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Not a happy story. A love story: Professional perceptions of love in families with child sexual abuse in two US mid-Atlantic Child Advocacy Centers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although research on child sexual abuse (CSA) has greatly evolved, studies revealing survivors' conflicting feelings towards their perpetrators and family members are scarce. Professionals' perceptions of love in intrafamilial CSA are often overlooked.

Objective: The current study examined the perceptions of professionals working on CSA multidisciplinary teams (MDT). The research questions were: (1) How do professionals define love in families with CSA? (2) What are professionals' perceptions of parental love in families with CSA? (3) What are professionals' perceptions of love from the abused child towards their parents and siblings? (4) What are the differences between professionals' perceptions of love and those of the families they serve, and how do professionals deal with these different perceptions during interventions?

Method: Five focus groups with a total of 34 child advocacy center (CAC) and MDT professionals from two CACs in the US mid-Atlantic region were conducted virtually and analyzed using a thematic approach.

Results: The findings indicated that professionals recognized parental love at the center of familial child sexual abuse (FCSA) cases and its range from benevolent and healthy to maladaptive, offensive love. Professionals also recognized the mechanisms enabling children's love for both offending and non-offending parents and complex expressions of love between siblings, even when one sibling sexually abused another.

Conclusions: This study highlights the importance of promoting discourse on love in cases of intrafamilial CSA. Recognizing and embracing the complexity of love bonds may empower the abused child and support their need to believe in their parents' love.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has a wide-ranging impact on survivors, with short and long-term consequences that necessitate multidisciplinary professional intervention (Bubar & Bundy-Fazioli, 2011). Previous studies have explored professionals' perceptions

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of CSA, and attitudes and interventions in CSA cases in New York City, southwest USA, and the Australian aboriginal population (e.g., Ashton, 2010; Bender et al., 2010; Long & Sephton, 2011), and subsets such as children displaying harmful sexualized behavior (e.g., Taylor et al., 2021). Yet, studying professionals' perceptions of multidimensional, complex experiences and emotions, like love, in families with CSA is often overlooked.

Many studies draw a clear distinction between positive and negative experiences as well as terminology related to them, as stated by Roer-Strier and Nadan (2020) in their discussion of the dichotomous separation between risk and protection. Delving into existing research on positive emotions in families experiencing CSA, few studies exist that reveal victims' conflicted feelings towards their offenders, as well as the significant role the offenders play in their lives (Eisikovits et al., 2017; Katz, 2020). One such study explores the conflicting feelings of love and hurt a child feels after experiencing harmful sexualized behavior from a sibling, and another, the conflicting emotions of adult survivors when deciding whether or not to maintain distance from their perpetrating sibling as adults (Tener, 2021). To understand love in the context of CSA, it is essential to elaborate on the conceptualization of love in the parent-child context as described in the research literature.

1.1. Love in the parent-child context

There is a wide acknowledgment that love encourages beneficial outcomes for children (Sroufe, 2005). Children's initial experiences of being loved usually take place in the context of a parent-child relationship, and the need for this love can have life-long implications (Bowlby, 1982). One of the most acknowledged frameworks of love in the context of parental caring and acceptance is the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory, an evidence-based theory of socialization and development continuum that aims to explain major causes, consequences, and other associations of interpersonal acceptance and rejection (Rohner, 1980; Rohner et al., 2012).

At one end of the continuum, the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory discusses that love is a component of parental acceptance, in addition to the warmth, affection, care, comfort, concern, nurturance, and support children experience from their caregivers. Parental acceptance also includes specific physical and verbal actions that can transmit love. The other end of the continuum is parental rejection, which refers to the absence or severe retreat of these positive and accepting feelings and actions, as well as the existence of a variety of physically and psychologically harmful behaviors and emotions (Rohner et al., 2005).

Another conceptual framework related to parent-child love is the Attachment Theory, which argues that the ability to love and evoke love is an evolutionary product designed to ensure survival. According to the Attachment Theory, warm parenting behaviors are critical to children's developmental outcomes (Bowlby, 1988). The third framework is the Parenting Style Typology, which relates to parents' affections in the responsiveness dimension of parenting (Baumrind, 1991). According to all three of these frameworks, parenting practices such as responsiveness towards the child, physical closeness to the child, or verbal practices showing warmth instinctively transfer to expressions of love.

Besides these conceptual frameworks, empirical literature has explored children's perceptions of parental love. One study showed that young children aged 6–8 years old could grasp the meaning of parental love and the meaning of its absence through stories the researchers collected from children (D'Cruz & Stagnitti, 2010). In this study, the children's stories emphasized physical affection (e.g., hugs), special joint activities (e.g., having a story time), special relationship (e.g., attention, loving words), and nurturance; and general feelings of protection and security as expressions of love. On the other hand, the lack of parental love was expressed by these children as abandonment, isolation, neglect, and a feeling of sadness. Similarly, physical affection and being helped were also identified as ways that children felt loved by their mothers (Klein, 1989), as well as spending quality time with parents, and ensuring that the parent met the child's basic needs (Kilicgun, 2016). Moreover, another study looked at parental love acts as reported by fathers, mothers and children, and identified playing or doing activities together, demonstrating affection, creating structure, helping or supporting, and giving gifts with treats as the major themes; mothers emphasized the importance of physical and verbal affection, while fathers acted more in the role as playmates (Sabey et al., 2018).

In a literature review focusing on reactions of children in foster care, one study found that children removed from abusive parents still often expressed longing for attachment with their birth parents, even while feeling rejected and contradictorily relieved and grateful to be removed from home (Baker et al., 2016). Moreover, it has been noted that children physically maltreated by parents still engage in behaviors that foster feelings of closeness with the maltreating parent, in ways that were likely to express love, care and concern for a parent and to elicit love, care, and concern in return (Baker et al., 2019). These studies provide a brief insight into the child's experience of parental love; nevertheless, further information and in-depth understanding are needed regarding perceptions of love among children, parents, and professionals in the specific context of child abuse.

