

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING, AUTHORITY, AGENCY AND CONSENT:  
DOES ACCURATE LANGUAGE MATTER WHEN WE DISCUSS SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE  
AGAINST CHILDREN?

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**Abstract**

Sexualized violence against children is a topic that many in our North American society find uncomfortable to discuss freely. Alongside this very common discomfort with the topic is a general lack of dialogue. As a society, we long ago created an accepted way of discussing the topic that constrains these events to a certain light or perspective. The language of sexual interaction (which is mutual) rather than language of violent interaction (which is unilateral) is most often used when we talk about this violation of children; we talk about acts of 'fondling' and 'intercourse' with a minor. Do we believe that children are engaged in sexual relations? Sexual acts are defined as mutual and the sexual terms we use for these acts imply consent. Rape is violence that is sexualized, forced and unilateral. Accurate language that takes into consideration authentic concise definitions of terms and that accurately reflects the agency of individuals involved in an act or event will thus communicate the nuances, intentionality and relational interactions of the crime more precisely. This thesis will deal with language and meaning, how we acquire and share concepts, and how accuracy in the language of description of real world events more precisely communicates accuracy of meaning, intentionality and agency, thus forming our social construction of the meaning of the event. In general, agency, implied consent, meaning, agreed-upon definitions or terminology and thus collectively held social 'truth' are co-created and communicated in language. Adults impart this knowledge to children as children learn language and societal norms. Adults often look to wise authority for guidance and for their frame of reference regarding usage and meaning. In the field of sexualized violence against children, the authority would be the professionals who work within the field. The question then is: when individuals who work within the field of sexualized violence against children are introduced to the discussion of the accurate use of language that is violence-based rather than the use of language that is heavily sex-act based (i.e. language that obscures the agency of the perpetrator thus implicating the child in the act) that is not accurate for what is occurring during the sexualized violation of a child, what is the response from these professionals? This thesis will discuss how meaning is socially constructed and communicated through language and will present a discourse analysis of the narrative elicited from a survey offered to professionals who variously work in the field of sexualized violence against children, asking about accurate language use as introduced by the project "Tell it like it is!".

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>3</b>
My Position as Researcher and My Researcher Bias.....	10
Definition of Terms.....	13
Research Question.....	13
Research design .....	14
Tell it Like it is! Project.....	14
<b>Overview of the Topics .....</b>	<b>16</b>
Child Development and The Child's Acquisition of Language and Meaning.....	16
Meaning as Socially Constructed .....	21
The Rights of The Child.....	33
Agency.....	36
Consent.....	42
The Role of Authority in Forming Meaning.....	49
<b>Methods .....</b>	<b>53</b>
Overview of the Survey.....	53
Data Gathering.....	54
Thematic Analysis .....	54
<b>Results and Analysis .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>58</b>
General Overview of the Results .....	59
Limitations of the Study .....	60
Implications for Further Research.....	64
Conclusions and Implications for Those Working in the Field .....	67
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>APPENDIX A.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>APPENDIX B.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>APPENDIX C .....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>APPENDIX D.....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>APPENDIX E .....</b>	<b>81</b>

## **Introduction**

### **Overview and Significance of the Topic**

Sexualized violence against children is not a topic easily discussed in North American society. When I am asked, across a dinner table, what my thesis topic is and I start talking about the language used around the rape of children, how the violence is not portrayed accurately but instead the event is sexualized or the violence obscured through the choice of language, there are blank stares, lots of fidgeting and either vast silence or nervous chattering in the nature of 'how awful' or 'what a difficult topic to go into'. Concomitant with this very common discomfort with the subject comes a general lack of dialogue and an apparent lack of socially acceptable manner of talking, that puts the events in a certain light or perspective. The language of sexual interaction (seen as mutual) rather than of criminal, violent interaction (seen as unilateral) is most often used when we talk about this violation of children (Coates & Wade, 2004). For example, media reports regarding perpetrators frequently reiterate the words 'fondling' or 'intercourse' with children, using terms that are mutualizing, commonly used for consensual sex acts, when the reality is that the rape of a child is a unilateral act (Coates & Wade, 2004).

Sexual acts are defined as mutual and the terms imply consent, while rape is violent and unilateral (Coates & Wade, 2004). Language that takes into consideration accurate and concise definitions of terms and that authentically reflects the agency of individuals involved in an event will thus communicate the nuances, intentionality and relational interactions of the event more accurately (Bandura, 1997; Splitter, 2011; <http://tell->

it.info). So, when we don't use accurate language, what does this communicate in terms of the meaning that is socially constructed and shared in our dialogue?

The children who are victims of sexualized violence that is referred to in sexual terminology are characterized as participating in a consensual act. The possibility for shame, for the child and within the family, is ever present, partially because our culture does not talk about this crime exclusively as an act of violence, but also as a sex act. The mis-matched terminology obscures what is being talked about (Coates & Wade, 2004). At the point where a child is learning concepts and forming fundamental meaning-making, use of language when depicting the experiences of the child may confuse the child in their formation of the concept of sex, as well as their ability to learn what healthy sexual relations are.

What happened to them is referred to in sexual terminology, and for a child, this then becomes their first foray into the realm of 'sex'. It is well documented that adults who have experienced sexualized violence in childhood have a greater incidence of sexual dysfunction, lower sexual satisfaction, depression, intimate partner issues such as divorce, morbid obesity, addiction and PTSD (Najman et al, 2005; Swaby & Morgan, 2009; Rellini & Meston, 2011; Staples et al, 2012; Pulverman et al, 2015; Brokenleg, 2012). If we generally refer to, communicate and understand that what happened to them in the realm of sexuality but not in the central category of violence, as we currently do, this might be a contributing factor of pathology experienced later in life.

As counsellors, we recognize that it is important how we frame our language when we talk about things, as professionals, as a client, as a society. Meaning has been argued to be socially constructed and shaped in language (Maines, 2000). Repeatedly, what we are

working with in our counselling spaces are those individuals who are grappling with the meaning of what happened in their lives. Coates & Wade (2004) state: “How we account for the actions of perpetrators and victims of violence has far reaching implications. Accounts are not objective or impartial reflections of events: rather, they must be treated as representations of events that vary in accuracy. Such fundamental constructs as the nature of events (e.g. violent versus sexual), the cause of the events (e.g. deliberate versus accidental), the character of the offender (e.g. good versus bad), and the character of the victim (e.g. passive versus active) are constructed within the account of the crime.” (p. 7). How we speak of events is central to how we understand the event, ourselves, and others.

This thesis deals with language and meaning, and how accuracy in the language describing real world events communicates accuracy of intentionality, agency and meaning. It has been argued that meaning is socially constructed through the language we choose to use to depict events (Hollander & Gordon, 2006; Maines 2000). In general, reality, meaning, agreed-upon definitions, terminology, depictions and thus collectively held social ‘truth’ are co-created and communicated in language (Maines, 2000). This paper will offer an overview of how children develop and first acquire language and socially constructed meaning. The universal rights of children will be introduced through a quick review of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commission, n.d.), and how this document fits into the discussion. A focus on the rights of the child opens the discussion toward just how the ability to consent can be impacted by age, poverty, coercion and other power dynamics that render children even more vulnerable than they already are as vulnerable members of society, largely due to

their age. A child's reliance on adults and their social situations makes them particularly susceptible to violence by those who may prey upon this vulnerability (Kruger et al., 2013).

Once these aforementioned aspects of the communicative act are developed, the argument will turn to authority, power and influence. If meaning is socially constructed and shared through language, and the topic of sexualized violence is one that is generally taboo in our culture, then it would seem that what little that is said, whose experience of the event receives the most prominent representation, and the language we choose to convey the subtleties of the event holds great importance (Van Dijk, T. A., 2011).

It is often the case that when very little is said, what words are said and how they are said increases in importance. In the case of sexualized violence against children, the dialogue is generally around the perpetrators and from their point of view, their intentions and experiences. The social dialogue generally is limited to the level of media, social and mental health organizations, law enforcement and politics. Thus, the dialogue, and in essence, the socially constructed meaning occurs largely from the point of view of adults and with professionals who work within the scope of sexualized violence against children. As an authority, it would seem that part of the responsibility of these professionals would be careful attention to the specific language used to describe the event from the point of view of the victim, so that the violation is accurately conveyed and can be addressed sufficiently by our judicial system. This would seem critical in forming the meanings and attitudes of our society around these topics.

Is accurate language important? Maybe it's important to those who work within the field, just like legalese is important to the select few who work with it daily. How is it important in our culture's general day-to-day? When we consider how we come to form



meaning, social understanding and how we communicate intentionality and accepted paradigms through language, especially of agency and of responsibility, we begin to understand how important it is to use accurate terms. Coates & Wade (2004) state: “For example, although the accounts ‘he kissed her’ and ‘he forced his mouth against hers’ could be used to describe ostensibly the same physical act, they suggest very different characterizations of the act (e.g. affectionate versus violent) and call for radically different actions (e.g. no intervention versus legal intervention)” (p. 7). With this in mind, precise language is important to fully and accurately represent what has occurred in the event.

If we as a society accept that sexual activities are mutual and consensual activities and that our laws recognize that children cannot consent to sex partially due to their developmental inability to understand the full nature of the act, along with other factors influencing consent, then the words we choose to use to express the intentional experiences are important to indicate the characteristics of the event we are referring to. Accurate language use in our society could help shape the perceptions of those children who are victims, and may alleviate the social stigma, shame, and any confusion within future ‘healthy’ consensual sexual relations. More precise language will also help regarding communicating full and accurate information when lawyers, courts and mental health professionals are involved in decision-making (Miranda & Saunders, 2003). It will clearly communicate that the child is a victim of violence and not of wrongful sex, and this may help our society to seek justice in relation to this crime. This framework of an accurate linguistic portrayal of the events will assist child victims to understand what happened was in no way mutual, and this will inform their healing. It will also support the perpetrator, as

the choices they make can be appropriately approached in sentencing and subsequent therapy.

Those who work variously with this subject matter may be considered to have relational authority in our community (Langford, 2010). We may look to them for expertise, and as such, they may be seen to have a responsibility in shaping the dialogue around this very important and sensitive topic. This seems especially possible and important when there is very little social dialogue around this issue in our culture.

When this preceding information regarding accurate language use is communicated, in the form of a website, to professionals working within the scope of sexualized violence against children in the fields of child protection, counselling, politics or law enforcement, what is the response? This thesis project will look at the responses to a survey asking about accurate language around sexualized violence against children, after viewing the “Tell it like it is!” website, and will present a thematic analysis of these responses.

### **My Position as Researcher and My Researcher Bias**

I have always been interested in language. I began to read when I was 4, and always enjoyed being read to. When I was about 7 or 8, I began to write songs and poetry; they weren't great, but I was enamored with working toward a precise expression, and the feelings of the words from my pen, in my mouth, on my ear. I had intended to study to be a writer, and along the way discovered the study of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, and pursued graduate studies in those areas, with interest in how we communicate and understand meaning.

I believe we are social beings, and we are compelled to share our reality, our view of the world. When we are in the place of pathology, it possibly is concerned with the lack of

being heard, loved or valued, either by others or by ourselves; when the commonly held discourse doesn't resonate with our experience and is overpowering what we need to say, we may struggle to remain in alignment with ourselves. Either the discourse shifts or we shift, and if the latter happens, we either suffer deeply or we find a different culture in which we can live where we are not alone in our version of internal misalignment of self.

