

“Yes, My Uncle, I’ll Do Whatever You Say”: Experiences of Israeli Muslim Arab Children During Forensic Interviews Following Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Children from Arab society in Israel have been overlooked in previous studies and efforts in the area of forensic interviews. The current study provides an in-depth thematic analysis of 30 forensic interviews with Israeli Muslim Arab children following child sexual abuse (CSA), all conducted by Arab forensic interviewers. In multicultural Israeli society, Muslim Arabs make up 18% of the population. In addition to the religious and cultural difference, this minority is involved in an ongoing conflict with the majority Jewish society in Israel and tends to have low trust of government authorities. This background necessarily affects the area of forensic interviews with children. The research explores the unique encounter between maltreated children from Israeli Muslim Arab society and forensic interviewers, highlighting its particular characteristics and challenges. Data analysis revealed a central theme of a clash of worlds. The forensic interviewers, although hailing from

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a similar background as the children, followed best practices developed in western societies. The children, on the other hand, faced enormous conflict in addressing CSA terminology and complying with the requirements of the forensic world in ways that are forbidden to them in their own. Moreover, having been educated to accept the authority of adults unquestioningly, the children were torn between the difficulty of disclosing the abuse to someone outside the family, and the obligation to communicate candidly with the adult interviewer as required in the forensic context. The findings highlight the urgent need to reform the services these children receive and to dedicate future efforts to further assessment of cultural context and its impact on maltreated children, particularly in the forensic context.

Keywords

forensic interviews, Israeli Muslim Arab children, child maltreatment, child sexual abuse, cultural context

Introduction

Child maltreatment is a large-scale, worldwide social problem with a wide range of consequences for children, their families, and society as a whole (e.g., Alisic et al., 2011; Corwin & Keeshin, 2011). In the last decades, many efforts have been made to improve the services children receive following disclosure of maltreatment, with studies focusing mainly on clinical and forensic interventions (e.g., Malloy et al., 2011). While these intensive efforts have greatly improved interventions for children, they rarely focus on the cultural context, which is considered a core component in children's lives (e.g., Fontes, 2005; Gelles, 2017; Korbin, 1991). The current study was designed to spotlight the encounter of Israeli Muslim Arab children with forensic interviewers during forensic interviews investigating child sexual abuse (CSA).

Every year, thousands of forensic interview requests are received by the Service of Child Forensic Interviews in Israel, including requests relating to Israeli Muslim Arab children (Katz, 2015). However, the number of such interviews of Muslim Arab children has not been reported, nor has it been documented in the Israeli system. This information gap may be explained by the possible perception that there is no fundamental difference between forensic interviews of Jewish and Muslim Arab children in Israel. This assumption, however, has not been substantiated, and it is likely that investigative interviews of Israeli Arab children are subject to unique cultural and political factors that differ from those prevailing in Western societies, including aspects of Israeli Jewish society.

Israeli Arab Children: Cultural and Political Contexts

Arab society constitutes a relatively large ethnic minority within Israel, making up 21% of the population. Muslims make up the vast majority of Arab society (18% of the Israeli population), together with Christians, Druze, and members of other religions (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Israeli Arab society is largely characterized by a traditional collectivist orientation, relying on values of interdependence, harmony, hierarchy, commitment to maintaining the reputation of the extended family, social cohesion, modesty, and satisfying others' needs even at the expense of individual needs, at both the social and family levels (Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2011; Barakat, 1985; Ben-Ari & Pines, 2002). These characteristics create a challenging cross-cultural encounter with the values and norms of the Jewish majority in the country (Abu Asbah, 2018; Sharabi, 2011). Such an encounter has led to a permeation of Western values into Arab society, often engendering certain social changes, such as reduction in the power and influence of the extended family (*hamula*) and changes in the structure and division of roles within the family (Dwairy, 2006; Kimmerling, 2004).

One significant manifestation of social change in Arab society in Israel involves the status of children and adolescents. The traditional structure devalues the identity of children, with little regard to their feelings and desires (Abu-Baker, 2007; Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Ben-Ari & Pines, 2002; Dwairy, 2006; Haj-Yahia, 1995). In this traditional view, the parent-child relationship is characterized by domination and submission (Haj-Yahia, 1995; Khamis, 2000). Children are usually considered responsible for understanding the needs of adults (Abu-Baker, 2007), for prioritizing the good of the family above their own good (Budman et al., 1992) and for adapting themselves to the values and generally accepted practices of the family (Dwairy, 2006). During difficult times, the Arab child thus tends to seek solutions within the family and to act upon them (Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Graham et al., 2010).

