sexual stimulation (“persistent touching”); emotional manipulation and lies (“blackmailing”); drug intoxication (“giving drugs”); and physical force (“using force”). The last four strategies stem from the taxonomy that Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson (2003) use to classify types of sexual coercion among adults. In accordance with this taxonomy, all tactics were coded from 1 to 5 in order of severity.

– Use of coercion. This factor results from the recategorization of the latter factor in two levels: no coercion (asking) and coercion (touching, blackmailing, drugging or forcing).

Within Vignette Task 2, the factors Type of sexual act and Age asymmetry were only examined on two levels, because the consideration of the type of strategy made it unadvisable to maintain the same number of levels in the rest of the factors (This would have unnecessarily complicated the analyses and procedure since Vignette Task 1 already explored in detail the impact of the type of sexual act and the age asymmetry). Particularly, types of sexual activity that require no contact were excluded (the tactic “sexual stimulation” could have confounded their effect) and attention focused on two behaviors with different degree of severity (touching and intercourse) and on two levels of age difference which entail clear differences in development: interaction with a peer (+0 years) or with an adult (+13 years, given that the minimum age of a minor is 5).

Procedure

From May 2007 to February 2008, measuring instruments were anonymously self-administered using two formats, paper and electronic.

In paper, participants were contacted via personal visit (in Salamanca capital), email or telephone (in other provinces of Castilla y León). An informative letter was enclosed with the survey, describing the characteristics of the study (authors and aim), the participation requested (tasks, time needed, anonymity) and the available formats. Paper copies of the instruments (with different vignette samples) were randomly distributed and finally collected via visit or post.

In electronic format, participants were contacted via email (invitations were mainly addressed to other regions in Spain and Latin America). The same informative letter was attached and a collaboration request was added (participants were asked to forward the invitation email to other professionals or to post an advertisement on their Website or newspaper). Unfortunately in this case it was not possible to offer everyone another format. Finally, participants accessed the instruments via link (versions were programmed in a way that the presentation was random on entering the link) and researchers accessed participants’ answers via the automatic electronic registers (which only register the computers’ IP thus ensuring anonymity).

Analyses

Given that the design of this study is inspired by the Factorial Survey technique, the vignettes are the basis of analysis and not the participants. Therefore, analyses focused on judgments provided by 974 professionals when faced with a total of 630 hypothetical situations through two vignette tasks.

The first step was to carry out logistic regression analyses by simultaneously entering predictors into the models, in order to test the relative contribution of each factor, and the contribution of the model as a whole to explain judgments. The second step was to carry out stepwise logistic regression analyses by sequentially entering predictors (forward) in order to obtain more parsimonious models and identify the best predictors. The reference criterion was the predictive ability of factors (assuming that 2% is the minimum contribution), because the sample size is very large (N = 974) and thus the contribution of the majority of factors, although small, is significant.

The perception of abuse and the intention of reporting abuse were treated as dichotomous dependent variables. Age asymmetry, minor’s age, type of strategy and type of sexual act were examined as quantitative predictors, and minor’s sex, other person’s sex and sexual orientation of the interaction as dichotomous predictors. The levels of factors and their coding system in regression analyses are specified in Table 1.

The last step was to conduct Chi-square tests and to estimate the Adjusted Residuals (AR) for each cell of the crosstabs in order to determine the direction of the relationship between the best predictors (treated as categorical factors in these analyses) and the dependent variables (participants’ judgments).
Results

Consensual sexual interactions with minors

When examining to what extent situational factors explain or predict judgments on vignettes in Task 1, logistic regression analyses show that all studied factors explain almost a third of the variance in the dependent variables: 33% of the variance in perception of abuse and 29% of the variance in intention to report abuse (see Table 2). Stepwise logistic regression analyses, however, indicate that age asymmetry ($R^2_c = .264$), type of sexual act ($R^2_c = .039$), and minor’s age ($R^2_c = .023$) are the best predictors of the perception of abuse, $\chi^2(3, N = 17002) = 4751.925$, $p = .001$; or the intention to report, $\chi^2(3, N = 17047) = 446.802$, $p = .001$. Particularly, participants are significantly more likely to perceive an abusive situation when the age difference is 5 or 10 years ($AR_{5} = 15.5$; $AR_{10} = 44.5$) and less likely when it is 0 or 3 years ($AR_{0} = -48.4$; $AR_{3} = -11.2$). Participants are more likely to decide to report when the age difference is 10 years ($AR_{10} = 49.8$) – see Figure 1–.