I have sometimes felt like an outsider in our culture, and it was not until I was in my 40's when I discovered that I lived from an attitude of connection and collaboration, seeing connection and similarities foremost in situations and in others. This set me apart, as I generally lived much of my life in a culture of competition, power, binary thinking, being wary of those who are different and getting ahead by taking advantage of vulnerability. In contrast, I have instinctively viewed the world in terms of what connects us, our innate possibility, and our shared humanity.

I have heard others talk about individuals who have been the victims of sexualized violent crimes, as if they were forever flawed and would never be able to re-enter 'normal' society. More than once, the individuals were discussed in a manner that put them in the category of 'street-walker', as if that's all they could become. In grade 6, my physically mature school friend disclosed to me that her step-father bathed her every night and she didn't like it. In grade 8, one of my classmates dropped out of school because 'she had become pregnant' (passive construction). In grade 10, my closest friend disclosed to me that her older brother 'humped her, and other stuff'. I didn't know what to do for her. She died before grade 11 was out. As an adult, I forcibly intervened and stopped a friend from being violently raped by a man at a party and heard him try to convince her 'this will feel

nice'. These are merely the sexualized violent happenings around me, of which I was aware.

I have known what it is to have sexualized violence in my life, in many ways, and my history is likely not unique. In the wake of the trauma, as a counsellor I ask: how can a person heal when the societal or familial messages do not fit with what they 'know' they have experienced? When victims of sexualized violent crimes are at their most vulnerable, we further tear at their dignity with socially acceptable reductive language that mutualizes the event, indicating that this was fundamentally only a sexual act. For anyone who has entered into the intimacy of healthy, caring sexual expression, the two are in no way similar, other than where it may happen on the body.

I appreciate the discomfort many experience with the use of explicit terms to describe what has happened. Sexualized violence against children is an area where we should be squeamish and feel deep unrest when we talk about the details of these violations of another young, vulnerable human being. To soften the language by mutualizing the act into sexual activity merely obscures the abuses of power contained within it, adding to the skewed power dynamic. Language that does not accurately represent the experience of the child victim disrespects the human being who has suffered this overwhelming, overpowering indignity. It does not speak to the physical and psychological struggle or to the fear the child victim experiences, in the moment and thereafter. I feel it is our duty to protect our children, to educate each other about the indignities the child victim has experienced and support him or her in the healing process, through acknowledging, by accurate language, that this was a unilateral act of violence that was perpetuated on them.

I do want to mention that I realize that the other human being involved is not a monster, but also requires social support, no matter how heinous the crime. Obscuring the 'reality' of the event, the agency and deliberate choices the perpetrator made to lure or coerce the child victim and the implicit or explicit violence that was involved to succeed at this, does not help begin the restitution and the healing the perpetrator must move through to feel whole and to be accepted again by society. Accurate language also supports the perpetrator to acknowledge what they have chosen to do, atone for it, and seek healing (Coates & Wade, 2004).

When creating the survey, I tried to be aware of my bias and ask as open-ended questions as possible. I wanted a wide range of possibility in the discourse that would be generated, without constraints around whether the accurate language was linked to the victim or the perpetrator, but to describe the act.

### **Definition of Terms**

For ease of the narrative, I will be using the term 'victim' when referring to the person who has experienced sexualized violence, and 'perpetrator' to identify the person who chose to act in a sexually violent manner upon the child. I will use the term child to refer to young people in general and child victim to refer to a young person who has experienced sexualized violence against him or her.

### **Research Question**

When individuals who work within the field of sexualized violence against children are introduced to the "Tell it like it is!" discussion that describes how the use of language

that is heavily 'sex-act based' rather than 'violence based' is not accurate for what is occurring during the sexualized violation of a child, what is the response?

### **Research design**

A survey of 5 questions (the first of which asks for consent to the parameters of the survey) was developed. The 4 content questions are open ended, designed to elicit as much information as possible without specifically leading the discourse collected. The survey was sent to professionals who work within the topic area of sexualized violence against children, asking them to access the 'Tell it like it is!' website then comment on the content it presents. Some of the individuals were mental health and social workers, some were politicians, other individuals worked in the legal system.

### **Tell it Like it is! Project**

In 2016, the "Tell it like it is!" website went live (<http://tell-it.info>). It is a collaborative project of several counsellors from Canada and Sweden. Each of the originators had worked individually and variously with each other on projects around interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence, identifying micro-resistance on the part of the victim and around how language obscures agency and an accurate depiction of the event (Coates & Wade, 2004). The discussions around accurate language use, when talking about sexualized violence against children, became a movement in the form of the 'Tell it like it is!' website and its corresponding FaceBook site ([www.facebook.com/tell.it.like.it.is2016/](http://www.facebook.com/tell.it.like.it.is2016/)).

The 'Tell it like it is!' website states: "Accurate descriptions of violence against children make a real difference. They reveal the unilateral nature of violence, accurately

assign responsibility to offenders, acknowledge children's responses and resistance to the violence, and avoid blaming children." (<http://tell-it.info>).

The website offers a quick background to this collaborative project as well as a vision statement that reads: "At 'Tell it like it is!', our vision is that: all professionals with and for children use accurate descriptions that expose the full extent and unilateral (one-sided) nature of violence; accurate descriptions are used to promote effective social responses to violence against children, to accurately convey perpetrator responsibility, to honour victim responses and resistance to the crimes, and to avoid shifting blame to child victims; accurate descriptions are the minimum standard for all professionals working with and for children in law enforcement and criminal justice, in mental health and social services, in child protective services and in education; in the media, accurate descriptions will be the norm; the media respond publicly when false and misleading descriptions are used in professional and public settings; children and youth and their families are confident that professionals and all members of society use accurate descriptions to convey the experience and uphold the dignity of victims." (ibid).

The site has bold 'signage-style' statements throughout, such as: "It is not 'child prostitution', it is 'organized rape of children for profit'" (ibid). The analogy offered is that a bank robbery is not considered a financial transaction, even though it involves money (central to financial transactions), so why would the rape of a child be considered having intercourse, or sexual relations with a minor just because the crime involves body parts that may also be used in sexual activities? The claim is that the gravity of the event as a criminal act is diminished or lost when mutualizing or sexual terms are used.

The topic of accurate description is presented in many ways on the site, including a webpage dedicated to how accurate descriptions can be used in a sensitive manner, so that children and families can use terminology that they can best manage and cope with at this traumatic time. A list of ‘more accurate terms’ can be downloaded that contrasts the terms most often currently used with terms the project considers more accurate (Appendix A). Examples from media, criminal justice, and social community organisations further assists in shining the light on the use of accurate language.

The website is very informative, well laid out, and easy to navigate. The information is clearly presented in a manner that is accessible to a range of educational levels. There is an area to sign up for a newsletter and alerts. The website’s focus is that our choice of language can be the conduit to a more accurate representation of the events, a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the violation and thus the crime that the child victim experiences.

## **Overview of the Topics**

### **Child Development and The Child’s Acquisition of Language and Meaning**

It is largely considered that language is arbitrary and language learning is seen as a cycle of social construction (Pinker, 1994). If I want something to be referred to as a ‘glink’, then I connect the word ‘glink’ to an object or action or abstraction, and indicate to another person that this thing is what I mean when I utter the word. Once the other person understands my use of the word, then they can choose to use the word in the same way, and share this meaning with others. So, I tell you and you tell others and when it gets back



to me it is likely the same representation, though there may be various changes through social construction, sharing and use over time and within certain user groups. We see this process easily with the invention of new things – we had never had a ‘slinky’ before it was invented, but now when I say the word you have an image in your mind of what it looks like and what it does, and possibly experiential images, positive and negative, linked to the word. Cabbage Patch Dolls initially had a strong meaning and social value attached to them that changed over time, though the dolls themselves remained the same dolls. Though they were very prominent and valued a generation ago, most young children now do not know what we are referring to when we speak of Cabbage Patch Dolls. Our use of symbols is arbitrary, and humans have the unique ability to innovate and extend meaning.

As a result, we can communicate an infinite number of thoughts and ideas through the negotiation of shared meaning, with our shared use of shared symbols. So, firstly, we create the connection or reference and then the reference ‘in use’ becomes indicative or the symbol of the thing, action or abstraction. Thus, language is an activity that is socially negotiated and socially held. Language is a productive and creative system that has infinite possibilities for symbolic representation and innovation.

Some of the prominent theories of first language acquisition include those of Skinner, who was a behaviourist, Chomsky, who is considered the father of modern linguistics as he moved the academic study of linguistics from a study of ‘form’ (structuralism) to that of language use, and Foucault and Saussure, who both contributed to theories of how we come to mean and share meaning in language. This thesis will not offer a full overview of the various linguistic theories that brought us to where we currently are. For a very readable overview of theories of language, the contemporary

linguist Steven Pinker has written accessible and popular books: *The Language Instinct* (1994) and *The New Science of Language and Mind* (1995).

Skinner (1957) postulated the idea of the 'tabula rasa', or blank slate. He theorized that children are born with a blank slate on which all language had to be learned. The parent or other utters a word, and the word is replicated by the child. This theory had limitations as it did not account for poetry and innovation, nor the infinite number of sentences we are able to produce. These phenomena could not be explained if we are bound by language input. Skinner's theory was not able to satisfactorily account for infinite language generation. Imagine the child who only parrots what he or she has heard – this seems like it would result in a terrible affliction to be diagnosed, rather than healthy language acquisition.

Noam Chomsky (1965) theorized that all human beings share an underlying linguistic structure and this Universal Grammar gives us the innate capacity for language learning with all of its rules and structural hierarchy. His model of language acquisition was both biological and computational. It allowed for infinite possibility of production. According to Chomsky, humans were not born blank, but with an innate biological system specifically for language development. Neither of these theories yet put socialization at the forefront.

Saussure saw language in two parts: *langue* and *parole* (from Pinker, 1995). Basically, *langue* is the system of rules and underlying structure while *parole* is the act of speaking and what is experienced socially, including the construction of socially held meaning. *Parole* also allows the possibility for language to hold an infinite number of representations or utterances. We are socially generating the negotiation of meaning. Thus,

Saussure's theory included the factor of language as a social activity as he acknowledged that humans are social beings.

Foucault (1972) understood that a statement or utterance is defined or holds meaning through both its content and its physical and social context. His theories indicate the notion that ideas and language change their function throughout time, and this aligns with a social constructionist theory of meaning.

We form meaning and social understanding through the language that we choose to use. In our choices, we communicate intentionality, agency and accepted paradigms, especially of agency and of responsibility, through language. Discussing Husserl, Smith & McIntyre (1982) state: "The "thoughts" expressed in language, he (Husserl) held, are the abstract, sharable contents - the meanings or noemata - of speakers' judgments and other experiences of thinking. Accordingly, the meanings that words express are themselves the noemata of the various intentional experiences that underlie the use of words. And as expressed in language, meanings or noemata are what give language its "referential" character: they prescribe objects of reference, so that language, too, is "of" or "about" something - and for the very same reason that experiences are intentional. Accordingly, there derive from Husserl's interlocking doctrines about mind and language important parallels between intentionality and reference." (p. xvi).