However, in recent decades there has been evidence of a change in the perception of child centrality, creating dilemmas and conflicts with regard to childrearing and education (Haj-Yahia-Abu Ahmad, 2006). At the same time, a child who is noncompliant with traditional norms and unaccepting of cultural and social family values often faces social rejection and punishment (Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Al-Krenawi, & Graham, 2000; Haj-Yahia, 1995). Termination of family support, or even the threat of termination, is a source of stress and can damage self-esteem and increase anxiety (Barakat, 1985).

Alongside these cultural characteristics, consideration must be given to the historical sociopolitical context, that is, the ethno-cultural composition of the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, as well as the ongoing Palestinian–Israeli conflict, which create mutual distrust often reflected in suspicion of government organizations (Ben-Ari & Pines, 2002; Hussein, 2000). It is also important to note the uniqueness of the Arabs' historical political position: While minorities in most countries mainly comprised immigrants, Arab citizens of Israel are native, having become a minority only after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (Ghanem, 2002). Moreover, Arabs in Israel, who comprise more than one fifth of the population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), have poorer social conditions and less social capital than their Jewish counterparts: They are characterized by lower education levels (Abu-Saad, 2004); higher rates of unemployment and unskilled labor; higher poverty rates; and poorer living conditions in neighborhoods subject to crime, violence, and road safety issues (Daoud et al., 2017; National Insurance Institute, 2015). These sociocultural and political conditions are important for understanding the issue of maltreatment of Israeli Arab children and specifically the encounter of the children with the forensic interviewers following CSA.

Israeli Arab Children and Child Maltreatment

According to the intersectionality approach, culture cannot, in itself explain child maltreatment, which is related to larger societal factors, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geographical location (Nadan et al., 2015). In this regard, the cultural, political, geographical, and organizational characteristics of Israeli Arab society can create many risks for children, and these risks are intensified by child maltreatment.

The lower socioeconomic status of Israeli Arabs compared with Jews (Sulimani-Aidan, & Benbenishty, 2013) often has enormous impact on the quality of social services that Arabs receive. For instance, smaller numbers of social workers are employed in Arab localities (Ben-Arieh & Haj-Yahia, 2006). Ben-Arieh (2010) points to strong relationships between the availability and quality of child protection services and the likelihood of these services being requested, which is reflected in disclosure rates among children who are victims of sexual abuse (Ben-Arieh & Haj-Yahia, 2006). Indeed, research has found a relationship between the deficiency in child protection social services in Arab society and the lower disclosure rates compared with rates for Jewish children (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2010; Ben-Arieh, 2010).

Preliminary research conducted in 2012–2013 explored, for the first time, child maltreatment rates among Israelis aged 12 to 16 (Eisikovits & Lev-Wiesel, 2013), comparing 2,274 Arab children to 8,239 Jewish children. Of

the Jewish children, 17.6% reported sexual abuse; 8.3% said they suffered serious sexual abuse; about half (46.5%) of those who reported CSA said the abuse occurred more than once; and almost a third (29.7%) of the sexual abuse incidents occurred within the family. Percentages of CSA in the group of Arab children were even higher: 22.3% reported sexual abuse; 11.8% said they had experienced severe sexual abuse; about half (49.4%) of those reporting CSA indicated the abuse occurred more than once; and two thirds reported sexual abuse within the family (Eisikovits & Lev-Wiesel, 2013). These findings stress even further the importance of investigating CSA among Israeli Arab children.

Israeli Arab Children and Forensic Interviews

Like many other countries, Israel has recognized the need for specific and varied interventions for dealing with CSA, one of which is the child forensic interview (Orbach & Pipe, 2011). The 1955 Law of Evidence (for further elaboration, see Katz, 2015) regulates child investigations and puts central role to the testimony of the children (Lamb et al., 2011; Malloy et al., 2010). This means that children play a decisive role in disclosing and substantiating the abuse. The law requires further that children involved in a criminal event as victims, witnesses, and even suspects are to be interrogated by child investigators only, and that any information gleaned from such an interrogation will be considered admissible evidence in a legal proceeding (Orbach & Pipe, 2011).