1.2. Love in the context of child abuse

A few studies have focused on the concept of love in the context of child abuse. One study discussed children's reluctance to disclose abuse in the context of love, as portrayed by the adult survivors in the study (Palmer et al., 1999). In that study, adult survivors discussed love expressions towards their abusive parents when they counted the reasons for not disclosing. An additional study that explored the relationships between survivors with their perpetrating siblings found expressions of love the survivors mentioned towards their abusive siblings, which emphasize the complicated context of harmful sexualized behavior between siblings (Tener, 2021).

Another context in which children express love to their abusive parents is in their attempt to rationalize abuse so they can explain their loyalty and love for the maltreating parents. Children's attempts to rationalize abusive behaviors committed by their parents were emphasized in a study by Katz et al. (2020), which directly explored love by examining children's narratives in forensic interviews. The

researchers found that children expressed love towards their parents in several ways, including defending their parents' abusive behaviors through direct confrontation with the forensic interviewer. Moreover, they noted that during the forensic interview, the child forensic interviewers focused on the parents' abusive behaviors but ignored children's statements of love towards their parents.

These findings echo previous studies. In [Katz and Barnett's \(2014\)](#) study that explored children's narratives during forensic interviews, it was reported that children looked for explanations for the physical abuse in intrafamilial cases to solve the internal conflict they experienced when the one supposed to protect them, in actuality, abused them. Therefore, children focused on the parent's positive characteristics, explaining that the parent's character or prior experiences were to blame for the abusive conduct. Furthermore, children tended to justify the abuse as an educational or discipline method ([Katz & Barnett, 2014](#)). In this regard, it is interesting to understand the mechanism of feeling love towards maltreating parents or siblings.

When probing the relationships between children and parents in the context of child abuse, the issue of perpetrators' tactics and grooming must be discussed. Previous studies have shown how perpetrators reframed their abuse as an expression of love to children to ensure its continuity and secrecy ([Eisikovits et al., 2017](#); [Niederberger, 2002](#)). These expressions of love on the part of the perpetrators are also evident in children's narratives ([Katz et al., 2020](#)). While the above-cited studies are informative, overall studies examining positive emotions in the context of CSA are relatively few. Moreover, professionals' perceptions of love in families of CSA have been even further neglected and need to be examined in order to provide the best services to abused children.

1.3. Professionals' perceptions of love in families with CSA

Professionals' attitudes and interventions in cases of child maltreatment usually concentrate on either the child protection model or the child welfare model in its broader sense ([Fargion, 2012](#)). Professional intervention based on the child protection model seeks to assess the degree of risk to the child and intervenes only in cases where the child is in a situation of significant risk. In contrast, a system based on the child welfare model seeks to intervene in any case where there is an impairment of the child's overall well-being, regardless of a specific risk assessment ([Price-Robertson et al., 2014](#)). For example, the Scandinavian social welfare model relies on universal public social services benefiting all citizens. This model represents extensive social legislation, which provides a safety net "from cradle to grave" ([Enjolras et al., 2021](#)) based on a therapeutic view and rehabilitation ([Burns et al., 2017](#)).

Recently, social policies in Western countries appear to be moving towards a child welfare model. Yet, because of varied tendencies in legislation and the structure of social welfare agencies, a child protection orientation is still evident, if not dominant ([Parton, 2011](#)). Therefore, practitioners who are expected to protect children from their maltreating parents and families are more likely to be approached with distrust and suspicion. Such an approach can explain practitioners' perceptions of cases of child maltreatment, including how they perceive the child-parent relationship in these cases. However, several studies have emphasized the importance of contact with family members, including parents, in the lives of children and for their well-being in out-of-home placement (e.g., [Boyle, 2017](#)), which means that the relationship between child protection practitioners and parents is crucial for children.

The need for a professional perception of a meaningful relationship between children and families was highlighted in [Shdaimah's \(2010\)](#) study. Most professionals in this study believed that bonds between parents and children are meaningful and that breaking such ties, regardless of circumstances, has a negative impact on both parents and children. Moreover, professionals believed in the superiority of the existing relationships between children and their families and emphasized the importance of emotional bonding and perceived love to compensate for other dangers and as a motivation for parents to attempt to mitigate those other risks. The findings of this study show that parental love is described as a moderating and protective factor, weighed against other risk factors for children. Therefore, it is necessary to directly explore love in families with CSA from the view and perceptions of professionals who work in the field of child maltreatment.

1.4. The current study

The current study aims to address the gap in the understanding of love in families with child sexual abuse (CSA) by spotlighting the perceptions of professionals working in two child advocacy centers (CAC) and on multidisciplinary teams (MDT) located in adjoining counties in the mid-Atlantic area of the USA by examining the following research questions: (1) How do professionals define love in families with CSA? (2) What are professionals' perceptions of parental love in families with CSA? (3) What are professionals' perceptions of love from the abused child towards their parents and siblings? (4) What are the differences between professionals' perceptions of love and those of the families they serve, and how do professionals deal with these different perceptions during interventions?

2. Method

2.1. The context of the current study

It is important to understand at the outset the context in which this study was developed by three of the authors, a group of researchers who focus mainly on the study of child abuse. During their research and professional work, all three encountered many expressions of love by children for their families, even when family members were the perpetrators of abuse. At the same time, the researchers noticed that these expressions of love do not receive professional or research visibility and recognition, especially when it comes to a child's love for the offender, or the offender's love for a child they are abusing. It was the recognition of the apparent underlying assumption that there is no place to talk about love in the context of abuse that was the beginning of the "love study."