In a similar way to how words are referential to objects, the meanings of the words are considered to be referential to internal experiences. This is an important concept and support for the use of precise language to accurately refer to the experience. For many years the terminology of sexual activity has been used when referring to the rape of children. Phrases such as 'intercourse with a minor' & 'child sex tourism' are used to refer

to sexualized violence against children. Whose experiences of the event does this language refer to and how does this influence how we perceive it, our judgments, and what activity, exactly, is referred to?

Language is not static but is itself seen as an activity, and as such, is dynamic in its use. For instance, 100 years ago the cultural meaning and social use of the word 'communist' was different from how it has been used since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There has been additional symbolic and emotional content added to the word, all of which has been socially negotiated, created and generally agreed upon or hotly debated. The 'idea' of communism 200 years ago greatly differs from what it is today, and also differs between a variety of cultures. The word 'gay' has gone through several transformations of social meaning and emotional loading in the past 100 years. It was a common name used in the UK, or indicated a light-hearted joy, but now is almost strictly limited to use to denote homosexuality in the English language. Both are examples of a single word taking on several different social meanings and degrees of emotional loading through various times in history. Uses of the word can reflect our cultural experiences and biases of the time, and are negotiated by the users of the word.

These active and fluid language transformations that are user dependent are part of what is referred to when we discuss the social constructionist theory of meaning. Now consider how accuracy of language in referring to our intentional experiences of objects and events progresses when we look at how we have variously referred to women over the years: dame, floozy, lady, bitch, blondie, flapper, princess, vixen, spinster, ball buster, girl, tart, woman. I can hold up an identical photo of one woman but the choice of any word I offer could be used to assign a specific meaning, judgment and other experiences of

thinking behaviours in others. These judgments and experiences are culturally shared, accessed within the individuals in the dialogue; they change with each word and change again over the years. Yet the single object, a female human being, is the same and we are simply use words to influence the meaning or message we intend to communicate. What has changed is how the speaker chooses to portray her, and how society sees her in different ways merely due to the meaning, thoughts and judgments collectively brought to mind through a deliberate choice of terms. This socially agreed upon and shared referential quality is key.

### **Meaning as Socially Constructed**

We use language not to simply point to objects or to parrot the utterances of others, but, as Husserl said, to share our 'judgments and other experiences of things' to share meaning. Dichotomies such as structure vs. process (langue and parole) become gradients, as we understand that the central aspect of language generation is the social construction of language, which is essentially inter-subjective and multi-disciplinary (Maines, 2000). Maines (2000) states: "... increase in theoretical and empirical analysis emphasizing action, agency, contingency, culture and history" (p. 582) is changing how we view the world and our research. We increasingly see culture, language and meaning as socially constructed, and the social constructivism approach gained momentum in the 1980's.

If we are to look at the crime of sexualized violence against a child and events from the point of view of the child victim, rather than the criminal/perpetrator, and without sexualizing terminology, then inherent violence is no longer obscured. The child knows that something happened and knows that he or she was frightened or coerced or

overwhelmed and may know that it hurt and was unwelcome. Brokenleg (2015) states: "One's reality exists in language. We see only what we have words for, and we see reality only the way our language permits us to see it." (p.17). The child victim's physical experience of the situation helps shape their basic initial understanding of the experience ('the adult tried to hurt me, touched me in a personal place') but much of the meaning making is acquired through the language we culturally choose and offer him or her to represent the new, foreign and frightening event.

Lynch (1997) states: "Social constructivism begins with the linguistic and cultural resources within a given social context, and then explores how these shape reality as it is experienced by those living within that context. Thus whereas the psychodynamic approach begins with the individual psyche, social constructivism sees the concept of the psyche as itself a social construct, and focuses on the contextual resources out of which such concepts are formed." (p. 5).

When the child has a new experience, he or she relies on language and social cues to help make meaning of the experience and help identify and construct the concepts that will be related to or encompassed within it.

Lynch (1997), describing social constructivism, states: "... (it) emphasizes that all human knowledge is constructed from the linguistic and cultural resources of particular social contexts. Social constructivism epistemology therefore states that there is no such thing as universal, objective knowledge, but only local knowledge which represents the particular resources and commitments of a given culture." (p. 5).

It seems simple, if we are to examine the commitments of our culture. Is this social context agreed upon, within our culture, to be a violent and criminal act, or a sexual

activity? If we accept that understanding and meaning is socially constructed and negotiated, we as a society have choices in meaning making, based on the language and terminology we choose to employ. At present, using mutualizing sexual terms for a unilateral violent criminal act seems to be putting competing interests and frameworks at odds.

Our choice in meaning making may depend on us wanting a certain outcome (Leichtentritt et al., 2011). In our descriptions of sexualized violence against children, are we as a society choosing what we might see as 'softer' language, so as to limit the impact of the crime for a child victim, hoping that our use of 'loving' terminology is preferable to the terminology of force and violence? If so, we inadvertently make the child victim complicit in a mutual activity that is unlawful. This choice would also obscure or negate the agency and intentionality of the perpetrator, the force or coercion they are utilizing, and the violence they are forcing upon that child victim. Our society seems confused about how it understands sexualized violence against children. In the Canadian criminal code, it is a crime, but in our society, it carries aspects of shame that victims of robbery do not experience. Part of this comes from messages in society and from messages the perpetrator might impart. Cultural acceptance and understanding the crime to be one of violence and not one of sex would likely mitigate this additional victimization.

The use of accurate language proposed by the project is not only directed at professionals. It is an attempt to create a more concise, culturally shared meaning within the terminology for use by individuals in our society in general, to accurately portray how our culture views the nature of the crime, all in an attempt to support the child victim. How parents talk with children about this subject is critical. It has been shown that the way that

mothers communicate with their children when reminiscing or talking about past events plays a critical role for the child's understanding of self and in the child's strategic memory development (Fivush et al., 2006). The research looked at mothers' reminiscing styles, and those mothers who displayed styles that were more elaborate and precisely detailed raised children who scored more highly in areas of self-understanding and strategic memory development. If mothers of child victims recount the story to their child and others using language grounded in force, power and violence terminology rather than grounded in sex act terminology, if she elaborates on the child's resistance and strength, without shame nor any sexual reference, then it seems that it is plausible that the child victim's sophisticated autobiographical memory of the event may be one that holds less or no shame nor any connotation that it was in any way a mutual act.

It can be argued that talking about the crime, in a sensitive manner, using accurate language framed in violence offers support to the child victim in a way that aligns with their experience of the crime. Guidance in this area, for both parent and child victim, around how to talk about what the child experienced, would come from all professionals who work with the child victim and this could greatly support healing. Excluding sex terminology from the narrative also excludes forming or strengthening any understanding of self that represents or categorizes the origins of this distress as sexual in the child victim's autobiographical story and memory. It may also be that our cultural avoidance of the topic doesn't allow for a healthy accurate verbal representation of the crime. The use of accurate language in addition to strength-based dialogue might provide a helpful base for the child to process the experience beyond what is provided in the therapist's space.



The issue of excluding sexual activity terminology from the dialogue is important once we understand how we process associated features or qualities and associated meanings, and thus how we come to form categories. By age 2, a child learns that many words for things are not unique to only that exact thing but is a term that allows the thing to belong to categories. A star and a circle are different shapes, but both are red, so the term 'red' links them. These categories form as the child moves into being able to discern shared features or shared qualities that allows the child to understand and express concepts such as colour (Markman, 1990). There are many theories of how children actually do this, and they do this from a very young age. One assumption around how children sort and categorize is that they use 'constraints' when forming hypotheses around the meaning of a new term, based on assumptions, such as the whole-part assumption, the taxonomic assumption or the mutual exclusivity assumption (Markman, 1990).

For example, when using the taxonomic assumption, the child assumes that the label refers to similar objects, and so the label can be extended to other objects that are somehow the same. Markman (1990) states: "To see why this constraint is needed it is helpful to consider what young children confront when someone teaches them a word via ostensive definition, that is, when someone points to an object and labels it. ... suppose someone points to a dog and calls it a dog. *Dog* could be a proper name, or it could mean *furry*, or *brown*, or any of a huge number of other properties. Moreover, 'dog' could refer to "the dog and his bone," or "Mommy petting the dog" or "the dog under the tree". In other words, objects are found in spatial, causal, temporal or other relations with other objects, so what prevents the child from thinking that the label refers to the objects that are related? These last examples of thematic relations pose a particular problem because

children are very interested in such relations and often find them more salient than categorical or taxonomic relations.” (p. 59). It is important to stress that thematic relations are interesting and more salient for children, and that will be brought forth for discussion later.

The hypothesis that children use, regarding word meanings, which assumes that words are mutually exclusive, is likewise important to this thesis. When we use the term ‘mutually exclusive’ it means that words have one label or category only. If an object has more than one label, then this whole process would become very confusing to a child. So, a chair is not a dresser is not a table. Where this does have overlap, is in categories, such as dog and poodle and animal and pet. Not only is there overlap, but labels can also include the other label (Markman, 1990). So, if a child experiences a new object or event that is referred to with more than one label then there is overlap and one label includes the other. From her research, Markman (1990) states: “... 3- and 4-year-olds try to maintain mutual exclusivity of terms even in this more difficult situation. Children interpreted a novel label as referring to the object itself when the object did not yet have a label. In contrast, as predicted, they interpreted the label as referring to part or substance of the object when the label for the object was already known.” (p.74).

A child does this naturally and impulsively through experience and interaction with the world. When a child is raped, this is often the only experience they have of this nature, so their ability to ‘figure it all out’ experientially, in terms hypothesis-forming to gain knowledge, understanding and meaning, is hopefully very limited and relies heavily on who is offering the dialogue. The perpetrator will likely refer to what has happened in sexual terms. The perpetrator often controls the dialogue and the act is seen as sexual. Wade

(2008) states: “Children who are sexually abused are encouraged to believe that they will be rejected by the people that love them, looked down upon by others, or harmed by the perpetrator if they disclose the abuse.”

When the victim of sexualized violence is a child, does what happened to the child belong to the category ‘violence’ or to the category ‘sex’? In many cases, this is their first encounter with the concept of any active focused engagement of sexual body parts with another person. I believe that, in many cases, the child instinctively knows that what has happened was wrong and that it has overwhelmed the child in a threatening way (the child is not ready for or does not know what to do with what is happening to him or her). Even where there is no physical violence, there is often threat in the psychological realm: ‘Don’t tell anyone’; ‘We now have a secret’; ‘You wanted this, I could tell’; etc.. Sometimes, it is the case that the child victim is asked, ‘Did he have sex with you?’; “Did she kiss you there?”. When the experience is violent or felt as a violation and the learned, culturally negotiated concept is that it belongs in the category labeled ‘sex’, and sometimes secondarily, to the category or label ‘violence’ or abuse is offered, then according to Markman’s research, the child victim is: a) likely to see that the two are thematically related and b) it is likely that the child will see sex and violence as part or substance of each other.

When we consider this information, it would make sense that the child may have challenges around their sexual behaviour in adulthood (Najman et al, 2005; Swaby & Morgan, 2009; Rellini & Meston, 2011; Staples et al, 2012; Pulverman et al, 2015). If the concept and the corresponding meaning of what happened to the child victim is relegated to the negotiated use of sexual terminology, then the sexual acts of fondling, intercourse, and such... hold shame, pain, power, coercion within them as they grow into adulthood and

can freely choose to partake in consensual sexual acts. This is a lot for mental health professionals to unravel, if we continue to refer to sexualized violence in sexual terms.