In Israel, as in many other countries worldwide, all forensic interviewers follow the protocol of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD; Lamb et al., 2011): a set of structured, practical guidelines that cover all phases of the interview (Lamb et al., 2011). The NICHD Protocol has been found to elicit rich testimonies from children of all ages in response to free-recall invitations (Lamb et al., 2011). It has been implemented in the United States, Israel, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and follow-up studies have systematically shown significant improvements in the quality of forensic interviews (Lamb et al., 2007; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg et al., 2001). Specifically, the Protocol has been found to have beneficial effects on credibility assessment (Hershkovitz et al., 2007), the elicitation of investigative leads (Darwish et al., 2008), and case disposition and resolution (Pipe et al., 2008).

There is consensus in both research and practice that the ultimate goal of forensic interviews is to elicit a detailed and reliable or rich testimony (Malloy et al., 2010). The richness of a testimony is assessed by the number of legally relevant details provided by the child, and it represents a key indicator for

assessing its legal reliability (Malloy et al., 2010). Studies have pointed to a variety of variables potentially affecting the richness of testimonies by children during forensic interviews (e.g., Lamb et al., 2011), mainly addressing child characteristics such as age, gender, and abuse characteristics.

Even before addressing the importance of the richness of testimonies, however, it is crucial that children disclose the abuse. Accordingly, previous studies have also dedicated considerable efforts in advancing theory with respect to disclosure rates as related to age, gender, and relationship with the perpetrator. However, the way context informs disclosure in the forensic interview has been largely overlooked, which is surprising given previous studies indicating the importance of context to the disclosure of CSA. Children are often surrounded by an overt or covert conspiracy of silence and denial. Disclosure under these circumstances could result in censure, blaming, punishment, social rejection, and stigma, and these may be significantly related to cultural background (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). Thus, understanding the norms of a given culture may promote understanding of CSA as experienced by the victims and their significant others and as affecting the likelihood of CSA disclosure.

The Current Study

The quality of forensic interviews has been widely studied, albeit mainly among children in the West (e.g., Lamb et al., 2011; Lamb et al., 2007). In particular, there is a dearth of research on sexually abused Israeli Arab children. The present exploratory study examines forensic interviews of Israeli Muslim Arab children, shedding light on the dynamics and challenges of their encounter with forensic interviewers. Thematic analysis was informed by an attempt to portray the interactions between children and forensic interviewers, with consideration given for identifying any challenges.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of interview transcripts of 30 Muslim Arab children (ages 7–14; 17 girls, 13 boys) who had undergone forensic interviews following suspicion of CSA. The selected interviews had to meet the following inclusion criteria: the child was interviewed after suspected sexual abuse; it was the child's first interview; the child disclosed the abuse during the forensic interview; the child had no documented developmental disabilities; and there was external evidence suggesting a high likelihood of abuse (e.g., suspect admission). The decision to focus on substantiated cases of CSA

derived from the exploratory nature of the current study: We wanted to concentrate on the encounter with the forensic interviewers and the challenges it posed for the children rather than be distracted by questions of their reliability as witnesses.

In 12 out of the 30 cases, the suspects were family members (father, brother, or uncle) and 18 were acquaintances (friends or teachers). The alleged incidents occurred multiple times, with nine and six cases of touching intimate body parts over and under the children's clothes, respectively, and 15 cases of penetration. All of the children were referred for a forensic interview following a report of a teacher or a consultant in their school, after having presented worrisome signs.

Five forensic interviewers (four women) conducted the interviews, all of them Muslim Arabs. All have received initial training followed by weekly individual and group supervision (for further elaboration on the thorough training process of forensic interviews in Israel, see Katz, 2015). They all had a bachelor's degree in social work and at least 3 years' experience with forensic interviews. All the forensic interviews in the current study were conducted in the Arabic language. Interviews were video recorded and transcribed by a professional company that works with the Service of Child Forensic Interviews in Israel. The transcripts were provided to the research team only after the identifying information of all children and any other people involved in the incidents was deleted.

Instrument and Procedure

Interviews were conducted in Israel between 2013 and 2016. Every interview closely followed the practical guidelines of the NICHD Protocol (Lamb et al., 2011). In the pre-substantive phase, the interviewer introduces himself or herself, clarifies the task ahead for the child, and explains the ground rules and expectations. Several questions are asked in this phase to establish whether the child understands the difference between true and false statements.

A two-part rapport-building phase follows. The first part is designed to create a safe and relaxed environment for the child and to establish trust with the interviewer (Lamb et al., 2007). The second part is designed to familiarize the child with open-ended investigative interview strategies while demonstrating the specific level of detail expected in response. To that end, children are prompted to describe a recently experienced neutral event in detail.