Secondly, Chi-square tests also show a significant association, although smaller, between the type of sexual act and the perception of abuse, $\chi^2(4, N = 17002) = 671.897$, $p = .001$; or the intention to report, $\chi^2(4, N = 17047) = 446.802$, $p = .001$.

On the other hand, Chi square tests show that the larger the age asymmetry between the minor and the other person involved in the consensual sexual interaction, the more likely professionals perceive it to be abuse, $\chi^2(3, N = 17002) = 3529.691$, $p = .001$; and decide to report, $\chi^2(3, N = 17047) = 2915.064$, $p = .001$. Concretely, it is noted that participants are significantly more likely to perceive an abusive situation when the age difference is 5 or 10 years ($AR_{5} = 15.5$; $AR_{10} = 44.5$) and less likely when it is 0 or 3 years ($AR_{0} = -48.4$; $AR_{3} = -11.2$). Participants are more likely to decide to report when the age difference is 10 years ($AR_{10} = 49.8$) – see Figure 1–.

Table 2

Logistic Regression of situational factors on the perception of abuse and the intention to report abuse (in response to situations in Vignette Tasks 1 and 2)

| VIGNETTE TASK 1 | Perception of Abuse | | | Intention to report abuse | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Factors | OR | IC 95% | OR | IC 95% | Inferior | Superior | Inferior | Superior |
| Type of sexual act | 1.396*** | 1.358 | 1.435 | 1.393*** | 1.350 | 1.438 | 1.393*** | 1.350 | 1.438 |
| Sex of the minor | 1.086 | 1.012 | 1.165 | 1.141 | 1.051 | 1.239 | 1.141 | 1.051 | 1.239 |
| Sex of the other person | .866*** | .806 | .931 | .699*** | .643 | .761 | .699*** | .643 | .761 |
| Sexual Orientation of the interaction | 1.025 | .955 | 1.100 | .966 | .890 | 1.049 | .966 | .890 | 1.049 |
| Age of the minor | .777*** | .757 | .797 | .887*** | .862 | .913 | .887*** | .862 | .913 |
| Age asymmetry | 2.741*** | 2.646 | 2.839 | 2.893*** | 2.770 | 3.021 | 2.893*** | 2.770 | 3.021 |

$R^2 = .327; \chi^2 = 4773.225$ ***

VIGNETTE TASK 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception of Abuse</th>
<th>Intention to report abuse</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>IC 95%</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>IC 95%</th>
<th>Inferior</th>
<th>Superior</th>
<th>Inferior</th>
<th>Superior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factors</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>IC 95%</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>IC 95%</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>Inferior</td>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of strategy</td>
<td>1.874***</td>
<td>1.764</td>
<td>1.991</td>
<td>1.733***</td>
<td>1.659</td>
<td>1.810</td>
<td>1.733***</td>
<td>1.659</td>
<td>1.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of sexual act</td>
<td>1.243***</td>
<td>1.090</td>
<td>1.418</td>
<td>1.252***</td>
<td>1.129</td>
<td>1.389</td>
<td>1.252***</td>
<td>1.129</td>
<td>1.389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of the minor</td>
<td>1.252***</td>
<td>1.119</td>
<td>1.399</td>
<td>1.326***</td>
<td>1.212</td>
<td>1.451</td>
<td>1.326***</td>
<td>1.212</td>
<td>1.451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex of the other person</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>.820</td>
<td>1.058</td>
<td>.793***</td>
<td>.714</td>
<td>.880</td>
<td>.793***</td>
<td>.714</td>
<td>.880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation of the interaction</td>
<td>1.349***</td>
<td>1.207</td>
<td>1.508</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td>1.044</td>
<td>1.250</td>
<td>1.142</td>
<td>1.044</td>
<td>1.250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of the minor</td>
<td>.845***</td>
<td>.809</td>
<td>.883</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>1.041</td>
<td>1.007</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>1.041</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$R^2 = .478; \chi^2 = 5013.385$ ***

$R^2 = .448; \chi^2 = 5651.904$ ***
Finally, analyses show that the age of the minor is significantly associated with the perception of abuse, $\chi^2(4, N = 17002) = 1071.727, p = .001; C = .244$; although to a lower extent, if compared to age asymmetry (see Figure 1). To be specific, participants are significantly more likely to perceive an abuse when a minor involved in consensual sexual acts is 8 or 11 years old ($AR_8 = 8.9; AR_{11} = 20.6$), that is, close to puberty, and significantly less likely when a minor is 5 or 17 years old ($AR_5 = -2.8; AR_{17} = -28.9$).