It is sometimes easier to see the direct categorical linkages and their impact on the child victim when the link is not of violence and sex, but of violence and something less conceptually common (though still sexualized). Craig (2017) tells of a perpetrator who used a specific common pretense to bring 7-year-old children to create 'happy times' for others, for almost a decade. The child's generous nature was used to coerce her to do a 'special dance' while the perpetrator variously violated and filmed the children, one by one. The children always danced to the same music. Sexual terms were never used. To this day, victims find it difficult to listen to the music of the pop group without associations and re-victimization through the parallel processing of the music, the dance, accompanying shame and the violations. In this case, there wasn't any association with sex, but with 'special dancing', and so, for the child victim, all the terms and the music that are associated with the dance are categorized with the violence. It was years before a child disclosed, and there was no thought in the child's mind, initially, that what happened was sexual, just that they knew the special dancing was wrong and they finally were able to get away. There were also violations that involved common items from a stationary store, and the children required extensive therapy to heal from these categorical linkages with the physical violations.

If we relegate the experience of the rape of a child to the category 'violence', using terms that are accurate in portraying the unilateral nature and power imbalance of the acts, the accepted meaning held by the child's community would be very different from what it is now. I venture to suggest that some of the shame and the pathology that is often embodied in the person well into adulthood and sometimes all through life may be avoided or more

easily worked through. Too often the violence is currently obscured by what might be commonly considered ‘romantic’ overtures (Gadin, 2012).

In remarking upon thematic relations I believe it is necessary to delve a bit more deeply. When a child learns how to use terminology for objects in relation to one another, they learn about thematic relations. They learn about a gun, they learn what it does through the various terminology we use. I can lead a dog; I can lead an army; I can lead an orchestra. Until a child has had experience with each of these uses of the word ‘lead’, they may see them in ways that are related to each other, such as an orchestra on a leash. If the child learns that what happened to him or her was a sexual activity, through the language of our culture, then their emerging formation of the concept of sexual activity will hold within it any fear, physical violence, force and coercion that they have experienced, and this will be a part of their concept until later life, when they have the opportunity and agency to experience and form a different concept if they are psychically free to do so. Our culture already has more accurate word use for other crimes involving objects that have multiple ways of using them (analogous to body parts, in sexualized violence). With a gun I can shoot, I can hunt, I can murder. All involve firing a gun with a certain intention, and the intentionality is generally culturally understood in the choice of the word. The “Tell it like it is!” project touches on this idea of thematic categorization and use of words when it indicates “When I hit you with a frying pan, I’m not cooking.” (<http://tell-it.info>)

Craig (2017) spoke of her role as a therapist to help coach children and parents through the sometimes troubling situation of interpretation of the child’s natural bodily functions. Sometimes a child victim who has experience sexualized violence experiences additional trauma, fear and shame in the aftermath because the adult (or the child) believes

that the child victim climaxed or ‘came’ thus seemingly enjoyed or participated in a mutual act of sexual intercourse. This can be a big stumbling block between a parent and child victim as they try to negotiate dialogue toward healing, when the adult uses common sexual terms and concepts to understand what happened to them. Craig was able to keep the conversation in the realm of violation and neutralize the sexual terminology by educating the parent around the automatic body responses that occur with stimulation, arousal and peak, and that these were “not of the girl’s own volition” nor sexual in nature (Craig, 2017).

If it is ‘sex’, then is it a crime? If it is violence, then it is not sex? The mutually exclusive hypothesis is at work here, even if intimate body parts are in both the sexual activity and rape. It depends on what we consider salient, and how we agree to talk about it, as a culture. Meaning is socially constructed. Consider the road sign that presents us with a graphic depiction of children walking together. In our society, this tells us that it is a school zone, we know the speed limit to which we are legally bound and we know the times when it is in effect. It is much more than a simple picture of children; it is significant and rich with socially negotiated and shared meaning. The socially negotiated meaning is fixed within us, not present on the sign (Tylen, et al, 2016). In many of our interactions, we rely on social stimulus evoking within us a specific socially held meaning, not merely an objective, reality-based event (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012). So, the event or the experience is the road sign, and the meaning that has been socially created and negotiated is to slow down as this is a school zone and we protect our children.

Now consider an instance of an adult and a child interacting with their sex parts. Do we socially negotiate this as sex or instead as a violation, violence, taking advantage of a

child's inability to fully consent to what is coerced or being forced upon them? Meaning is socially constructed, and the road sign helps us to see that we, collectively, have great leeway in how we create meaning, through discussion and consensus, and how efficiently nuanced and multiply layered one object or word can be. It seems that sexual activity terms should be mutually exclusive of violence terminology in our dialogue around sexualized violence against children. The terminology of violence with body parts as the targets, conforms to our socially agreed upon construct of violence and the agreed upon illegal nature of the rape of a child. When we view the situation from this perspective, it is more difficult to allow sexual activity terms into our descriptions of sexualized violence against children that signifies to the child's forming mind that sex is demoralizing, coerced, painful, unilateral, without consent.

Cruddas (2007) states: "... it is in the process of making and negotiating shared social meaning that we move imperfectly towards jointly conceived understandings of personhood and community." (p. 479). From this, our understanding of personhood is not in the realm of the individual but is negotiated in the dialogue of society. The child victim hears this dialogue about the crime, what 'happened to them' (passive construction) and hears the words fondle, sexual relationship, oral sex, cum, kiss, intercourse, or maybe nothing is allowed to be said, and the child truly does not have an option, then, to process and understand the crime in any other way. The child may first learn about what is being forced upon or expected of them through the words of the perpetrator.

Precise dialogue that puts the actions in the realm of violence and the responsibility for the actions solely with the perpetrator is important for the well-being and the healing of the child victims. Cruddas (2007) also states: "The social event(s) of verbal interaction

(are) sites of struggle of different social languages and ideological belief systems (heteroglossia) in the production of shared social meanings.” (p. 479). The struggles the child victim already faces due to the crime are compounded by confusion around how we as a culture represent the act in our larger society.

Children are active and aware in their desire to shape meaning-making regarding their own experiences (Jenkins, 2015). If the child victim is provided largely with language that represents the social forms of sexual intimacy, of which they have little or no prior experience in terms of participation or meaning, to express what happened to them, they will likely incorporate the idea of ‘sex’ as something connected to the crime that just happened. This possibility makes sense when we remember that children find thematic relations more salient than categorical or taxonomic relations when learning about the world around them (Markman, 1990). If our culture is using terminology from the domain of sexual intimacy and thus sharing and shaping meanings of this crime that are related to the concepts and activities of sexual engagement, then it seems inevitable that what we find in adulthood is sexual dysfunction and sexual dissatisfaction within the population of adults who were victims of sexualized violence as children (Najman et al, 2005; Swaby & Morgan, 2009; Rellini & Meston, 2011; Staples et al, 2012; Pulverman et al, 2015).

Is this another way we might be violating the rights of the child? The current physical, emotional and psychological safety of the child victim is violated and often alters the child’s life course into the future. Society has an obligation to protect a child from harm in every way we can, including long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences. There is a growing awareness that the rights of children are important and are often not attended to.



## **The Rights of The Child**

Similar to the movement that has asserted the rights of women, our North American society is waking to the ways in which children are expected to not have a voice, nor equal rights and dignities. Gillian (2011) states: "Culture is the way of seeing and speaking that is so much a part of everyday living that it never has to be articulated. Fish don't know they are swimming in water, until they are a fish out of water. It is when culture shifts that we recognize the ocean in which we have been drenched. What we had taken as natural or taken for granted becomes instead one way of seeing and speaking" (p.1). Just as Gillian realized our culture counted on the non-existence of women (ibid), we have mainly been living in a culture reliant upon children's experiences not being fully and accurately represented.

Children have rights to dignity and accurate linguistic representation of their experiences in our society, as does any other human being. So often we treat children as objects, possessions or lesser citizens because we can; their vulnerability is exploited and they have little voice. Many times we see ourselves as their caretakers, and this can take the form of an abused trust to inflict indignities upon children and deny their voices. Children are subjected to indignities and suffering, in the name of parenting and 'discipline', that we would not visit upon another adult for true fear of retribution and criminal charges being laid (Brokenleg, 2011). We jerk them by their arms when they are walking too slow or don't want to come with us; we talk aggressively into their faces and demand 'look at me when I'm talking to you!'; we subject them to meals where they are not part of the conversation and they sit, ignored, like a dog (and sometimes dogs get more attention)

(Brokenleg, 2017). All these behaviours are ones we would be mortified to subject an adult friend to, one who is equal to us in status, stature and respect. As a society, I believe that we systemically marginalize and colonize our children and keep them from the dignity they so actively try to hold onto. Our society is even more culturally careful in how we speak of other groups of individuals who are considered vulnerable, such as immigrants or individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Take for instance what we may commonly say when we are mocking another person: “You’re acting like a baby”, “Quit acting like a child!” (Brokenleg, 2017). These are pejorative statements that we would not tolerate if we correspondingly uttered, “You’re acting like a retarded person”. Or, if we want to clean it up a bit, would it still be allowable to say: “Quit acting like a cognitively disabled person!”?

The United Nations took on the discussion of the rights of the child, and from this emerged the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), within which are 54 articles that were discussed, “adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989; entry into force 2 September 1990, in accordance with article 49” (United Nations, n.d.). Our federal laws agree with the claim that ‘childhood is entitled to special care and assistance’ (Government of Canada; Department of Justice, n.d.), as, in Canada, we have special considerations for minors who commit crimes; there is agreement that children have a different decision-making capacity from adults who may choose to commit crimes or choose to partake in activities such as drinking. We have laws to protect our children.

With the creation of the UNCRC, children were formally and internationally acknowledged as human beings with inalienable rights. The document was signed by 195

countries. It is “the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history” (United Nations, 2015).

The great intentional violation of those rights and protections is when an adult chooses to commit an act of sexualized violence against a child. The safety, innocence, dignity, agency, autonomy and physical, emotional and psychological well-being of the child is violated.

Several of the articles in the UNCRC are pertinent to this thesis. These include Article 3, that states that decisions that adults make should take into consideration the well-being of the child, with full awareness of any short and long-term implications. Article 5 and Article 12 speak about the child’s right to have a voice and to express an opinion that is considered valued in the society. Article 19 specifically addresses violence and harm perpetuated against body or mind. Articles 35 & 36 condemn any actions of abduction, sale, trafficking, or exploitation of children.

Article 34 talks about unlawful sexual activity though it does not go into a discussion around the developmental inability for a child to consent, nor the power imbalance through poverty, gender, size, strength, threat of safety or well-being of others, that may also be at play in influencing the freedom or knowledge required to purposefully consent. The special vulnerability of a child to the influence of coercion is not fully described. Some of these complexities of consent will be further discussed later in this thesis.

This protection of the rights of the child is essential to the well-being of our society. As children mature, they may have a greater ability to make choices and to act upon desires to secure their own safety. A child generally has increased agency, or ability to act, as he or she gets older and closer to adulthood.

## **Agency**

The topic of agency, for the purposes here, is referring to two very separate things. We will discuss agency as depicted in language constructions in addition to the agency within a person, which can be considered as choice or ability to act. Agency within a person is shaped and influenced by contextual and societal factors, including age.