In a transitional dialogue between the pre-substantive and substantive phases, a series of open prompts is used to non-suggestively identify the target event(s) under investigation. If a child makes an allegation during this dialogue, the free-recall phase begins with an invitation ("Tell me everything . . .") and other free-recall prompts. Once the first narration is completed, the

interviewer prompts the child to explain whether the incident happened one or more times and secures incident-specific information. Interviewers then inquire about issues mentioned by the child and request information within specific categories only after free-recall prompting (Lamb et al., 2011, 2007). They also ask direct questions addressing the child's focused recall, such as "What did he do to you?" (after the child said that "he" did something to him), "How did he touch you?" and "Where did it happen?" Only after an interviewer determines that a child has provided all the information he or she can in response to these questions will the interviewer give option-posing prompts aimed at recognition recall, such as: "Did he touch you on top of or under your clothes?" These questions are asked only when significant information has not been provided in response to open-ended or directive questions. Forensic interviewers are advised to avoid suggestive questions such as: "It hurt you, right?"

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis strategy to allow an inductive approach in exploring children's experiences and perceptions in the context of CSA and Arab society. The transcripts underwent several interrelated stages of qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first, the researchers identified preliminary ideas related to the research question, which addressed the encounter between the children and the forensic interviewers, its characteristics, and possible challenges. The first two authors read the first 10 interviews repeatedly, breaking down each case into small textual segments representing discrete units of meaning. The segments included both the children's verbatim narratives, the questions asked by interviewers, and most importantly, the interactions between the questions and the answers, which was highly informative of the relationships between the children and the interviewers.

Note that while both groups belonged to the same culture, the interviewers' training was based on Western values and was not culturally adapted. The protocol, although translated into Arabic, was also not culturally adapted. Thus, during the analysis, the authors paid great attention to the relation between the questions asked and the children's responses, not only in terms of verbal content, but also in terms of gaps between the interviewers and the children's normative perceptions.

Based on this preliminary acquaintance, the second stage entailed grouping the identified codes into initial themes. As the authors continued reading, some of these were removed or revised and additional codes and categories were added. At this stage, the other authors coded the same texts, such that all researchers analyzed the remaining interviews.

In the next stage, themes and subthemes were reviewed, classified, and reclassified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, themes were refined and named, and interrelationships between them were suggested (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The authors referred back to the transcripts to retrieve any more information needed to develop the categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). All disagreements between authors during the coding procedure were resolved by discussions that led to consensus.

Trustworthiness was achieved by audit trails and peer debriefing, which were carried out once a week throughout the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). The audit trail consisted of documenting how raw data were collected and analyzed. Direct quotes of participants were attached to all interpretations, and the peer debriefing process was documented in writing (Bowen, 2009). The authors also wrote journals to maintain awareness of influences on their interpretations (Jootun et al., 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Because this study is based on confidential files with highly personal information, the authors made concerted efforts to conduct the research in compliance with ethical standards. Thus, the study was approved by the research board of the Israeli Ministry of Welfare; the manager of the Service of Child Forensic Interviews in Israel; and the ethics board of Tel Aviv University. To ensure compliance with ethical principles, all transcripts were sent to researchers without names or identifying features of the children, parents, or other people and places involved.

Findings

Data analysis revealed a central theme of clash between the forensic interviewers and the abused Muslim Arab children. This clash revolved around four cultural dimensions which were identified within all the children's narratives: (a) direct versus oblique terminology when describing sexual acts; (b) the child at the center versus the family at the center; (c) disclosing to formal authorities as a desired versus dangerous outcome; and (d) enabling reliable testimony versus encouraging attempts to please the adult.

Direct Versus Oblique Terminology When Describing Sexual Acts

The children's compliance with cultural expectations was evident in the discussion of the nature of the CSA. One of the key aims of a forensic interview is to shed light on the nature of the abuse and to receive rich, coherent, and

reliable testimony. However, the discussion of sexual content with children is taboo in Israeli Arab society, and this created a unique challenge for both the children and the interviewers.

In response to specific questions about the sexual acts, such as “tell me exactly what he did to you,” “tell me where he touched you,” or “please tell me the exact name of the body part you are pointing at,” children replied in a culturally sanctioned manner. That is, they had great difficulty naming anatomic parts correctly and speaking explicitly about sexual abuse. When asked specific questions about body parts, they often remained silent and had difficulty providing the required information. When they did respond, they used euphemisms such as “the forbidden name” and “the shame place” and described incidents obliquely: “He did something dirty to me”; “He did something forbidden to me.” This difficulty with discussing sexual content was evident even among the older children, who are assumed to be more familiar with the relevant terms.