When a decision was made to conduct focus groups of professionals as the method for this study, the researchers presented the possibility of participating to professionals at a child advocacy center (CAC) whose staff and multidisciplinary team (MDT) members had already participated in prior research focus groups. Among other things, the researchers described their desire to conduct more positive, “happy” research to focus group members. Although they agreed to participate in the focus group, the professionals expressed initial discomfort and “insult” at the attempt to produce “optimistic” research in what was perceived by them as a superficial summation and lack of recognition of the true complexity of the topic. Indeed, throughout subsequent meetings with the focus groups and data analysis, the researchers formed the understanding that, on the one hand, love exists and is powerful in these families; however, it is not necessarily happy or optimistic, but rather multifaceted and complex. This led to the title of the study – “Not a happy story. A love story.”

2.2. Setting and participants

The findings are based on five focus group sessions with a total of 34 CAC and MDT professionals, that took place between October 2020 and March 2021. All participants had experience working on sexual abuse cases, with time in the field varying widely from 1 to 40 years. Perceptions, beliefs, and collective views can be generated for research data using the traditional and proven method of focus groups. A main advantage of using focus groups is the ability to observe interactions on a topic. Another is the ease of conducting less structured interviews, which are especially useful for exploratory research (Morgan, 1996). The five focus groups were conducted with team members from two CACs located in adjoining counties in the mid-Atlantic section of the United States. One of the CACs is located in a major urban area and has been in operation since the 1980s; the second CAC is located in a county immediately adjacent to the urban county, encompassing urban, rural, and suburban areas, and has been operating for 13 years. The first author sent an e-mail invitation to the numerous team members who work on CSA cases at both CACs and asked for voluntary interest in participation. Team members who expressed interest were invited to attend the focus groups. Those who responded and participated included child protection services workers (8); mental health professionals (7); forensic interviewers (5); prosecutors (4); CAC administrative staff (3); law enforcement (3); victim advocates (3); and a medical professional (1). It was emphasized prior to the study that taking part in the focus groups was voluntary, and all participants freely signed participation consent forms.

The focus groups were directed by the authors via Zoom in real-time. Each session was attended by six or seven participants, all of whom were MDT or CAC staff members. There were different professionals with various levels of experience in CSA cases attending each focus group to account for the numerous individuals who could be involved on different teams investigating allegations of CSA, and groups contained members from both centers. The first and second authors attended and conducted all of the focus groups, and the same administrative assistant was present to ensure that transcription was accurate and to provide technical assistance. The fourth author attended the first two focus groups, and the final author attended the first focus group. Each group began with participants introducing themselves, including current positions, time in the field, and experience with child sexual abuse cases, and were encouraged to respond freely and openly.

Using a semi-structured interview guide, questions were asked in an open-ended manner by the researchers which enabled the group members to talk freely about their experiences and elaborate on the topics that were meaningful to them.

The groups were all conducted in English. At the beginning of each focus group, the second author introduced a general question concerning love in families, such as: How would you define love between parents and children? What is love between parents and children? This was followed by encouragement by the researchers for group members to participate in a discussion between themselves, and all participants were given a chance to respond. The discussion was followed by more specific questions concerning love in family units with CSA such as: (2) Now we would like you to look at your daily work with children, adolescents and families at risk for [mal]treatment or abuse. Can you think about expressions of love that you see during your daily work? (3) Can you think about expressions of parental love/love from parents to children or from children to parents that you see during your daily work? (4) What kind of love or loving expressions do you see among siblings in cases of any kind of abusive families or child maltreatment? (5) What is the place of love in your professional life?

Each focus group was transcribed by the administrative assistant and checked against the electronic recording. The study obtained the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As there is a need to maintain the anonymity of the group participants, no details are given about the participants themselves other than that they are professionals participating in the focus groups.

2.3. Data analysis

We used a qualitative, thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022) in order to analyze the transcripts from the focus groups. This included several interrelated stages. Before beginning the analysis, the interviews were read several times in order for the researchers to become familiar with the data and to identify initial ideas. Open coding was performed to elicit initial categories: the cases were broken down into small segments of text, representing discrete “units of meaning,” and each unit was labeled according to its content. In the second stage, the codes were grouped together as initial themes. As the authors read the cases, some of the themes were removed or changed, and additional codes and categories were added. For example, several codes were defined as “children love: loyalty,” whereas others were defined as “children love: sacrificing.” In the third stage, the themes and subthemes were reviewed and classified by their dimensions and properties (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, all the various professionals' perceptions of children's expressions of love towards their parents were merged and separated from all other topics such as children's love towards their siblings and grouped together. Finally, in the fourth stage, themes were refined, named, and interrelationships between them

were suggested (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). The final themes included the unique expressions of parental love versus children's love, with the latter divided further to include love towards parents and love towards siblings. At this stage, the researchers referred back to the transcripts to retrieve additional information as required to develop the categories. Once all stages of the analysis were completed, comparisons were then made to identify themes reflecting commonalities and different experiences and perceptions.