Agency is depicted in language in a sentence when the sentence has an active construction. We can use the active voice or the passive voice to communicate slightly different experiences or points of view. If I kick a dog, I can say, 'The dog was kicked' or I can say 'I kicked the dog', or 'My foot touched the dog', or 'The dog and my foot met with each other', or 'The dog touched my foot'. Each of these has slightly different images about them, based on their construction; each indicates differing points of view, interactions, responsibility and agency. But each time, there is contact with my foot and the dog, although each linguistic structure does represent this fact in various ways and communicates various images and meanings related to these images.

When I utter the sentence 'Jane kicked the dog', Jane is the agent of the action as Jane is the initiator of the action. This is an active sentence construction. 'The dog was kicked' is a passive sentence construction, as the agent (the initiator of the action i.e. the kicker) is implied but is not explicitly referred to. If the agent is not showing up in the sentence, it is not the subject of the sentence and it is implied that they are not important to what we are discussing. In this passive construction, we are likely discussing something about the dog. As a result, you may even wonder, 'then what happened to the dog?'. When discussing linguistic practices by judges in Canadian criminal courts dealing with cases of

sexualized violence, Coates & Wade (2004) observed: "...high incidence of agentless descriptions of violent acts, which conceal who did what to whom..." (p. 6).

Agency of an act can be held in the grammatical construction. So, if the situation is that Jane kicked the dog, Jane is the agent of the action and, in this case, it was not just an accidental foot touching the dog as Jane walked by. If we wanted to talk about what Jane had done and investigate if she did anything criminal and if she should be responsible for her actions, then this is not effectively nor accurately communicated if we use the sentence 'The dog and Jane's foot met with each other' to represent the situation. In fact, if we choose to use even the passive, 'The dog was kicked', rather than 'Jane kicked the dog', we still obscure the agency and Jane's responsibility in our specific choice of linguistic representation of the situation. This is how our choice of language can obscure or inaccurately represent what is going on in a situation.

This is one reason why descriptions such as: 'there was fondling of the child's genital area', do not accurately depict the crime, as there is no linguistic representation of an agent in the sentence, in addition to using a mutualizing sexual term by using 'fondling'. The act of fondling did not happen by itself, it requires that someone does it, and when the perpetrator is obviously omitted from the description, then the description is not full and accurate. It seems odd to discuss the crime of sexualized violence against a child and the only person we talk about is the child victim. We talk about child prostitution, even though children cannot give consent to sexual relations, thus be considered prostitutes and the crime does not originate with the child mentioned in the description of the activity. The crime is then talked about without direct reference to the perpetrator, the person who deliberately plotted and initiated the crime, or in this case, the client who illegally solicits

and engages in the act. The child's experience of the crime is absent, and any accurate description of events that the child experiences of fear, force and violence are not represented in the dialogue. It is unlikely that the child felt fondled or masturbated, unless that is generally considered to be an invasive thing.

If we as a society believe that this is a unilateral crime against a child, then it seems to me that it is counterintuitive that we talk about it in terms of the inferred motives or desired actions of the linguistically absent perpetrator, which in this case may be seen as being sexual gratification. It may be 'sex' for the adult, but that is not the experience of the child. As a result, when we currently talk about the crime the presence of the adult perpetrator is seemingly not required, but the sexual activity terminology we attribute to the perpetrator is ever present. Sexual activity is considered mutual, yet the perpetrator of this activity is absent from direct reference in this sentence construction, so mutuality sits with the one person mentioned, the child victim, implying consent. It seems odd to me that passive constructions are deployed to depict a sexual event in which the only individual with agency to consent does not show up.

The terminology implies consent and does not take into account where there is agency in the act. Children, in general, are not that passive when it comes to communicating what they are feeling and what they may need. (Jenkins, 2015) investigated how a young child communicates an experience of pain to their parents and found that the expression required a back and forth negotiation. Firstly, the child broadly communicated their experience. The parent responded by asking to clarify, or dismissed the feeling as nothing to worry about, whereby, in either instance, the child further expressed the experience in an attempt to be heard and to be fully understood. The child communicated a more

accurate depiction of the pain. This supports both the young child's ability to negotiate meaning and the capacity early on to act as agents in their own life and well-being. Children are indeed not passive beings observing the world around them. They are interactive agents of their own understanding and are able to negotiate toward being understood. The old adage, 'Children are to be seen and not heard' does not apply, and does a great injustice to children.

If we refrain from using sexual terms (something children have no accurate experience with) when asking a child what happened, we as adults may hear more precisely. The unilateral nature of the experience may be strengthened if the child victim is allowed to clearly describe the violence and their attempt to resist. Currently, when we use the word 'kiss', it is a mutual act, and does not leave much room for questioning what the child victim did when the person kissed them, as the implication and questions around a 'kiss' are different than the implications around another person 'pushing his mouth on your body'. We're supposed to like kisses, in our culture, and we limit the child victim's agency to offer their experiences if we use words that do not leave the possibility for full responses to unilateral acts upon them.

Individuals have agency when they have choice and capacity to act or express themselves. We have choice when we have knowledge of the situation. Our subsequent action is an informed one admitting to whatever consequences that may result from our actions. Some individuals have restricted choice and are not free to act due to limitations of their mental capacity, such as people with advanced dementia or those with severe cognitive delay. Children are active beings who make choices and make those choices

known (Jenkins, 2015). Children experience the world and they interact with others based on those experiences.

A child's physical expression of their agency is limited variously, at different ages, by forces outside their control, such as their reliance on adults for food and shelter. Also, coercion and being physically, emotionally, mentally or psychologically vulnerable, threatened or overpowered will limit a child's expression of their agency. Even when in a threatening situation, a child victim chooses what he or she can to express their agency and resist what they are not choosing (Coates & Wade, 2007). Coates & Wade (2007) state: "The manner in which victims resist depends on the unique combination of dangers and opportunities present in their particular circumstances. Victims typically take into the account that perpetrators will become even more violent for any act of defiance." (p. 514). A child victim will resist in whatever safe way they find; they may feign stomach aches to avoid visiting a relative who is a perpetrator. If we give them mostly a moderated form of the language of sexual activity, it may be challenging for a child to understand and express their agency and actions in resisting the force of the perpetrator. When the event is framed in the terminology of violence and force, then it is likely easier for a child to see, understand and discuss their own experiences more clearly and thus voice how they resisted the attack.

Both the absence of conversation and the varying focus within any dialogue that does occur, such as linguistic constructions that obscure agency or usage of inaccurate language to define and describe the crime, prevents our society from effectively protecting children, especially from re-traumatization. This also prohibits us from accurately portraying the actual violence that the child experiences, as well as from seeing and telling



the strong grounding stories of any resistance or agency that a child victim musters in such incredibly overwhelming situations (Coates & Wade, 2007). All of these factors further rob the child of expressing agency and a clear voice, yet again. Young et al (2003) states:

“Agency, or the belief within an individual that he or she can alter and manipulate life vents (Bandura, 1997), is largely revealed in the words that people choose and the ways in which they put those words together.” (p. 1040).

This is not ‘a crime against a child’. This is ‘a violent crime perpetrated by an adult against a child involving intimate body parts’. It is important to employ active language constructions to show agency. The use of violence and the responsibility of the perpetrator is obscured when we do not (Coates & Wade, 2004). In addition, the possibility for the child to communicate their agency and resistance to the crime is limited when we talk about what occurred as ‘he kissed you’, versus ‘he pressed his mouth against your face/skin/body’. Culturally, kisses are considered pleasant, and the child’s expression of what happened may feel constrained by the language he or she is given to work with.

This is further complicated by our culture of desire for obedience in children. Our North American society values obedience and submissive behaviour from children, so when an adult directs, the child is expected to comply. The website ‘everyday feminism’ shows how we undermine a child’s agency by requiring obedience and the coercion of consent. In doing so, we perpetuate our rape culture (Everyday Feminism, n.d.)

In dominant North American society, we view the child and the child’s experience with less respect than we offer adults (Brokenleg, 2017). Children are vulnerable, by the nature of their age and inability to survive without adults, and are not an equally valued member of our North American community. This is no reason for us to offer them less

value, respect and not acknowledge their right to a voice within our community. So many children in Canada live with disadvantages that are systemic and not of their own making.

The Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal site states: “In 2013, there were an estimated 62,428 children in out-of-home care across Canada (Jones, Sinha, Trocme, 2015). Because child welfare services fall under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial authorities each province has different legislation pertaining to child protection interventions, making it difficult to compare rates of children in out-of-home care across provinces.” (Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal, n.d.). According to the Canada Without Poverty website, one in five children in Canada lives in poverty, making them even more vulnerable citizens (Canada Without Poverty, n.d.). These are the individuals who, it is hoped, will be our future society leaders; as a society we fail them now if we cannot care for them and provide the basic rights outlined in the UN document.

A child’s experience and social and psychic needs are not really accommodated in our society and not fully taken into account. When we examine how we socially construct meaning in our language, the actions and experiences of some are more important than others, therefore any representation of experiences is skewed via language. Including the current definition of rape and the concept of ‘consent’.

## **Consent**

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, ‘consent’ is defined as: “to give assent or approval” (Merriam Webster: consent; n.d.), while ‘agency’ is defined as: “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power” (Merriam Webster: agency; n.d.). Both agency and consent are influenced by a multitude of contextual factors. If we freeze from

shock when an armed bank robbery is taking place around us, our full, true agency is compromised. We may say 'yes' and give our money, seemingly freely and with consent. I give the robber the money, but do I consent to the robber taking the money from me? Do I have agency to make choices, power to act in any other way? Our decision-making, our choice to act and our ability to freely make the choice to act, even for our own safety, can be compromised by factors such as age, socioeconomic factors, gender, threat of injury or death to self or others, power imbalances in the situation, coercion, hunger, our fear of being alone, our need to be accepted. Vulnerability can come in many forms, and emotional vulnerability, cognitive vulnerability in not knowing fully what the child might be agreeing to, coercion, power imbalance due to age, size, dependency, and fear all impact on the ability to consent, even when the child seems to believe they know what they may be consenting to at age 14. This is why the child must be protected under the law. Our concept and definitions of consent would ideally include the reality of coercion.

In Canada, our legal system offers a variety of guidelines defining when an individual can legally consent to sexual activity (Government of Canada, Department of Justice, n.d.). In general, sexual activities between adults are considered consensual, and lack of consent is what deems the activity a criminal offence and, arguably, not a mutual sexual activity. There are laws to protect children due to the limits of their ability to consent, though only age is generally offered as a limitation to consent. By the nature of a child's emerging cognitive capacity to fully understand the scope of their own choices and the consequences that accompany them, the Canadian government outlines the 'Age of Consent' laws in a variety of ways. Protecting the child from engaging in possible life-altering choices aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In general, Canada's age of consent for sexual activity is 16 years of age. There are modifications to this, based on what may be considered 'special circumstances'. The Government of Canada Department of Justice website (Retrieved March 14, 2017) states: "However, the age of consent is 18 years where the sexual activity "exploits" the young person when it involves prostitution, pornography or occurs in a relationship of authority, trust or dependency (e.g. with a teacher, coach or babysitter). Sexual activity can also be considered exploitative based on the nature and circumstances of the relationship, e.g. the young person's age, the age difference between the young person and their partner, how the relationship developed (quickly, secretly, or over the Internet) and how the partner may have controlled or influenced the young person." In essence, the child is protected even if they may have seemed to be consenting because the government recognizes that imbalances of power exist, and the 17 & 18 year old children are protected from adults who may offend in a relationship of trust.