The following interview segment illustrates this dynamic:

Interviewer: Where exactly did he touch you?

Child: It is shameful.

Interviewer: You can tell me everything here.

Child: I . . . ah . . . this is forbidden, he did something shameful to me.

The Child at the Center Versus the Family at the Center

Whereas the interviewers' questions focused on the children and their experiences, the children focused on their families when responding. In the pre-substantive phase, when the children were asked to “tell me about the things you like to do,” all answers followed the same pattern: “I love to help my mother and father”; “I love to help my family.”

The children's responses to the interviewers' attempts to understand whether they disclosed the alleged abuse to someone were also focused on their families:

- I am not stupid enough to say this and shame myself and my family.
- Why are you asking me this question? Don't you know I was raised properly and would not do such a thing?

The focus on the family is further highlighted in the following dialogue:

Interviewer: Would you like to tell the judge what happened to you?

Child: That is not my decision to make.

Interviewer: So whose decision is it?

Child: My parents'

Disclosing to Formal Authorities as a Desired Versus Dangerous Outcome

In addition to the children's commitment to the cultural norms of their upbringing, the challenging political context was evident in their narratives and their dynamics with the forensic interviewers. Their mistrust of formal authorities was tangible, as they first verified that the interviewer was "like them" before they would cooperate. Even then, this agreement was only on condition that their story would not be relayed to other formal organizations. This mistrust was integrated into the children's narratives from the start (in the pre-substantive phase), through the discussion of the alleged incident (the substantive phase) and until the close of the interview: "Who will see this?"; "Will you show it to anyone?" The following quote illustrates this difficulty:

Interviewer: It's very important that you tell me everything that happened to you.

Child: But will other people know about it?

Interviewer: Only people who can help you.

Child: But who will see this? Whom do you know?

It is important to note the complexity of this situation for the children. On one hand, they voiced mistrust that the interviewers were not "like them," but on the other hand, they feared the possible consequences of being interviewed by an Israeli Arab and the risk of disclosing information to someone from their close circle: "So you are an Arab like me? So do you know my family? People from my village?"

Enabling a Reliable Testimony Versus Attempts to Please the Adult

Forensic interviews of abused children are constructed so as to avoid child bias and thus include questions aimed at establishing whether the child understands the difference between true and false statements. Yet for the Israeli Muslim Arab children in this study, who are often required to understand adults' needs and prioritize these needs over their own, this produced conflictual feelings. The children's perceptions and experiences of the adult as an authority figure were identified in both their narratives and their behavior during the forensic interviews.

This perception of the adult in the center was also reflected in relations with the forensic interviewers. When the interviewer failed to understand some of a child's words, the child adjusted his or her vocabulary in an attempt

to help. In addition, the child referred to the forensic interviewer in terms indicating respect: "My uncle"; "My teacher." A more elaborate example is played out in the following exchange:

Interviewer: Tell me about the first time with your brother.

Child: I can't remember.

Interviewer: But I need your help with this.

Child: Okay, my uncle, I will do my best.

This illustrates the risky dynamic that can be generated from strategies of supporting and encouraging the children to talk. These strategies were developed among children from Western societies and aimed at strengthening the child as the sole source of information. However, as can be seen above, for children from Israeli Arab society, this strategy becomes enmeshed with the inherent imbalance between children and adults. As an adult, the forensic interviewer is in a dominant position and the child cannot fail him or her.

These basic rules in the interview protocol seem to present a challenge in the pre-substantive phase as well. For example, when practicing communication rules, the following conversation took place:

Interviewer: If I say you're a girl, what would you say?

Boy: I would say God will forgive you.

This child does not realize the interviewer is being hypothetical. Instead, he takes the statement at face value and sees it as an insult. Because of the imbalance between them, the only way for the child to reply is to pray for the interviewer. Similarly, in the substantive phase, when a child wanted the interviewer to take him seriously, he felt a need to swear: "I swear to you in the name of God, in the name of the Prophet . . ."

Discussion

The current exploratory study performed an in-depth thematic analysis of transcripts of forensic interviews of Israeli Muslim Arab children who were alleged victims of CSA, with the aim of uncovering the dynamics between the children and the forensic interviewers, as well as pointing out the challenges these dynamics can present. The study's initial assumption was that forensic interviews of Israeli Muslim Arab children require more than the translation of practical guidelines. The findings stress the need for future efforts dedicated to cultural adaptations of interventions with children following CSA.