These analyses have been performed by the second author, a professor of social work specializing in child sexual abuse and qualitative research methods. Selected excerpts from the source materials were discussed throughout in several peer debriefing sessions, with the first author, the Chief Executive Officer of the Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center, the fourth and fifth authors, lecturers in social work specializing in child sexual abuse and qualitative methods, and the fifth and the sixth author, a Ph.D. scholar and doctoral student both social workers specializing in child abuse and neglect. The audit trail included detailed documentation of all analysis stages, with raw excerpts attached to all interpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The entire analysis process was accompanied by reflexive writing by the authors on their ideas, perceptions, thoughts and feelings as they evolved (Cope, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

3. Findings

During the focus groups, it was possible to look at three key aspects in relation to the professionals' perspectives on love in families where children were sexually abused. These included: (1) perceptions concerning parental love in families with child sexual abuse (FCSA); (2) perceptions concerning children's love towards parents in FCSA; and (3) perceptions on children's love towards siblings in FCSA. Exploring these relationships using focus groups created complex and rich perspectives about love in the context of FCSA, as illustrated by the following exchange:

Participant 1: "It's so interesting. One thing that's stuck out ...about what everyone has said is that a lot of times when kids express love, it's not so much the words they are using, it's the actions behind the words..."

Participant 2: "I've been thinking through this conversation. We've been talking a bit about parents and the way they love, but I think it's also important to recognize the way children learn about love, how they experience love, and how that love for them changes over time as they learn about love."

3.1. Parental love for children in FCSA

Parental love in the context of FCSA was complex for professionals to discuss. Most participants believed parental love was present in every FCSA case. Some described positive expression of love, such as emotional or physical closeness, understanding of the child's needs, support in moments of distress, care, fun shared activities in daily life, as well as a safe and comfortable daily routine.

"So, I spend a lot of time with parents, and they'll play on the floor with their children and help them develop an age appropriate understanding about what's happened to them. They'll believe them and support them and meet their needs. They will rock them or hold them during a difficult session, and you'll see a child go to a parent when they need that support or help when they're having a hard time."

Others described signs of love which were considered maladaptive, damaged, and signs of unloving behavior, such as not believing or blaming the child, choosing the perpetrator over the child, or showing affection through material objects. Signs of damaged and maladaptive love were hard for professionals whose jobs are to protect abused children to accept, as described in this quote:

"I've had to ... investigate cases where, you know, a kid discloses about Mom's boyfriend or someone in the house, and Mom doesn't believe the kid, it's hard to not let your opinion of that Mom's love for her kid impact how you treat them. Like... if you really loved your daughter, you would be putting that man out of the house. You wouldn't be keeping him there and wouldn't be leaving your kid, but it's like, those are really easy judgments to make in the moment. They're easy for me, because it makes my job easy ... I find it easy to make those snap judgments, but then when you kind of slow yourself down and you take a second, it's also kind of like checking yourself."

This professional, as well as others, expressed the need to get beyond personal feelings about parental love in order to help children and families, but also acknowledged how complicated dismissing personal feelings can be when dealing with parental behavior which can be damaging and harmful to a child. As expressed by another professional:

"When I have a caregiver sitting in front of me who is not believing their child, I think there's this unknowable quality of love still inside them for their child but you can't see it on the outside. There are qualities of love that are so complex and internal, and sometimes damaging. I don't know that love between a parent and child ever dies."

When asked about parental love in the context of FCSA, professionals discussed both families where the abuse took place within the home (by a parent or a sibling) or by non-familial offenders. They discussed parental love in general but also at times specifically referred to the sexually offending parent. It is important to note that when professionals addressed parental love in these families, they usually put the abuse or its disclosure at the center of the picture and looked at manifestations of love associated with the abuse disclosure process and the non-offending parent response to the child disclosure. They described both overt and covert expressions of love. Covert expressions of love included a parent being present for their children after disclosure, believing and protecting them, as well as acknowledging their need for help. Overt expressions included anger towards the authorities as a sign of love, as well as more

subtle signs of parental care such as parental presence, or reaching out for professional help as described in the next two quotes:

“For example, the fact that a caregiver is even present in the [CAC] shows love, because there are times when children come without a caregiver, and that's sad to me.”

And another professional stated:

“For me, a significant expression of parental love for their children is when they end up at my door and going through the process of the forensic interviewing. For the caregiver to grapple with the fact that another family member hurt their child — perhaps it's their paramour — and to continue with the process and release some of that control that a lot of times our parents might want to have is that, you know, I can fix this, I can help my child. To let that go and allow another person into the home or basically into the family to say, ‘please help my child. Please help my family,’ and put everything out there for the sake of their child is an ultimate expression of love.”

Parental believing and supporting their children, i.e., covert love, was demonstrated in the following quote, when a professional described how a victim's mother declared unconditional support for her daughter despite external circumstances:

“[The mother] basically said, ‘I've talked to my daughter about this and let her know that I believe her.’ She [the mother] said, ‘but I was realistic with my daughter that I believe you, but sometimes the system doesn't work the way we want it too. I believe you, but I can't control whether the police are going to make an arrest, and I can't control how court might be really scary and it might be really hard. And then he might be found not guilty at the end, but it doesn't mean that I believe you any less.’”

When referring to more covert acts of parental love, professionals described parents being angry as a sign of love:

Participant 1: “One expression of love that we see a lot is anger...if you dig a little deeper and try to understand where that anger is coming from, it generally comes down to the feeling of love, like they're trying to protect a kid and it comes out as anger...”

Participant 2: “[Participant 1] hit on it... For many years, I felt like I had a sign over my office door that said, ‘This is Where Complaints Come.’ Every parent who had a complaint about what a caseworker was doing with their family would end up working their way up the chain to me and complaining to me about it, and frequently, I'd get these very angry phone calls from a parent ... ‘you people took my child away, and it was inappropriate,’ whatever it was they were yelling me, and they'd be screaming and yelling at the phone and calling me all kinds of names ... I would always say to them, ‘I'm really glad to see how angry you are, because, anger tells me you care about your kids. You're angry that we took your kids. You're angry that our case workers are coming to your home on a regular basis. If you weren't angry about these things, I'd be worried that you didn't care at all’ and that would immediately calm them down, and they'd start saying, ‘Well, yes of course I love my kids.’ ... I don't know that they ever looked, themselves, at what love meant to them and where love was coming from for them.”