**Attempts of sexual interaction with minors (with possible coercion)**

According to logistic regression analyses, studied situational factors largely explain participants' perception of abuse (48%) and intention to report abuse (45%) when someone tries to involve a minor in sexual acts with some strategy (see Table 2). However, stepwise logistic regression analyses indicate that use of coercion ($R^2_c = .242$), age
asymmetry ($R^2_c = .189$), and type of strategy ($R^2_c = .039$) are the best predictors of the perception of abuse. $\chi^2(3, N = 13969) = 4901.176, p = .001; R^2 = .470$; while age asymmetry ($R^2_c = .262$) and type of strategy ($R^2_c = .167$) are the best predictors of the intention of reporting, $\chi^2(2, N = 14138) = 5363.575, p = .001; R^2 = .429$.

Chi-squared tests confirm that the type of strategy used to involve a minor in sexual acts is significantly related to the perception of abuse, $\chi^2(4, N = 13969) = 3035.263, p = .001; C = .422$; and the intention to report, $\chi^2(4, N = 14138) = 1972.099, p = .001, C = .350$ (see Figure 1): participants are significantly more likely to consider it abuse ($AR_d = 20.3; AR_t = 20.5; AR_R = 13$) and decide to report ($AR_d = 25.3; AR_t = 16.5; AR_R = 3.8$) if a person uses drugs, force or blackmail to involve a minor in sexual acts, and less likely to perceive an abuse ($AR_d = -2.9; AR_t = -52.5$) and intend to report it ($AR_R = -9; AR_R = -37.9$) if this person persistently touches a minor or asks for consent.

Likewise, age symmetry is significantly associated with the perception of abuse, $\chi^2(1, N = 13969) = 1580.123, p = .001; \phi = .319$; and the intention of reporting abuse, $\chi^2(1, N = 14138) = 2937.521, p = .001; \phi = .415$. In particular, participants are significantly more likely to perceive the existence of abuse ($AR_d = 39.8; AR_R = 39.8$) and be willing to report ($AR_d = -54.5; AR_d = 54.5$) if an adult 13 years older, instead of a peer, tries to involve a minor in sexual acts with some type of strategy (see Figure 1).

On the other hand, analyses indicate that the age asymmetry in the interaction is significantly associated with the perception of abuse whether there is coercion, $\chi^2(1, N = 11336) = 934.376, p = .001; \phi = .276$; or not, $\chi^2(1, N = 2633) = 1072.788, p = .001; \phi = .538$; that is to say, participants are significantly more likely to perceive abuse if there is a significant age difference (13 years) between the minor and the other person, regardless of the use ($AR_c = 30.6$) or not ($AR_{na} = 32.8$) of coercive strategies. Similarly, the use of coercion and the perception of abuse are significantly related whether age asymmetry exists, $\chi^2(1, N = 7777) = 1011.860, p = .001; \phi = .339$; or not, $\chi^2(1, N = 6192) = 2071.432, p = .001, \phi = .501$; that is to say, in one case or another, coercive sexual interactions are more likely to be considered abusive ($AR_d = 31.8; AR_{na} = 45.5$).

**Discussion**

First of all, it has been found that the studied situational factors largely explain professionals’ judgments, concretely, from a third to a half of the variability they show when detecting and reporting a CSA case. Although this result contradicts prior research which found inferior (14.2% in Ko & Koh, 2007) or much higher (84.4% in Jackson & Nuttal, 1993) figures, it must be noted that the number and type of analyzed factors are different and thus it is difficult and unadvisable to make reliable direct comparisons.

Secondly, it has been observed that not all the situational factors contribute to the same extent to explain judgments, with the following five factors being the only ones playing a really important role (from the greatest to the least contribution): the use of coercion by the other person in the sexual interaction, the age asymmetry between the minor and that person, the type of coercive strategy employed to involve the minor, the type of sexual activity carried out, and the age of the minor (possible victim). Thus, consistently with hypothesis, the two most relevant criteria for defining CSA according to literature -the age asymmetry and the power asymmetry between the minor and the other person (the latter defined here by the use of coercion)- seem to be the criteria that professionals take most into account when assessing the existence of sexual abuse and deciding whether to report it.