Though the need for cultural adaptations is illustrated through the example of Israeli Muslim Arab children, it is relevant to other cultural groups, both in Israel and worldwide, that are unique and different from Western groups. To date, most literature on sexual abuse disclosure has been conducted with children from Western societies (e.g., London et al., 2008; Pipe et al., 2007). These studies suggest possible explanations and offer intervention strategies for various challenges of disclosure, yet pay little attention to the effect of macro systems, such as culture, on the disclosure patterns of children, even though research (e.g., Fontes, 2005; Fontes & Plummer, 2010) has highlighted the importance of cultural context with regard to children's disclosure and the need for further exploration. The current study also emphasizes the political complexity that often accompanies the cultural dimension of forensic interviews and calls for additional research into this issue as well.

Forensic interviews were designed to be an adequate tool for children's disclosure of abuse. Yet, though the practical guidelines used with the Israeli Muslim Arab children were translated into Arabic, there was no further cultural adaptation, which created a setting that conflicted with the basic cultural values of children and the forensic interviewers alike and created clashes between them. Specifically, we found four major areas of conflict.

First, whereas interviewers required direct terminology describing the sexual acts, the children used oblique terminology, perceiving direct terms as taboo. The children's narratives consistently stressed that they could not provide such information; they either did not understand the question or felt shame mentioning such terms. This may be explained by the Arab culture, which holds conservative attitudes about sex. Indeed, sex education is frowned upon in the Arab school system in Israel (Abu-Baker, 2013); discourse on sexuality and sexual abuse is muted (Abu-Baker, 2013; Gesser-Edelsburg & Arabia, 2018); and the discussion of intimate body parts may not be allowed (Timraz et al., 2019).

A second clash occurred because forensic interviewers positioned the children at the center of the interview, aiming to empower them as decision makers and exclusive sources of information. While studies in Western society consider such strategies as enhancing children's performance within the forensic context (e.g., Malloy et al., 2011), this seems to create intense power relations and possible stress among Israeli Muslim Arab children. Similarly, the forensic interviewers expected the children to disclose the abuse incidents in isolation from their families; instead, the children preferred to place their family at the center, in keeping with cultural norms. While the fear of children in general of hurting their family as a result of disclosure, or being hurt by their families, has been extensively researched (e.g., Draucker & Martsof, 2008; Hunter, 2011), complexity is even greater

when it comes to Arab children. In contrast to Western culture, Arab culture gives primacy to family cohesion and solidarity over the well-being of the individual (Haboush & Alyan, 2013). Familial piety, hierarchical parent–child roles, and the importance of family honor are all central features of Arab society, and children may be expected to sacrifice their own well-being for the benefit of their family (Budman et al., 1992; Haboush & Alyan, 2013). By excluding other family members, the interview setting conflicts with the child’s cultural needs. The interviewers expected the children to make decisions which, based on their culture, were not theirs to make.

Third, while forensic interviewers encouraged disclosure to formal authorities, presenting this as a desirable outcome, the children were worried that this would harm them, their families, and their communities. This fear was based on their cultural understanding that if they were raised properly and respect their families, they should not disclose secrets, such as abuse (Haj-Yahia, 1995). In patriarchal society, the decision of whether to disclose is strictly up to the adult. Furthermore, Arab families tend to be sensitive to any scandal (*fadiha*) causing damage to their social reputation (Abu-Baker, 2007). For instance, extramarital sexual relations are considered severely harmful to the honor (*sharaf*) not only of the perpetrator, but also the victim and families on both sides (Touma-Suliman, 2006). When personal or family honor is perceived as harmed, some families even practice so-called “honor killing,” murdering the victim or the perpetrator (Hasan, 2003; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005).

Beyond the cultural component, the historical inherent suspicion between the Arab minority and Israeli authorities (Ben-Ari & Pines, 2002; Hussein, 2000) is also relevant. The meeting with an institutional body, and certainly law authorities, carries with it a significant political burden. This tense political context intensifies the conflict of the child in the forensic interview position, which may exacerbate a feeling of betrayal.

Finally, the goal of the forensic interviewers was to obtain a reliable testimony, whereas the children made considerable efforts to please the adult, a common behavior in their culture. These dynamics between the child and the forensic interviewer, in keeping with studies on the pleasing pattern toward parental and authoritarian figures in Arab society (Khamis, 2000), underscore the imbalance of power that exists in any encounter between a child and a professional, especially in the forensic context, but apparently more so in specific cultural contexts. Instead of being empowered by interviewers, Arab children are busy trying to make them happy.