Another professional discussed the small, hidden signs of love:

“I do think that even in parents that have very, very low capacity to care for their children, I'm still able to find these glimpses where they're making efforts, and I think that's love ... Something as simple as the parent making sure that the child makes their appointment with me ... I think that we can talk about these grand things, where I see parents, you know, just holding their children after they've heard this story, in this beautiful intimate moment.”

In addition to expressions of love by non-offending caregivers, there were also specific instances recalled by the MDT members that indicated love by the parent-offender towards the child they abused. As expressed by one of the professionals:

“[Love] can go to great places...you can share things like...your love of animals, or your love of reading, or [something you are] going to love, you know, watching a show. It can go from something so simple and so innocent, to something so disastrous...”

Another professional illustrated how ‘disastrous’ misguided expressions of love by an offender could be:

“[I]t's a complicated thing. That people, in both my personal and my professional experience, that the depth of that love or the expression of that love is very different from person to person. And I've certainly seen very appropriate, ... caring love between parents and kids. And then I've seen very misguided love towards parents and kids, you know? If we were talking about sexual abuse, I can remember one case where a father told us that the reason he was sexually abusing his daughters was that he loved them, and that he felt that they should learn about sex from him. And so, I think there's a lot of very misguided expressions of love.”

Conversely, an appropriate expression of love by an offender after the abuse came to light gave a professional pause to consider the effect of love by an offending parent and the meaning of protection as a sign of love by the non-offending caregiver. The following quote does not involve CSA, but illustrates a surprising way love was expressed by an offending parent to the child:

“I hear a lot of parents' reflections on wishing they could have protected their child in a different way, and feeling protective over their child in terms of what's going to happen going forward. So, sometimes that looks like being protective of their child from the perpetrating person. ... [O]ne of my clients got a letter from a caregiver who's incarcerated this week, and I thought to myself, initially, ‘Way to undo like three months' work,’ but I think that ... despite having done some things that are unspeakable, the love that they have for their child shone through in the letter. Despite all of these kinds of, like, you know, errors in terms of all of the things always described as love — keeping him safe, being in contact with him, you know, protecting him

from danger — none of those things were things that she was able to provide, but were like, there. So, I think it's interesting for me to think about how a parent would describe it. If that's a perpetrator, that's harder, but I think protection is definitely a big one.”

3.2. Children's love for parents in FCSA

As opposed to the ambivalent feelings the professionals had towards parental love in FCSA, by contrast, when it came to the abused children, the attitudes of professionals were almost entirely positive regarding children's love towards their parents and their siblings; this included cases when the parents or siblings were their perpetrators. Professionals described the children as having a huge capacity for genuine love with a variety of expressions which included emotional words and terms. One participant described:

“The capacity of children to love and care for other people ... to me, is astounding because as an adult, it's really hard to jump forward beyond anger and be able to see someone's need. It takes a lot of training to get there, and I think kids show that expression of love in really profound ways when they make statements [that reflect] that.”

When professionals were asked to describe children's love for their families, the most common term used was loyalty towards parents, as described in the next quote:

“The biggest expression, I think, is by kids showing their loyalty to their parents. And if their parent is the offender, a lot of the times they're showing their loyalty to the offender parent by not wanting to talk about what happened or testify about what happened. Even when the parent is not the offender, they show loyalty to their parents by kind of taking whatever attitude Mom and Dad have about the case and kind of echoing that. So, if Mom doesn't want the child to talk, the child's not going to talk.”

Another expression of love was described by professionals in the context of out-of-home placement. Although out-of-home placement could be a protective environment for the child, the child can reframe this arrangement in a negative way to let his parents know he loves them the most:

“I'll tell you, one of the things that I've seen a lot with kids who get removed from their parents, is they get placed in foster care and feel very, very torn. They don't want to like or love the new foster mother, because they see it as a betrayal of their own parent, ... and sometimes what they do when they're visiting their parents, is they will talk badly about the foster parents or do something. They feel that's showing love and loyalty to their parents.”

Another professional responded:

“And that loyalty is definitely something we see a lot in expressing their love, as well as pleasing. Like, they know parents want to hear certain things, so they'll say or act that way ... by not talking about what's going on in the home, that's how they're showing their love. So, I think about loyalty and pleasing a parent.”

Further, the professionals described external behaviors which symbolized acts of love, which may not have been apparent to an outside observer. These included caring behaviors such as helping in the house and using parents as a source of physical and emotional comfort during distress. Yet others described acting out behaviors as acts of love:

“When you're that safe person for them, when you're that soft place to fall for your child, sometimes they will throw their absolute worst behavior at you. They will do their best to push you away, especially kids who have had attachment challenges. And so, sometimes I see with the person that the child loves and feels the most safe and secure with, they also have the most serious and significant behaviors with that person. And I think that I try to at least reframe that for parents and say like, ‘It is because of how of your loving presence feels that they can be this way with you, and they know that no matter what they bring, you're still going to love them. You're still going to keep them safe.’”

Finally, professionals described children's recantation as an act of love, as presented in the next quote:

“We see often kids try and recant once they see how sad mom is, right? Or the person who's the offender might have been the financial source of support, so they see like, how are they going to pay the bills? ... So, they will come in and they'll say like, ‘You know what? I just made that all up. I just want things to go back to the way they used to be.’ I've had one child try and recant ... we figured out that it wasn't a true recantation but that she was just sort of being pressured into this ... she actually said to us, ‘Like if I just tell you that this didn't happen, my mom will love me again.’”