Canadian society looks to the Department of Justice to guide us through their depiction of what is acceptable and to accurately indicate the boundaries of 'not acceptable'. Aspects as to 'why' a child is unable to consent are not clearly indicated, only depictions of some conditions of the types of 'relationships' in which 'sexual activities with a minor' may be present. Any direct mention of violence, force, false promises or coercion are omitted yet 'sex' is referred to. Sometimes the experience, even if the child seems to consent, is not considered a mutual sexual activity, for the child, and this is generally acknowledged when an adult is involved.

The reality and influence of coercion has been written into South Africa's Sexual Offences Act 32 (Mills, 2010), changing the definition of rape in that country. It includes a

new definition of consent. In essence, the new version says that ‘yes means yes’ and that ‘yes’ cannot be reached through coercion, but that ‘yes’ is only when it is a positive response. Mills (2010) states: “... by listing coercive circumstances in which consent will be vitiated and by making that list non-exhaustive, the Act allows for a widened understanding of coercive circumstances that reflect the systemic context of rape, poverty, and unequal gender power relations ... This focus on context allows us to redefine rape to take account of the reality of women’s lives and systemic inequality, giving effect to the constitutional right ... to be ‘free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources.” (p. 81). The statement could also be true of ‘the reality of children’s lives and systemic inequality’.

Consider the child who lives in poverty and does not have nice toys, clothing, nor good food, or who struggles socially. Consider a 12-year-old girl and the 14-year-old boy (or a 16 year old child and a 20 year old adult who is not in a specific relationship of authority, trust or dependency). She may be coerced into ‘consenting’ to rape, and feels shame, yet is again coerced through the voice of the perpetrator to remain silent. Maybe she gains social acceptance amongst her peers from the relationship through the forced interactions that she does not want. Maybe she defends him, because that is what she knows to do, from popular media or close family situations. Consent can be coerced through promises and quietly taking advantage of her vulnerabilities; she might have thought what was going to happen would be a romantic thing. What she consented to, the experience she had, is currently considered sexual activity, though it may be unlikely that she would characterize it as such, if given her voice. Canada does not have highly defined laws to approach this situation. In fact, it has ‘close in age’ peer group exceptions, that allow

for this situation. It is challenging to see who this law is protecting; it seems to be protecting the young perpetrator in this case. How we perceive the activity is critical to how we talk about it and the action we take, for both individuals involved.

Viewing the act as rape changes many things, and a discussion around where a young perpetrator chooses to assert his or her power, violence, coercion and force would be a very important dialogue to embark upon. If we see the act as wrongful sex, it might seem like a generous perspective for our criminal justice system to create this exception in favour of the perpetrator. Where is the victim in this scenario? Often, our judicial system considers the formative past of the perpetrator to offer compassion to the circumstances of the crime he or she chose to commit (Coates & Wade, 2007) and to offer a way forward that softens the resulting punishment or sentence. In this light, it seems odd that our society rarely considers the circumstances that can bring someone to be targeted as the child victim, and how the crime of sexualized violence can shift a very vulnerable life into a future with added challenges and encumbrances that are not mitigated by our collective societal compassion and measures to offer a gentler way forward.

The 'close in age' exception does not clearly articulate the full richness and real world portrayal of coercion. Sexual activity between a 14 year old and an 18 year old can be considered consensual as long as "there is no relationship of trust, authority or dependency or other exploitation of the younger person." ([www.justice.gc.ca](http://www.justice.gc.ca)). This seems inadequate. There are strong possibilities for peer coercion to consent, especially considering the research literature that strongly reveals the fact of every-day occurrence of sexualized bullying (Shute, et al., 2008; Gadin, 2012). Definitions of coercion and how they impact consent would be helpful here.

The current laws for exceptions allow for ‘sexual activity’ between an 18 year old and a 14 year old, as it allows a 4 year difference in age. Common sense will tell most people that the developmental capabilities of a 14 year old greatly differ from those of an 18 year old. Once again, I’m curious to know how this exception was arrived at and who it serves. Why, in these cases, do we forget that rape is an act of power, not of sex, but that the perpetrator is served when it is presented as a sexual activity? Godsoe (2017) makes the very relevant comment, regarding peer statutory rape: “... who is the victim and who is the offender? ... Where half of high school students have had intercourse, the law’s immense scope and inevitable under enforcement allow prosecutors to virtually define the crime by the tiny percentage of cases they choose.” (p. 173).

A 12 year old can still be coerced into what may be seen as a consensual sexual activity by a peer or a 14 year old who knows how to prey upon vulnerability in a subtle way and is looking to violate, dominate, or use the naivety of the other to their advantage, even if they are not in a position of authority. The power dynamic is still there, and the element of coercion may be difficult to prove. Teen-aged bullying is also ever present and thus coercive activities ever present (Cuadrado-Gordillo, 2012; Gadin, 2012; Shute et al. 2008).

Coercive acts against children are deep within our generalized culture, as evidenced by the Everyday Feminism website. Like the fish unable to see the water, we often do not recognize them. Coercion is normalized in our society, taking agency and consent from the child. Unless compliant, we often see a child as being the challenging issue. This offers insight into how our society currently removes agency from the description and thus does

not honour genuine consent of our children. Dialogue to rectify this situation is a good start to empowering and protecting our children.

Mills (2010) strongly agrees that 'yes' can be coerced, and offers coercion methods such as fraudulent claims, promises or inaccurate information as examples. It would be helpful if we are to protect Canadian children, to include discussions around coercion in our laws around consent. Then the distinction between sex and violence or force would be more clearly and precisely articulated.

When speaking of sexualized violence against women with mental disabilities, Benedet & Grant (2014) stated: "... existing criminal code provisions in Canada are inadequate to address this type of exploitation because courts have consistently failed to recognize that such abuses of power and trust are fundamentally inconsistent with any notions of voluntary consent." (p. 131). This substantiates the idea that power, in the cases of vulnerable populations, does not only come from a political authority or some systemic source. Coercive power is always a threat to vulnerable populations. People will make fraudulent promises to get what they want. Any imbalance of power can be either reflected or maintained in our use of language, if we deem that important. Authority may not only come from our Canadian judicial system, but a different source of authority may guide our collective understanding, response, and way of speaking about sexualized violence against children. Furedi (2015) states: "Authority's capacity to guide people's behavior is an outcome of a moral influence which, when allied to the power to compel, can gain obedience without either having to argue or to threaten." (p.95). How do we achieve the new, culturally shared narrative that honours the experience and rights of the child victim?



The new understanding may require many changes, as indicated by the “Tell it like it is!” project.

### **The Role of Authority in Forming Meaning**

Authority is established in many ways and can mean many things. Historical authority, trust and reliability, influence, consistency, and oppressive power all can be understood as being indicators or parameters of authority (Furedi, 2015; Morselli & Passini, 2011). Authority is important to this discussion because it can operate as an agent of change, and the meaning (reflected in language), that the authority figure chooses to use will culturally transmit the ‘official’ or sanctioned description of the situation. Barrett et al (1995) state: “Discourse is viewed as the core of the change process through which our basic assumptions ... are created, sustained, & transformed” (p. 352) while Furedi (2015) continues with the statement that “...claim-making involves both an appeal to and the construction of authority.” ( p.95). Thus, language has the ability to create meaning, influence society’s understanding, construct authority and to influence how society chooses to respond.

Morselli & Passini (2011) state: “... authority is an everyday phenomenon characterized by the influence that one of the social actors can exert over the other members of the group or a community... some scholars use the concept of authority as overlapping with the definition of power, although the two concepts have different and sometimes opposite characteristics.” (p. 291). This is a very important point for this thesis. When the subject is violence, then it is important that when power (such as political

power) is coupled with authority, whatever is communicated arises from the point of view of moral authority, not of power over others.

As indicated previously, when individuals are looking to others to help form and negotiate meaning for situations or concepts that are as of yet unclear, they look to another who has more wisdom and can impart the knowledge needed to fill the gap of understanding and meaning-making. Children look to wiser peers or to trusted adults; adults look to academics, or to professionals who work in the area that they need information from. When people are trying to make decisions, they take into account social influences, possibly changing their decisions based on what others say. But when the information comes from an authority figure, such as medical authority, then the influence of the authority outweighs all others (Schobel et al., 2016). The accuracy of the account of the event that is being communicated by the professionals who work in the area of sexualized violence against children, and the precision of the language that is used, is important to guide our social understanding and meaning around the situation. From the professional authority, the parent will learn how to talk with their child victim in a way that best supports healing, without sexualizing the experience.

Asking for comments from and the opinions of professionals working in the subject of sexualized violence against children is key to learning how they view the current language used and how amenable they might be to the proposed more precise linguistic representations that more accurately depict the criminal events. Any support or disagreement will spark further dialogue that will be useful in many ways. Furedi (2015) states: "Authority legitimizes claims, which is why claim-makers have always sought its validation".

Yet, authority figures do not always see themselves in that light. Langford (2010) looked at early childhood educators (ECEs) who work with children every day in a multitude of situations. Though the ECEs were fully qualified and displayed a high level of skill and competence, they themselves did not feel that they could be considered ‘authorities’ or experts in what they do. Langford (2010) speaks of why some of the ECEs might feel they lack authority, as they feel the “... lack of authority and legitimacy to address social inequalities significantly, engage in social action, and bring about social justice for children, families, and early childhood educators... I suggest that early childhood educators cannot wait for society to accord them authority and status; rather, they need in practice to claim and assert authority on their own terms.” (p. 292). This contrasts the ability for an authority not only to have power, but to assert influence through knowledge. The study found the ECEs to have “... relational authority expressed in practice as knowledge, judgment and will” (ibid, p. 302). Mental health and social workers may be considered to have relational authority, as would any professional who works in the field of sexualized violence against children. Schoebel et al. (2016) state: “...people weigh social information differently according to the authority of other decision makers. The influence of authority was strongest when an authority’s decision contrasted with private information.” If the private information is that this crime is sexual, then professionals speaking out with language that grounds the crime in the realm of violence will likely have influence.

Maybe what the “Tell it like it is!” project is seeking is a shared narrative of validation. If all professionals and those seen as having authority in the subject matter of sexualized violence against children could collaborate and agree to use standard

terminology framed in the terminology of violence, then the narrative more greatly reflects, validates and respects the experiences of the child victim. At present, the shared narrative is largely about sexual activity. Possibly, the thinking is that by using less graphic and mutualizing terms, we as a community can buffer our shock and diminish the vicarious trauma the community feels when we are faced with this crime. Maybe we are helping to numb ourselves to reality by thinking that what happened to the child was not as assaulting and degrading, dignity-robbing and dehumanizing as it really was. It is my belief that in asking our society to adopt the language and terminology from the “Tell it like it is!” website, the shared narrative of validation would more accurately reflect the fear, pain, degradation, indignity, helplessness that the child experiences in these unilateral acts of violence.