Nonetheless, contrary to the expected, it has been found that factors referring to the sex of those involved in the interaction, although showing significant values in the analyses (attributable to the great sample size), they do not really contribute much to the explanation of judgments (their predictive ability is very low), which suggests that professionals are aware of the literature and current legislation (in Spain, L.O.11/1999 30th of April) and disregard these factors as criteria of abuse or report, or that the explicit manipulation of these factors in vignettes generates a social desirability bias.

**The age and age difference of those involved**

The age asymmetry is, apparently, the criterion that most professionals take into account when assessing the consensual sexual activity of minors. In particular, sexual acts between minors and people five or more years older are significantly more likely to be considered abusive.

It is worth noting, however, that voluntary sexual acts among minors of the same age are also often labeled as abuse (16.7% of cases if they are prepubescent and 10.4% if they are adolescents), even when interactions are less intrusive (i.e. no intercourse or oral sex) and typical of sexual development (SIECUS, 2004). It is also surprising to find that only in extreme cases (a minor consenting to sexual acts with someone ten years older) professionals are significantly more likely to report the existence of sexual abuse.

Likewise, the age of the minor (possible victim) appears to be an important criterion for professionals when evaluating consensual sexual acts, though its predictive ability is more limited. Confirming the findings by Finkelhor and Redfield (1984), it has been found that the effect of this factor describes a curved plotting. Regarding the possible reasons for this plotting, some authors (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Haugaard, 1996) suggest that people tend to assess sexual interactions with children of a younger age in a more benevolent manner as these are usually associated with curiosity rather than sexual motivation. We
are inclined to believe, however, that professionals are more benevolent because this study has not included a case scenario of a five year old child consensually involved with an adult in sexual acts (the maximum age difference studied is ten years). On the other hand, in order to explain the favorable perception of sexual acts involving consenting older minors (17 years old), it should be considered that on average participants believe that the legal age of sexual consent is 16 years old in their countries of origin and thus the probability of perceiving abuse significantly decreases when they are faced with sexual acts consented by minors above this age limit.

The use of coercive strategies

The use of coercion is another factor that seems to largely influence judgments. As expected, professionals more often deem sexual interactions to be abusive when these involved the use of any coercive strategy to achieve the participation of the minor. In accordance with Finkelhor (1994) and López (1995), it thus seems that professionals consider that the existence of power asymmetry is a sufficient condition to determine the presence of abuse, in other words, they recognize that minors can perpetrate CSA not only due to the age asymmetry but also the use of coercive strategies, a fact which is supported by some researchers (Gil & Johnson, 1993; Masson & Morrison, 1999) and recent studies (Shaw, 2000; Sperry & Gilbert, 2005).

Besides, it seems that the concept of sexual coercion that Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003) apply to adult interactions is similar to the concept that professionals assume when assessing possible cases of abuse in minors. Furthermore, professionals’ opinions seem to fit with the taxonomy of severity of these authors; in particular, the likelihood of detecting and reporting CSA appears to be significantly greater when drugs, force or blackmail are used to involve minors in sexual acts, as opposed to sexual stimulation.

Regarding the intention of reporting abuse, however, it has been found that age asymmetry is the most relevant factor—when some form of coercion may be present—Specifically, attempts of sexual interaction by a person much older (13 years) than a minor are more likely to be reported. Likewise, the type of strategy used by the person is another factor that professionals seem to take into account, though to a lesser extent. In particular, they are more likely to report abuse when drug intoxication, force or manipulation (blackmail) is used to obtain sexual contact, in this order of importance.

The type of sexual act

Consistently with Faller (1993; 2003) and the hypothesis, it has been observed that this criterion holds a significant and remarkable importance to professionals, but by far less than other mentioned criteria. Nevertheless, this finding contradicts Ko and Koh’s (2007) results, who concluded that the perception of CSA depends fundamentally on the degree of intrusion of a sexual interaction, and to a lesser extent, on the age of those involved in it. Perhaps this discrepancy is due in part to the fact that Ko and Koh (2007) only considered generic levels of development (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) which encompasses a broad range of ages. In fact another study (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984) which analyzes a wide range of age values concludes that the age is a more influencing factor than the type of sexual act.