We found a difference between professionals who saw children's love as unconditional, automatic, and taken for granted, as opposed to professionals who saw children as active actors of love, those who make conscious, understandable choices to love their parents, despite the heavy personal price that these choices can have. An example of the unconditional, taken-for-granted love (which was also referred to by professionals as “passive love”) is illustrated in the discussion between two professionals in one of the focus groups:

Participant 1: “Love for children – is very passive. They don't make a personal choice. They do what's told to them.”

Participant 2: “What we may see as grooming and manipulation, the child sees as care.”

Another professional gave an analogy of animal loyalty to a child's passive love:

"I don't want to compare people to animals or to dogs, but look at a dog's love to its owners, right? I feel like with kids, it's kind of like that with parents. It is what they know, right? So, if they have a parent that we obviously don't think is a great parent, it's what they know and they love that parent, no matter what. ... [T]his person can do these things and can harm me, but I still love them."

Yet, other professionals saw children as active agents in their own lives, who are able to make honorable and fully aware choices to love. They were impressed and touched by the children's ability to care for others. For instance, professionals shared how abused children were reluctant to disclose the abuse and sacrifice themselves in order to protect their parents' feelings, as expressed in the next quote:

"[S]he [the abused young girl] was also trying to protect her mom, believing that if she told, that the Mom's relationship would be over and then Mom would be sad."

In the next quote, the professional described two cases of active love by child victims which "humbled" her:

"In one case, the child, who's a teenager, was sexually abused by her father from the age of nine, until 16. He was facing a significant prison sentence ... I remember thinking he should be locked up and the key should be thrown out. This is a terrible person. ... What's amazing about kids is that they're able to recognize the wrongdoing of their parents and still love them ... I feel I sometimes lack the ability to do this well. So, I remember sitting there and she was ready to testify, because she recognized what he did was wrong, and all the harm he did to her. But I remember one thing she said at the end of the day. She said, 'He is my dad, and I don't want to be the reason that he dies in prison.' So even though he deserved all of this, she asked for the lightest sentence. The district attorney honored that request."

She further continued and told about another case:

"I had another client when I first started whose mother's paramour abused her, but she didn't want to go through the criminal case. And I remember a conversation with her asking if it was because of fear of testifying and so forth, and she says, 'No. Because if he goes to prison, there's nobody to support my mom and siblings, and I can't have them go into foster care.' She made a choice, a self-sacrificial choice for her family, and her mother who didn't support or believe her, and who probably wouldn't protect her once this guy is out of prison. But she made that choice, and she knew that. ... She exercised her power to choose to love these people in her life at her own expense. So those two things kind of shifted my view of how to support child victims and sometimes support decisions that I personally may have wrestle [sic] with. It definitely humbled me ..."

3.3. Children's love for siblings in FCSEA

Professionals also described children's love towards their siblings in FCSEA. They mostly described a very strong bond between the siblings and intense expressions of love, including love in cases when one of the siblings sexually abused the other. They described the daily bond between the siblings as extremely strong, and the siblings' desire to continue this bond even in the face of an abuse that occurred within it.

The strongest sign of love perceived by professionals was the tendency of abused children to protect their siblings from abuse or from the consequences of disclosure. An example of this scenario was seen when siblings wished to testify in court first, before other siblings, in order to make it easier for the others. Another situation of sibling protection can be illustrated by a sibling disclosing to protect another sibling. In the following quote the professional described a case of two sisters:

"I had twin girls who were sexually abused by [describing adult perpetrator]. The one sister was severely autistic and completely nonverbal, so she couldn't tell anybody what was happening. The other twin actually came forward and initially only disclosed what [the perpetrator] was doing to her sister, not that he had done the same thing and worse, to her. She ultimately ended up telling [our CAC] ... and when I was prepping with her, I was asking her like, 'Why did you tell about it, the scenario before you told about yourself?' She told me that she wanted to protect her sister, because her sister had no voice; she had to be a voice for her sister, and she didn't care about what happened to herself. Because she could tell him now, and make him stop, but her sister couldn't."

In other extreme cases, professionals described how siblings sacrificed themselves in order to save their siblings, and this was considered a strong sign of love. An example of this is illustrated in the following quote, which describes a case of a girl abused by her mother's live-in boyfriend:

"We had a young girl, 13 at the time, who was allowing herself to be repeatedly raped within her home because she had two siblings that were special needs, and she kept allowing it to happen to her because that was her way of protecting her siblings. She was afraid that economically, they would be harmed if she told."

Another sign of sibling love was the wish for the sibling subsystem to return to normal functioning even after a crisis had occurred following disclosure of sexual abuse:

“I’ve seen that too, with a case where it was involving two brothers, and the older brother started molesting his younger brother from a very young age. ... The younger brother was obviously traumatized and upset by it, but when he came in to give a statement to [the CAC] I was struck by how he wanted a normal relationship with his brother. ... He would sort of put the abuse out of his mind and the rest of the time, have and want to continue a regular sibling brother relationship.”

Another expression of love that children show to their siblings is by thinking about them even in hard and difficult times:

“At our center we give out teddy bears and books after every interview. ... It’s like the worst day of their life because they now have to talk about these terrible things, but they show this capacity to care about other people and to love. They’ll come out into the waiting room and they’ll say, ‘Oh can I get a teddy bear for my little sister?’ They’re thinking of someone else when adults sometimes don’t even have that capacity ... the capacity to think of others and love others, even through really difficult times.”

Finally, participants described the sibling ability to truly genuinely forgive each other as love, as further described in the next quote told by a professional who dealt with a case of sibling sexual abuse which was tried in court:

“I think it was really interesting to watch the brothers interact with each other. They obviously weren’t talking to each other during the criminal case, but just to watch their body language and watch their facial expressions towards each other while both sitting in the gallery or during testimony, you could tell that the victim and the offending brother really forgave each other, I think, and wanted that relationship back. The victim’s brother never wanted his brother to go to jail, but he wanted his brother to realize that what he did was wrong ... I think all he really wanted – well, I know all he really wanted — was his brother to explain why he did what he did, that it was inappropriate and say he was sorry.”