Regarding the situation of sexualized violence against children, there is currently little social dialogue, so what is currently being said is critically important. How do we change our cultural perspective when, even if we do change the language used, the topic is still taboo? Barrett et al. (1995) found: “Discourse is viewed as the core of the change process through which our basic assumptions about organizing are created, sustained, and transformed.” (p. 352). Like other recent social movements such as ‘Black Lives Matter’ and LGBTQ rights, change often comes from increased dialogue, in a focused and precise manner. Our society needs to talk about this crime, using precise language that accurately represents the experience of the crime, not the intension or desires of the perpetrator. An informational website may be a first step in shaping our new cultural narrative that more accurately reflects the violent and oppressive nature of the crime. It will be important to

see how those who work in this subject area respond to the content of the ‘Tell it like it is!’ project website.

## **Methods**

### **Overview of the Survey**

The survey was designed by the researcher asking respondents to view the existing ‘Tell it like it is!’ website. The survey was comprised of 4 questions to elicit broad responses to the content of the website from those professionals who were contacted and who work intimately in the field of sexualized violence against children. The text of the responses was analyzed by the researcher and a second reader to identify themes in the narratives.

The survey is comprised of an introduction letter, a consent question that triggers the respondent’s ability to complete and submit the survey, followed by 4 open ended questions (Appendix B). The elements required to be included within the invitation letter were strictly outlined by the ethical review process for research at City University of Seattle that used human subjects.

The survey was created on the SurveyMonkey platform. Responses are compiled by the site and can be downloaded by the owner of the survey portal. Responses are anonymous unless the respondent identifies him or herself in their responses.

The target recipients of the survey were individuals who worked in the field of sexualized violence against children. These included researchers, mental health and social workers, lawyers, law enforcement, and politicians. The survey invitation was sent directly

to the individuals through their e-mail. These e-mail addresses of the target audience were found mostly through searches of websites that indicated that they worked with this population. Also, politicians who may work with this topic area was searched for the list.

The invitation letter to describe the survey and to invite recipients to complete the survey was then sent to the target audience (Appendix C). A total of 27 individuals were sent the survey invitation letter. The second prompt was scheduled to follow up two weeks later.

Once the time limit for responses was reached, the responses were printed off from the site and a thematic analysis of the discourse completed by the researcher and by one other person, to determine accuracy.

The intention was to send the survey to media, but there were barriers in acquiring reliable e-mail addresses.

### **Data Gathering**

Once the invitation letter was sent out, any responses were compiled by the site and were downloaded by the researcher. Responses are anonymous unless the respondent identifies him or herself in their responses.

Two recipients responded to the survey, and their responses were more than simple sentences to answer the questions.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The sentences were coded to identify general themes that were present in the text of the responses. Then a more narrow analysis of the text was done to discern if the broad

themes identified overlapped or were distinct from one another. We also looked at which identified themes may simply be reiterations of the same theme in the same answer to a question.

This coding protocol was applied to the text by a second person who was a native speaker of English who held an undergraduate degree. The two results were compared to ensure that the identified themes had all been found, were agreed upon and were considered valid.

## **Results and Analysis**

### **Responses**

Of the 27 invitations sent out, 4 came back indicating that the e-mail address or the person associated with it no longer existed at the organization. Therefore 23 e-mail invitations are thought to have reached their recipients. The researcher received 2 completed responses to the survey. This was a disappointing result, but one that could bear analysis. The general criteria for thematic discourse analysis suggests that a minimum of 8 responses be acquired for any analysis to be relevant to indicate a trend or generalization. This smaller sample size will limit the ability to generalize based on the results and this detail will be noted in the discussion.

Within the 2 responses, there was rich and relevant information that forms a narrative that is worthy of consideration. In addition, the lack of response is an artifact that may be analyzed and may offer some clues for future investigations into this area of inquiry.

## **Themes Emerging From the Data**

There were 9 themes identified (Appendix D). The themes were as follows, with one example of the theme offered for reference:

Challenges to societal attitudes

“... an essential piece in challenging how society views sexual violence.”

Educational - a support for all

“... website helps individuals to understand why using these terms is so important...”

Concern about re-victimization through language (by both uses of language)

“... we must challenge language that only serves to further oppress and blame individuals for the abuse they have been subjected to.”

Supportive of victim

“... using more accurate language supports survivors and helps to create a world that is less stigmatizing...”

Puts responsibility onto the perpetrator

“The survivor/victim is not an active participant.”

“... takes the onus off of the survivor/victim and places it where it belongs, on the perpetrator.”

Common language (professional & layperson): increases collaborative approach among professionals

“... legal terms are used by the mainstream media and by the layperson more often than terms that we know as professionals are more encompassing, accurate and less oppressive.”



Responsibility for accuracy lies with the professionals in authority

“... contributing to changes in how child sexual violence is spoken about or viewed  
...”

Increased accuracy of depiction of experience

“Recognizes that children cannot be active participants in sexual encounters and the language should reflect this.”

Asserts act is not about sex, but about power and control

“Sexual assault is about power and control, not about sexual desire...”

### **Researcher's Interpretation of the Data**

Of the 9 themes, most of them had more than one mention (Appendix D). The most salient were the comments regarding how the website is educational and a support for all. As the participants were professionals who work with the subject matter, it was heartening to see that this was the most frequent comment, at five mentions, regarding the site.

The second most frequent theme offered, mentioned four times, was the theme of re-victimization, and there were conflicting comments regarding this. One was a comment that the existing language used currently served to re-victimize child victims, while another commented that the more accurate language proposed may re-victimize. This is an area that might warrant some further discussion.

An increased collaborative approach among professionals, through the adoption of a common terminology and way of speaking about the subject was a theme that was mentioned three times. Also, the increased accuracy of depiction of experience as well as

challenges to societal attitudes were themes that matched the number of mentions regarding the collaborative approach.

The comment that the more accurate language puts the responsibility properly on the perpetrator was offered two times, matched by the theme of the responsibility for accuracy is in the hand of the professionals in authority. Along with these themes regarding responsibility, the theme regarding that the act is not about sex but about power and control received two mentions.

The theme that the language was simply supportive of the victim had only one mention.

The 9 themes can also be broken down into 4 topic areas of concern: society, language/meaning, authority, victim/perpetrator.

Examples of comments that related to the topic area of society would be: "...an essential piece in challenging how society views sexual violence.", which is encompassed in the theme of cultural attitudes.

The greatest number of comments were around the topic area of society, closely followed by the topic area of victim/perpetrator with comments regarding how the use of more accurate language might specifically impact each of them. The other topic areas, authority and language/meaning, held an equal number of comments.

## **Discussion**

## **General Overview of the Results**

Though there were only 2 individuals who responded to the survey invitation, the text of their responses was rich with relevant comment. I will reference them as respondent A and respondent B.

The richness of the text may indicate a high degree of engagement with the material. Respondent A generally aligned with the information presented on the site, and occasionally offered either support or new information. Examples of this is: “The examples you provide also help to support your messaging and I believe for people who do not work in the field it helps to see how this language can reinforce messaging that is not only incorrect but also could have negative impacts on the survivor/victim” & “Sexual Violence is not a legal term but it encompasses much more than the legal definitions of sexual assault, it houses sexual harassment, cyber sexual violence, trans-phobia, street harassment and many more acts of emotional, psychological and physical abuse that is sexually targeted.”

The primary purpose of the survey was to generate dialogue, inform and to hopefully influence the language used by these authorities in the future. It was also hoped that this survey might assist in gaining insight into where there might be resistance to accurate language use.

Text from respondent B seemed to occasionally align with and protect the needs of the perpetrator. This was an unexpected result, but much welcomed as it is important to receive comment and insights from all the professionals working in all areas of sexualized violence against children. There was comment regarding why the more accurate language might not be used, and this was related to labeling the perpetrator long term. Respondent B

stated: “I think violence researchers who have been in the field for a long time take a lifespan approach where we do not condemn perpetrators as forever more ‘evil’. One needs to consider how they got to the spot they are now at.”

As stated, the purpose of this survey was to elicit dialogue to hopefully discover where the information on the website aligned with the perspective of professionals working in the field and where it did not, where professionals felt there would be challenges to using precise language that more accurately reflects the crime, and what will be required to move this work into common use in North American society.

The responses indicate that the information regarding more accurate language around sexualized violence against children is important, is welcomed and supported by those who work in the subject area. The comments indicated that there is a need and desire for dialogue in this area, and it is seen as important to all involved. As mentioned previously, the limited number of responses do not allow for generalizations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were limitations to the study, some of which were protocol parameters and out of the control of the researcher while others arose and can inform future research.

The survey design and ethical review required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of City University of Seattle were cumbersome for the design of this project. As I was not supposed to contact possible responders and engage them in conversation, other than using the script I had submitted to the ethical review board, it was challenging to garner e-mail addresses from people who work in areas where privacy and security are highly valued. This is not a comment on the value of the IRB, as the ethics parameters are critical,

but more on the fit of my project design and meeting the criteria required to pass the IRB standards, for a survey of this nature.

The most obvious limitations were the number of individuals contacted to invite to participate in the survey and the number of responses. Other limitations include the fact that no media were on the invitation list, the invitation letter was very long and may have overwhelmed possible respondents, and the small number of respondents which limits the ability to generalize the results.

Firstly, regarding the scarce number of responses, it is important to note that there are requirements that must be followed, set out by the IRB who regulates the composition of any scripts used with human subjects. This includes any telephone conversations, letters, surveys or any verbal and written interactions with humans.

For example, there were many challenges in creating the invitation letter, which must include many required elements and is strictly dictated by the IRB, rendering it very wordy. One of the barriers to responses may be the length of the invitation letter. The IRB monitors the ethical standards of any research at City University of Seattle that uses human participants. There are strict guidelines that must be followed in the creation of research designs and survey documents. In addition, rigorous consent information must be offered in the invitation so that prospective participants are fully informed as to the nature of the work and what they are consenting to participate in. Contact information of supervisors, as well as contact information to mental health services if the respondent is in any way traumatized or disturbed by partaking in the survey must be included. This is very important, though the practical aspect of presenting all of this information when inviting a busy stranger to participate in a research survey is cumbersome. Upon going through the

long process of receiving consent, it might be more useful to gather information by conducting a free-flowing interview.

I believe the invitation letter is daunting to someone when they first encounter it, as I tested the responses of various colleagues by sending it to them before sending it out to the list of participants. Most test colleagues responded that they felt they would not have the time to read this all through and then also respond to the survey, as it was all just too overwhelming. Though the survey itself was simple, I would be curious how many respondents failed to even get to it due to the demands of the required formalities of the invitation letter (Appendix C). For busy professionals to take the time to read this much formality would likely be off-putting.

There may be other reasons that only 2 of the recipients responded to the survey. Most people who work in mental health and social services have heavy caseloads and are not paid accordingly. Lack of time may be a factor. If there is little time to get their work done and there must be a choice between directly helping children by working on a file or taking 20 minutes to complete a survey, the survey will likely not be a priority.

Another factor may be that the people who work in the field may not see themselves as 'authorities' in the subject matter, as they are not often referred to in that manner, especially if they are working in mental health or social services. This was the finding in the study that looked at early childhood educators and when researchers inquired if they saw themselves as authorities, they overwhelmingly indicated that they did not, mostly because they felt that they did not have power and were not seen as agents of change (Langford, 2010). From personal experience, I would argue that many mental health professionals have similar judgments of themselves in their profession.

There may be concern by the individual who completes the survey that they may be identified. For many, the political landscape or their professional positions may not allow them a voice on this possibly controversial topic. Many individuals work for not-for-profit agencies and may feel they risk misrepresenting the agency with their comment. Those in politics may feel they cannot give their opinion, even off the record. Though it was stressed in the invitation letter that the survey was anonymous, this may have been a concern for some.