Focusing on behavior, as it was predicted, this study notes in accordance with others (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Ko & Koh, 2007) that more intrusive sexual acts are more likely to be perceived as abusive and reportable, that is, those sexual acts that Faller (1993, 2003) considers to be more serious forms of abuse: intercourse, digital penetration and oral sex. According to our results, however, professionals disagree with Faller and agree with Finkelhor (1994) and English & the LONGSCAN Investigators (1997) in placing all form of vaginal/anal penetration of a minor (whether is digital or penile) on the same level.

On the other hand, in accordance with the majority of authors (Faller, 1993, 2003; Finkelhor, 1994), professionals appear to acknowledge that minors may be abused through noncontact sexual acts (although these are less likely to be deemed as abuse or reportable) as long as any abusive condition exists—age or power asymmetry.

Finally it is worth noting some limitations of this study. The first limitation can be found in the reduced number of professionals surveyed in Latin America. It is necessary to take into account, however, that the region of origin of participants has not shown to be a significant predictor of their judgments (González, 2009), neither have other sociodemographic (sex, age, parenthood, etc), academic-professional (profession, studies, work experience with CSA, etc) and attitude (attitudes to sexuality, religiosity, etc.) factors.

In addition, it is possible that auto-selection bias has occurred, given that the professionals who participate in this type of studies often show more concern for maltreatment and childhood (Kalichman et al., 1989) and consequently their responses may lead to overestimate the

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2 Among all analyzed personal factors, only one highly contributes to explain the variance in perception of abuse: the beliefs on the age of consent. The more conservative or restrictive these beliefs are, the more likely professionals detect abuse (González, 2009).
real frequency with which this population detect and report sexual abuse. It is also worth highlighting that the large size of the sample could have increased the significance of results despite having applied more restrictive criteria in face of this possibility ($p < .001$).

With regards to instruments, professionals’ opinions and intentions in response to vignettes may not reflect their real way of thinking and acting when faced with similar situations in real life. It is recommended, on the other hand, that future investigations examine a larger number of values in age difference (in order to verify if the increase in the severity of perceptions stabilizes from a certain asymmetry), minor’s age (in order to attain a more exhaustive analysis of the influence of these factor) and types of sexual act (in order to analyze more forms of non contact sexual interaction, such as exposure to pornography, voyeurism, forcing to masturbate/undress….).

We hope nevertheless that this study provides with useful information which help to better understand the judgment and decision processes that play a remarkable role in the detection and reporting of sexual abuse, and that it contributes to the discussion of the definitions and parameters that should guide child protection work. In conclusion, the obtained results suggest that the scientific and professional community coincide in considering that the existence of an imbalance of power, age or maturity in the sexual activity as a clear criterion for abuse, regardless of the sex of those involved and the type of sexual act they are engaged in. However, we believe that it is necessary to work in order to achieve a greater degree of consensus and accuracy in the definition of the limits that in practice indicate the presence or absence of this abusive condition.

References


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APPENDIX

Vignettes in Task 1 and Task 2: Prototypes and examples

VIGNETTE TASK 1

Prototype:
A _______ year-old boy/girl (child) _______ with a _______ year-old boy/girl (child)
(Other person’s age) (Other person’s sex) (Type of sexual act) (Minor’s age) (Minor’s sex)

Example:
- Combination of situational factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF SEXUAL ACT</th>
<th>MINOR’S SEX</th>
<th>OTHER PERSON’S SEX</th>
<th>MINOR’S AGE</th>
<th>OTHER PERSON’S AGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genital exposure</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 years old</td>
<td>+10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Statement:

“A 18 year-old girl exposes her vulva to a 8 year old boy child”

VIGNETTE TASK 2

Prototype:
A _______ year old boy/girl (child) _______ with a _______ year old boy/girl (child) by _______
(Other person’s age) (Other person’s sex) (Type of sexual act) (Minor’s age) (Minor’s sex) (Type of strategy)

Example:
- Combination of situational factors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF STRATEGY</th>
<th>TYPE OF SEXUAL ACT</th>
<th>MINOR’S SEX</th>
<th>OTHER PERSON’S SEX</th>
<th>MINOR’S AGE</th>
<th>OTHER PERSON’S AGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional manipulation</td>
<td>Genital touching</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11 years old</td>
<td>+13 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Statement:

“A 24 year-old boy attempts to touch the vulva of a 11 year-old girl child by using blackmail”