The professional further told that the abused sibling testified during trial as if speaking directly to his brother who was sitting at the defense table and described the offending brother’s response:

“It was really interesting, because the brother sitting at the defense table ... and he just put his head down and cried, and it was, I think, a genuine cry; ... And from that point on, their interaction really changed with each other. You could really see just in their faces that they still love each other and that they want to have that relationship back.”

To sum up, professionals spoke extensively and in detail about the bonds of love between family members in cases of child sexual abuse in the family. Their words emphasized the extraordinary strength of those bonds, even in cases of the utmost adversity and harmful situations. These bonds are filled with complexity, including parental expressions of love towards their children, especially in families where the parents had abused the children. Simultaneously, professionals brought up many expressions that symbolized for them parental love, like the ability of parents to support their children after disclosure, and believe in them.

When looking at children’s love for their parents, the professionals generally looked in a positive and admiring way at children’s love for their parents and their ability to make empowering decisions that stemmed from love. They described even more powerfully children’s love for their siblings and their ability to sacrifice themselves for their siblings’ well-being. And at the same time, they watched with pain for behaviors that symbolized love but caused the children great suffering, including instances where children recanted so that their parents would love them.

Professionals accepted the complexity of the children’s emotions, including that they may still love perpetrators despite the abuse, and the intricate emotions of loyalty and love towards non-offending parents and siblings. However, there seemed at times to be an expectation of more direct feelings from the non-abusing parent, specifically that the parent should prioritize the child without consideration for any emotions the parent might have for the perpetrator, or other aspects of the surrounding circumstances, including financial needs, or not being able to accept that a person they care about has perpetrated this behavior against their child. The complexity of love is inherent in this research. Indeed, at the end of the final focus group, one of the participants asked a pointed question of the second author, who facilitated the group, which led to the following conversation:

Participant: “[What are] your thoughts on the questions you asked us?”

Researcher: “I would call it, ‘Not a happy story. A love story.’”

Participant: “I think it’s a good title, because love isn’t, and people’s experiences with love aren’t always happy and positive, and I think one thing that we’ve talked about throughout this whole session is how complicated and complex and dynamic feelings of love are. And I don’t know... it resonates. It resonates.”

4. Discussion

There is a broad consensus regarding the necessity of love in a family context for the well-being of children (Sroufe, 2005). A consequential event such as CSA disclosure challenges intra-family relationships (Fong et al., 2020) and puts to the test the concept of unconditional love within the family unit. This study revealed the complex professional discourse that surrounds the concept of love in the context of families experiencing CSA. The focus group interviews unexpectedly exposed rich, deep, and emotionally charged discussions around love in the context of parents sexually abusing their child(ren). Contrary to these abundant discussions, love tends to be absent from the literature about child abuse and neglect, perhaps because professional discourse often tends to be binary and polarized (i.e., victim vs. perpetrator), and professionals find it challenging to contain conflicting narratives (Katz et al., 2020). However, the professionals in this study showed understanding of the complexity of the dynamics of CSA within the family and integration of both the love and abuse discourses.

Parental love has been seen by many professionals at the center of a story in FCSEA cases and outlined its diverse range—from benevolent and healthy love to maladaptive, offensive love. Studies dealing with non-offending parents' responses to CSA disclosure do not use the conceptualization of “parental love,” but offer a similar range of responses between caring, compassion, and empathy to disregard, denial, disbelief, and even blaming (e.g., [Bolen, 2002](#); [Elliott & Carnes, 2001](#)). The reframing of covert expressions of parental love in this study may fit within this range, and can be related to the literature on ambivalent parental response and support following CSA ([Bolen & Lamb, 2004](#)). The professionals in the current study are especially aware of these expressions based on an understanding of their importance in terms of both present recovery and preventing future revictimization for CSA survivors ([Scoglio et al., 2021](#)).

The findings of this study indicate a particularly paradoxical phenomenon—the co-existence of parental love with parental abusive behavior. Offensive parental love has been reviewed in previous studies that have addressed the justifications of offending parents. These parents have raised the perception that sexual contact is a way of expressing affection and love for the child, while some even actually describe “being in love” with the child ([Hartley, 2001](#); [Phelan, 1995](#)). The professionals in our study addressed other possible expressions of parental love by an offending parent not included in the CSA event itself, which display concern and support for the child in various areas of life.

There is an important emotional need for children to have a relationship with the offending parent, even though that parent has harmed their child. Previous studies indicated that the children themselves seek this kind of parental support and feel a great emotional bond with their parent-perpetrator. Even if harmful and dangerous, the relationship of the child with the parent was one of the most meaningful relationships in their lives ([Katz & Field, 2022](#)). Our findings indeed indicated the important role of professionals, in their perceptions, to save, as much as possible under the individual circumstances, the positive love actions and bonds from parents to children for the overall well-being of the child.

Professionals in our study express complete recognition of the mechanisms that enable children's love for their parents, even in the presence of an offending parent. As indicated in previous studies, children may foster feelings of loyalty, dependence, and even love towards their caregivers, even when they are the perpetrators, leading them to delay or recant disclosure of the CSA ([Malloy et al., 2007](#)). Past studies mainly emphasize the place of children's vulnerability to adult familial influences in enhancing the risk of recantation after CSA disclosure. For example, a child's perception of sexual acts can be affected and manipulated by the abusive parent to be defined as an expression of love by the parent ([Tener et al., 2016](#)). However, the professionals in the current study offer an alternative interpretation and reframe this phenomenon as stemming from the complex parent-child love relationship: children desire to protect the known and “trusted” adults in their lives from expected negative consequences ([Malloy et al., 2011](#)), even if that trust involves CSA.