The above clashes highlight the intersection of the cultural and political contexts, which is critically relevant to a better understanding of the problem of disclosure. As described earlier, the children displayed feelings of mistrust

toward their interviewers. Their narratives emphasize that disclosure is a double-edged sword: Not only do they struggle with trusting formal Israeli authorities, but they also struggle in regard to authorities of their own culture, who share their beliefs and values, as they fear the forensic interviewers might share the reported information with their families or even their entire village. Thus, even if a child wants to tell, has to tell, needs to tell, to whom can he or she disclose? This inner conflict, which can be inferred from the children's narratives, highlights the difficult position in which these children are placed.

This dilemma deserves special consideration by both practitioners and policymakers. Traditional Arab norms in Israel relating to sexual behavior and misbehavior do not permit the release of information to authorities. These norms contradict the state's dominant Western cultural norms. Many Arabs in Israel therefore feel that Israeli legislation does not adequately consider the immediate and long-term harmful effects of overt legal procedures on the structure and reputation of Arab families. These intersecting aspects continue to influence families' decisions to treat cases of CSA away from the influence of authorities. Furthermore, Arab families in Israel rely on their extended families, despite individual cases of abuse or mistrust, sensing that social welfare authorities and police ignore possible harm to the family reputation when filing abuse charges.

All these clashes are related to the broad ecological framework of the context-informed perspective. The essence of that perspective is that a person's life is influenced by many intertwining contexts, including sociopolitical, historical, economic, cultural, religious and spiritual contexts (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Roer-Strier, 2016). This perspective calls on researchers and practitioners to simultaneously take into account both the macro sociopolitical structural level and the micro level, including the numerous identities and characteristics of individuals and families (Nadan et al., 2015).

Our findings encourage us to reflect on the tension surrounding the conflicting cultural and value systems of minority groups and practitioners that becomes evident and intensifies when dealing with sensitive issues such as CSA. This tension does not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a complex arena embedded in power differentials related to professional role (clients vs. practitioner) and social location (minority vs. a representative of the hegemonic majority group).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has a number of limitations. First, as this is a new research area, our findings are tentative and in need of replication. This exploratory study is based on a small sample in a specific setting of

forensic interviews. Thus, its findings cannot be generalized to all Arab children who have experienced CSA in Israel, let alone other populations and contexts. Rather, by presenting the experience of the children, we hope to contribute insights and encourage further studies on this difficult subject from an insider perspective.

A second limitation is related to the context of the forensic interview. The forensic interview is meant to provide reliable testimony on abuse for forensic purposes. As such, it often lacks essential parts of children's experiences, such as feelings and thoughts about the offender, perceptions of the family, cultural habits, coping, and resilience. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with Arab children could yield many more significant details.

A third limitation is that the study did not examine contextual factors with potentially deep effects on the victims' experiences, such as socioeconomic status, which may operate beyond or in interaction with religious affiliation (Nadan et al., 2015). Future studies should address this issue and the ways it may affect CSA incidence, duration, and disclosure. Theories of intersectionality, which relate to how interacting identities such as race, class, religion, and gender affect the individual simultaneously (Nadan et al., 2015), can make significant contributions in this regard.

The study is also limited by its observation of only Muslim Arab children in Israel, disregarding other Arab groups with different religious beliefs (e.g., Christian Arabs). Furthermore, studies of Arab groups with differing levels of exposure to Israeli Jewish society, such as those living in villages versus urban groups, could provide additional information. Future research should trace these important contextual factors.

Furthermore, this study focused on the exclusive experience of CSA victims. To understand the phenomenon more broadly, future studies should examine the perceptions and voices of other significant actors within the abuse dynamic, including parents and other family members (e.g., siblings who witnessed the abuse), perpetrators, professionals, and police officers. Moreover, it can be assumed that the voices rising from the current study, reflecting children's perceptions in real time, might be different from their perception of the event retrospectively, years later.

Finally, this study is based, by definition, on survivors who have disclosed their CSA during childhood and whose cases have led to formal intervention. It does not address victims from the Arab community who have never disclosed to anyone, a group that is both larger, perhaps with different characteristics, and certainly in greater need of help. Retrospective studies of adult survivors, as well as alleged perpetrators from within Arab society, and perhaps also community leaders with experience dealing with CSA disclosure can provide crucial information on the topic.