Another limitation of the research design was the challenge in getting e-mail addresses for certain individuals I would have liked to include. Again, this limitation was partially due to the ethical guidelines regarding scripts used to gather data, put forth by the University. Any contact with possible participants was to stick to script, and the various scripts the researcher intended to use were to be included in the ethical review document that was to be reviewed by the IRB and once accepted, were to be adhered to. As demonstrated by this thesis, communication, understanding and meaning is socially negotiated, so to be under such restriction limited my ability to connect with possible participants or organizations where they worked to solicit their participation and get access to their e-mail addresses. If and when they asked a questions as to the nature of the research, I was put in a dilemma to choose to answer them and actively solicit their valued participation or remain with the script and within the parameters imposed, so as to conduct what was seen as ethically sound research.

This was especially true of those working in media. To obtain e-mail addresses on the telephone, and honour the script I had submitted proved to be very awkward.

If I was to do this research project again, I would aim to conduct interviews (rather than a survey), either in person, via Skype or on the phone. To have a number of dialogues around the subject matter with a variety of people who work in different areas would be of value, to look at the themes that come up from these narratives. If doing social constructivist research ideally requires dialogue with the research participants (Kim, 2014), then this would be a more suitable approach. A project such as this would require only a few respondents. With the survey, I had hoped to reach a greater audience and thus receive more responses from individuals who were contacted in this study thus a range of professional opinions. In the end, the design that interviews fewer professionals but elicits a rich narrative seems to be the better choice. Though there were only 2 responses to this survey, I am grateful for the richness that the respondents provided in their narratives.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Several of the themes that arose in the text may be suitable areas for further research. The purpose of this survey was to stir a dialogue, to inform and to hopefully influence the language used by these authorities in the future, and to gain insight into where there might be resistance in precise language use.

One of the areas of interest might be to look at the subject of re-victimization. The comments indicated that there was concern both for the current language's ability to re-victimize the child victim, for any proposed more accurate language to re-victimize the child victim. I would be interested in looking more into the concept of re-victimization and what professionals consider are factors in re-victimization.



There may be a great deal of merit to conducting a survey to elicit comment from those who work in law enforcement, as their realms are both child victim and perpetrator. Gathering their comments around more precise use of language would be of value in forming and informing the dialogue.

I am also curious about the topic of sexting and where the boundary of expression/exploration is for youth. Do the young people today know what they are doing? Is this considered a sexual activity? Is it a 'game' for them; are they aware of the many consequences? I'm not sure how to go about looking into this area. But it is currently relevant and will impact on those young people's language of sexualized violence, so again it is an area that will require accurate ways of discussing it. What are the dominant narrative strands of language usage around consent in this activity? I am unsure as to how the judicial system responds to an adult sending photos of genitalia to a child.

Another area of interest and possible further investigation would be to send the survey exclusively to those who work in the media, to elicit their specific concerns and comments on the project and the use of more precise language. As the media has a very strong ability to influence our culture, and to act as an authority, it would be of interest to learn of any resistance that those who work in the media might have to the more accurate terminology.

The importance of getting the media on-board in a cultural-change project such as this cannot be underrated. Andrews & Caren (2010) state: "...local news media favour professional and formalized groups that employ routine advocacy tactics, mobilize large numbers of people, and work on issues that overlap with issues that overlap with newspapers' focus on local economic growth and well-being." (p. 841).

Since this is a discussion that does not easily happen around dinner tables and most of what the general public hears about crimes involving sexualized violence about children is likely presented by media outlets, how the media communicates what happened is very influential to the social-construction of this topic's meaning, and the well being of our children.

The existence of the "Tell it like it is!" project may be seen as an example of social entrepreneurship. The idea is that, increasingly, the social entrepreneur is seen as a bold agent of social change who does not act for business nor government, but as an independent moral authority for our culture who lives between the government and society, promoting innovative solutions and systemic change to current societal challenges (Partzsch & Ziegler, 2011). If the project is a form of social entrepreneurship, then the collaborative approach will serve it well, hopefully engaging direct stakeholders through their educationally-slanted website. As more professionals become involved and the site is linked to more community-based initiatives, the awareness will grow throughout our society and any resulting grassroots movement will be empowered to influence politics and law enforcement.

Reaching a consensus of definition, on the part of the many individuals and agencies who work within the field of sexualized violence against children, would be a good starting point from which to advocate for societal change. Salmon & Rapport (2005) discussed this very topic and found that there was a need for agencies to develop a common language, even if the agencies had different mandates, as they were all united by a common concern and common goal. "Tell it like it is!" may be a good focal point from which to generate this discussion.

One of the possible initiatives of the project may be to create a database of people working within the field of sexualized violence against children. This would have been very helpful to me, and to researchers in the future who are looking to do work with this target population of professionals. The contact information can be shared as well as it becoming a network of support, focussed on the well-being of the children. This could then link those who work in this area and foster advocacy when need arises. This appears to be what is initiated with the mailing list the website is currently compiling. It could be taken a step further by creating a kind of registry or Googledoc area where members can sign in and can access names and e-mail addresses, the city they work in and their professional roles. The possible risk would be to expose professionals in the field of sexualized violence against children to unwanted visitors to the site, but if the site was closed and closely vetted in some way, this idea might have merit.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Those Working in the Field**

As often is the case, researching and writing this thesis generated more questions than it answered.

What are the implications of this discussion on the work of counsellors? Much of what we meet in our offices, in terms of adults who have experienced sexualized violence in childhood, is concerned with the sequelae of shame, or confusion, of not being heard, or not believed. My clients so often tell me that assumptions are put upon them and they can't speak up; their experiences and narratives are unwelcome or their reality is not heard. This may be because 'well-meaning' individuals erroneously want to spare the victim from re-living the experience, or the listener cannot witness the more accurate telling of the crime

themselves for fear of vicarious traumatization, so they 'soften' the terminology by putting it in the realm of sex. Several adult clients who were targets of sexualized violence when they were children received clear messages from adults that the child was at fault for the sexual interaction, and there was no mention of force, coercion nor the violence they experienced. I think that a very significant cultural shift must occur for society to move toward healing.

What seems overtly to be missing in the dialogue, but rather is implicit, is justice. Maybe if we find the way in which to use more precise language that accurately portrays the crime, our perspective on healing, both for the child victim and for the perpetrator, and what they may require to heal, will be shifted from any thoughts of sex and we may possibly see more successes.

Once we have more precise language to discuss sexualized violence against children, we can use this to direct further sociological study into the meaning of the crime in our society, including to families and to children and their futures. How will this impact the weight and meaning of the criminal sentence, and to the responses in healing those affected? Maines (2000) states: "Those developments ... will come about only through a new consciousness among sociologists in their recognition that to assert any social ontology is to assert that something has been socially constructed. This recognition is not one of mere semantics or rhetoric. It is important because it will force analysts to look even more closely at actual human conduct and agency and thus be less willing to reify social constructs. Future developments will also come from the recognition that meanings in themselves deserve direct study, and that such study is not some philosophical or metaphysical matter but of fundamental sociological importance." (p.582).

## Summary

As societal shifts continue, perhaps bringing an altered focus recognizes that children have the right to be protected and to be free from physical violation and violence of all kinds, many more questions will arise within the dialogue. What is important now is that this dialogue occurs now, led by those who work within the field, knowing how to speak confidently of such a topic, minus any squeamish tones. The child needs us to speak frankly, and without shame, and tell it like it is. The story needs to be told from the point of view of the person most vulnerable, who is being acted upon, violated, shamed, and dismissed as lesser than in terms of their rights. For the perpetrator, this may be a sex act for personal gratification, but it is a forced, coerced and violent invasive act that the child cannot navigate.

I will close with words from Martin Brokenleg (2015): “The kind of language we use to refer to children and youth may define and limit youth in ways which we are not conscious.” (p. 17). I believe this is generally true of the language we use, and thus the use of precise language that accurately depicts sexualized violence against children is a very worthwhile topic of discussion.

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## APPENDIX A

Please see attachment



10 ways to use  
correct

## APPENDIX B

Please see attachment



Accurate Language  
Survey.docx

## APPENDIX C

### Script of initial contact e-mail:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am a graduate student completing my Master of Counselling program at City University of Seattle, at the Canadian campus in Victoria, B.C.. My primary interest as a practitioner is how violent crimes are represented in language, and particularly how inaccurate language can misrepresent or distort the events around sexualized violence against children. As part of my Master's thesis, I would invite you to take 20 minutes to complete a survey that deals with the language used around sexualized violence against children.

I am writing you as I have identified your organization as one that works within the scope of the topic of sexualized violence against children.

If there is another individual within your organization who would be better suited to partake in this survey, I would be grateful if you could forward this e-mail to them, or reply to this e-mail with their contact information. I acknowledge your work within this challenging field, and thank you for taking the time to complete this survey and hopefully help to offer a better understanding of the topic, from which we can move forward in our work.

Prior to accessing the survey, you may wish to look at the website: [http://tell-it.info/?page\\_id=590](http://tell-it.info/?page_id=590) as the survey will refer to the general concept introduced in this site.

Confidentiality for you and your organization will be protected, to the extent allowed by privacy laws. Specific responses will not be identifiably linked to your organization or agency in the published thesis.

At the beginning of the survey, and attached to this e-mail, there is an informed consent document to be read and terms accepted prior to accessing the survey. This document further outlines the purpose of the study, information around participation and offers the details around confidentiality.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. **insert survey link**

If you would like an e-copy of the completed thesis, as a participant in this study, please let me know and one will be sent to you once it is finalized and published.

If you have any questions, you can contact me by replying to this e-mail.  
My e-mail address is: [karlad@cityuniversity.edu](mailto:karlad@cityuniversity.edu)

My identity and enrollment as a graduate student in the Master of Counselling Programme may be confirmed by contacting City University Canada at the Victoria Office. The number is 250-391-7444.

The programme chair is Dr. Allan Wade. My thesis supervisor is Annette Przygoda.

Also, if you experience any distress from taking this survey, please contact the Programme Chair and we can provide a referral to a mental health professional.

Thank you for your generosity of time and for your participation.

Sincerely  
Karla Dolinsky, M.Sc.

## **APPENDIX D**

### 9 Themes from the Discourse

Educational as a support for all – 5 mentions

Concern about re-victimization in language (by both uses of language) – 4 mentions

Increases collaboration among professionals; common language – 3 mentions

Increased reflection of accuracy of experience – 3 mentions

Challenges societal attitudes – 3 mentions

Asserts act is not about sex, but about power and control – 2 mentions

Puts responsibility onto the perpetrator – 2 mentions

Responsibility for accuracy lies with the professionals in authority – 2 mentions

Supportive of victim – 1 mention



## **APPENDIX E**

### **SOCIAL – 8 mentions**

Challenges societal attitudes

Educational as a support for all

### **VICTIM/PERPETRATOR – 7 mentions**

Concern about re-victimization in language (by both uses of language)

Supportive of victim

Puts responsibility onto the perpetrator

### **AUTHORITY – 5 mentions**

Increases collaborative approach among professionals; common language

Responsibility for accuracy lies with the professionals in authority

### **LANGUAGE/MEANING – 5 mentions**

Increased reflection of accuracy of experience

Asserts act is not about sex, but about power and control