At the heart of these two conflicting perspectives regarding children's love for their parents lie different perceptions of children's agency and autonomy. The findings demonstrated different perceptions regarding the agency of the children within their relationships with parents, moving on a continuum between portraying children as passive recipients of adult influence, to those who saw the children as social actors. The latter reflects the “paradigm shift” that took place in the 1970s/80s recognizing children's active roles in constructing their own lives and the lives of those around them, instead of seeing them as passive subjects ([Berridge, 2017](#)). The children's agency in the eyes of the participants is reflected in choices that seem paradoxical, such as loving the abusive parent and thinking about his or her well-being.

Moreover, the sibling system in the eyes of professionals includes complex expressions of love that intensify in the face of CSA, including compassion, sacrifice, and willingness to forgive, even in cases when one of the siblings sexually abused the other. As we have found in a previous study ([Katz & Tener, 2020](#)), siblings were portrayed by the professionals as supportive bystanders by tending to protect their siblings from the abuse while it was occurring. Also, in the case of sibling sexual abuse, professionals have described dialectical relationships that contain vulnerabilities and victimization alongside the longing for relationship repair, closeness, and forgiveness ([Tener et al., 2020](#)). The professionals in the current study describe a dynamic according to which the survivors wanted their abusive sibling to acknowledge the abuse and ask for forgiveness as a way to renew the relationship ([Monahan, 2010](#)).

4.1. Implications for theory and practice

Clinical implications for professionals in the field of CSA are mostly related to our main finding that discourses/narratives of love and of abuse can co-exist in cases of intra-familial CSA, and that professionals are encouraged to embrace such complexity. In this way, our findings encourage professionals to pay close attention to and explore such dialectic with their clients, both victims and perpetrators. For example, as this study exhibits, alongside their vulnerability, survivors sometimes ask their abusers to not only acknowledge the harm they have caused, but to also ask for their (the victim's) forgiveness. Also, it seems that while children's love for abusive parents and sibling love is understandable and inclusive, parental love by an offending or non-offending parent is a phenomenon that may require a settlement of cognitive dissonance depending on circumstances.

In this context, we believe it is important to listen carefully and to deliberately explore with clients, beyond the stories of abuse, additional possible meanings and feelings that are assigned by them to their relationships, including love. [Lum \(2011\)](#) introduces the notion of “inductive learning,” which holds that professionals need to listen to the meanings clients assign to their lives and their experiences within their unique life contexts. [Blom \(2009\)](#), too, recommends that professionals should adopt an un-knowing stance towards their clients and should try to understand the idiosyncrasy instead of relying on known theories. Listening to children's and parents' voices regarding love might contribute to a professional's work with victims and perpetrators, especially in cases of parental sexual abuse. Acknowledging the love in CSA families does not diminish responsibility of the perpetrators and often does not change the outcome of the intervention. However, recognizing the existence of love, in whatever form, empowers the abused child and gives

recognition and support to their feelings and need to believe in their parents' love.

Embracing such discussion might evoke confusion and anxiety in both clients and professionals and therefore needs careful attention. As part of this journey, we encourage professionals to critically reflect on their own conceptions of “love” in general and in cases of CSA, in particular. We hope that reading the voices of the professionals who were interviewed for this study might help in the reflective processes.

Moreover, identifying the dynamics of love within the family system can be an essential tool for professionals to develop helpful and proactive intervention strategies. For example, mirroring to non-offending parents their loving expressions towards their child, even if covert, may reduce feelings of guilt and shame and encourage more benevolent behaviors. In addition, among victims a therapeutic dialogue can be held that encourages a distinction between feelings of love and concern for parents and a feeling of responsibility towards them.

4.2. Limitations and future directions

The study carries a number of limitations. First, although the make-up of the focus groups was representative of potential MDTs who could work on a case, it is possible that the difference in participants ages, agencies, and varying experiences with child sexual abuse, impacted their perceptions. This might be especially true for the responses in the section of how participants look at love in CSA cases.

Next was the inability to address significant contextual factors which affect the dynamics of love within families. For example, the professionals rarely addressed the cultural backgrounds or religious affiliations that may shape healthy, loving family relationships, although extensive literature has dealt with the way in which socio-cultural contexts construct the dynamics among FCSA (e.g., [Fontes & Plummer, 2010](#)). Addressing socio-cultural factors may better explain the expressions and nuances of parents' and children's love for each other.

An important contextual limitation is the type of abuse. In our study, no distinction was made between references regarding intra-familial and extra-familial CSA, although it is likely that the impact of each on family dynamics is entirely different ([Loiaz et al., 2019](#)). Future studies should explore the role of these contexts in the love discourse between family members and the perceptions of other significant participants within the abuse dynamic.

Although a similar study was recently conducted among child survivors ([Katz et al., 2020](#)), additional studies are needed with a focus on parents' and other family members' perceptions regarding the concept of love in situations of IFCSA.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not define the terms “family” or “parents” when conducting the focus groups, e.g., differentiating between biological, step-, blended, or adopted parents and siblings. Future studies are needed to address an in-depth understanding regarding perceptions of love among all members of the family unit.

Finally, as discussed at length above, children are often separated from the offending parent for the protection and general welfare of the child. However, separation may be contrary to the child's need for keeping the parent-child bonds in place, even with an abusive parent. There is a great need for additional research on the effects of love-bonds on long-term or permanent separation of children and how stretching/severing those bonds impacts the already harmed child. The implications for future child protection and welfare practices have the potential to be profound.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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