The current study points to important directions for further exploration in the area of forensic interviews with children. First, previous studies of Israeli children have not addressed the specific group of Arab children that is the focus of the current study, raising several questions that must be further examined in future studies. For example, one aspect in the forensic interviews that needs to be further assessed and modified is the way the power imbalance between the children and the forensic interviewers should be approached. Another is misunderstood and forbidden words used in questioning children in this context. By mapping the various clashes involved in this encounter, the present study can be a first step in addressing these challenges.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Focusing on the unique cultural and political contexts that impact the encounters of Israeli Muslim Arab children with forensic interviewers following the disclosure of CSA, this study highlights the need for future efforts to target these specific issues. Despite a growing acknowledgment of the centrality of cultural characteristics when dealing with child maltreatment, no cultural adaptations have been made in the forensic context. Nor has the political context been taken into account. The first step is to document forensic interviews with children while addressing not only their ages and gender but also their contextual background. This documentation will enhance future efforts to culturally adapt the forensic context to the mutual benefit of both interviewees and interviewers.

In addition, our tentative findings call upon researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to consider cultural characteristics in interventions and prevention efforts for abused children. Our findings suggest that the very skills learned by interviewers, which aid them in interviewing Western children, can be harmful and offensive to Arab children. Professionals who work with Muslim Arab children need to acquire sufficient knowledge and training in significant cultural-societal characteristics and to be aware of unique cultural and spiritual needs (Furness & Gilligan, 2014; Nadan & Ganz, 2018; Oxhandler et al., 2015). This is in keeping with the call to practitioners to move beyond cultural descriptions and stereotypes toward listening to the meanings that clients assign to their lives and their experiences within their unique life contexts (Hollinsworth, 2013; Nadan, 2017). Indeed, it is only by weaving together various perspectives and considering all aspects of the lives of children and their families—including cultural and political elements—that effective interventions and prevention efforts can be achieved.

In addition, the study findings suggest that while the disclosure of CSA may be a primary target of intervention with children who have suffered CSA, such disclosure can be harmful to survivors (e.g., Draucker & Martsof, 2008). In certain cultural contexts, such as Muslim Arab society in Israel, disclosure to formal authorities may actually endanger the child and his or her family, with life-threatening results. Note that Israel has a special Exemption Committee, which can allow temporary exemption from reporting abuse to the police together with a referral for therapeutic intervention. The composition of this committee is determined by law, and its members include a senior representative of the State Prosecutor's Office, a police officer and a district-level child protection officers (CPOs) (Tarshish & Tener, 2019). The committee is authorized to grant a permanent exemption or to cancel the temporary exemption and order legal intervention (Roth, 2010; Tener et al., 2019).

This unique model aims to deal with culturally sensitive CSA cases. The advantages of the committee in cases requiring cultural sensitivity, and specifically with Muslim children, lies in the thorough assessment it performs based on victim, perpetrator, family, and abuse characteristics (Tener et al., 2019). The committee emphasizes the need to protect victims to prevent recurrence of the abuse and yet also acknowledges their cultural needs and the danger that lies in ignoring them. For example, in cases of Muslim children, the committee can decide to grant exemption from mandatory reporting that endangers the victims' lives and instead offer an alternative which includes creating safety plan for the victim: Separate the victim from the perpetrator and ensure the victim is not be abused again by the perpetrator or other family members, including the extended family (Herzog & Yahia-Younis, 2007). Thus, the exemption committee serves as a tool for professionals to deal with the inherent complexity of CSA cases and to create an alternative intervention route that better fits the family unit, enabling discretion based on professional judgment and therapeutic needs (Tarshish & Tener, 2019).

One finding that stood out in the children's encounter with the forensic interviewer was their difficulty finding words to refer to sexual issues and intimate body parts and the use of alternative terms from their cultural world. Similar results have been found among Jewish religious children who suffered CSA (Bedihi, 2008; Ben Meir & Levavi, 2010; Eisen & Berman, 2018). These alternative concepts are not necessarily understandable to the child investigator or legally valid. It is therefore of critical importance that professionals working with abused Arab children learn to understand these concepts and offer them valid alternatives to direct reference to private parts, which the children may view as inappropriate. This emphasizes the need to adjust the requirements of children in the forensic context, as well as to be sensitive to the possible consequences that encounters with formal authorities can have in the lives of Israeli Muslim Arab children and families.

Finally, the involvement of authority figures in the Arab community may be essential for encouraging disclosure and facilitating effective interventions. Religious leaders such as imams may employ a collectivist orientation to assist families of Arab origin to better support child victims of CSA, and they can be influential in affirming that Islam does not condone sexual abuse (Abu-Baker & Dwairy, 2003; Abu Raiya et al., 2010; Weatherhead & Daiches, 2010).

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