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Identifying novel forms of reluctance in commercially sexually exploited adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has largely overlooked expressions of reluctance in commercially sexually exploited adolescent (“CSEA”) victims. This is problematic because gaining information from known victims is of the utmost importance in order to better serve the needs of current and potential future victims.

Objective: The current study proposes a novel conceptualization of reluctance based on CSEA victims’ transcripts from police interviews and courtroom examinations.

Participants and setting: The study examined police interviews ($n = 8$ victims, 1558 utterances) and courtroom transcripts ($n = 6$ victims, 1961 utterances) conducted with female CSEA victims aged 15–17 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.29$). The victims were associated with the same trafficker and were thus interviewed by the same group of police officers, and for those who testified, were questioned by the same lawyers in court.

Results: Sixteen reluctance tactics were identified, including several that have been overlooked in previous literature. The current reluctance measure identified more reluctance than previous studies’ reluctance measures. Reluctance was much more common in police interviews (26.4%; $p < .001$) than in court (5.5%), and if victims were more reluctant in the police interviews, they were less likely to appear in court ($p = .001$).

Conclusions: These findings have implications for future conceptualizations of reluctance, and illustrate the importance of considering the age of the victim and the circumstances under which the victim is questioned in identifying reluctance.

1. Introduction

Reluctant children provide lower quality accounts of their abuse (Blasbalg, Hershkowitz, & Karni-Visel, 2018; Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, & Horowitz, 2006; Lamb, Brown, Hershkowitz, Orbach, & Esplin, 2018; Lewy, Cyr, & Dion, 2015; Orbach, Shiloach, & Lamb, 2007), which may detrimentally impact the perceived credibility of their reports (Lyon, Scurich, Choi, Handmaker, & Blank, 2012; Regan & Baker, 1998). Problematically, the majority of existing research only focuses on reluctance with children (i.e., younger than 10 years old; World Health Organization, 2021) and younger adolescents (i.e., ages 10–14; e.g., Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Hershkowitz, Lamb, Katz, & Malloy, 2015; Lewy et al., 2015; Orbach et al., 2007; World Health Organization, 2021). Commercially sexually exploited adolescents (“CSEA”) are likely to be especially reluctant for many reasons, including the fact that their exploitation is often discovered unintentionally, they struggle to trust adults, and they view police in particular as

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adversaries (Albright, Greenbaum, Edwards, & Tsai, 2020; Hampton, 2020; Lavoie, Dickerson, Redlich, & Quas, 2019). Due to the large proportion of sex trafficking cases that go unreported, gaining information from known victims is of the utmost importance to prosecute sexual exploiters and market facilitators and to identify ways to better serve the needs of current and potential future victims (Farrell et al., 2019; United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2016). Because existing research has failed to capture the myriad of ways that CSEA express reluctance, the current study contributes to the dearth of literature by evaluating novel forms of reluctance identified in a sample of CSEA victims, and subsequently assessing that reluctance in response to both police and courtroom questioning.

In the following paragraphs, we will review why reluctance is likely expressed differently with CSEA victims than in most existing research, which typically involves younger children who are victims of sexual or physical abuse (Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; 2015; Lewy et al., 2015; Orbach et al., 2007). We then highlight additional problems with the reluctance literature, namely that it overlooks adult evasiveness strategies, it fails to consider that reluctance can co-exist with informativeness, and it is based on what could be honest responses (e.g., don't know, don't understand). After, we propose our novel conceptualization of reluctance based on CSEA victims' transcripts from police interviews and courtroom examinations.

2. Reluctance in commercially sexually exploited adolescents

Sexually trafficked adolescents are likely to be a particularly reluctant population of victims (Lindholm, Cederborg, & Alm, 2015). Not only are they describing potentially traumatizing events that victims frequently feel guilty, ashamed, and afraid to disclose (Crisma, Bascelli, Paci, & Romito, 2004; Schönbucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder, & Landolt, 2012), but also, sexually trafficked adolescents often have a history of maltreatment exposure, sexual abuse, and runaway behavior that heightens their feelings of mistrust towards adults (Klimley, Carpinteri, Van Hasselt, & Black, 2018; Lacks & Gordon, 2005; Lavoie et al., 2019). Sexually trafficked victims typically have complex relationships with their exploiters (Reid, 2016). They may feel loyalty or love for their exploiter, and thus may think there is "nothing to disclose," or prefer to protect their abuser rather than cooperate (Reid, 2016). CSEA victims may also be coerced and controlled by their sex trafficker and consequently fail to cooperate out of fear (Williamson & Prior, 2009).

Sex trafficking victims are often members of marginalized groups that have historically poor relationships with police, which can severely impede trust and cooperation (Farrell et al., 2019). Sexually trafficked victims frequently experience counterproductive legal encounters in which they are treated as criminals or delinquents rather than as victims (Lavoie et al., 2019; Wilson & Dalton, 2008). Police intervention can result in victims being detained for minor charges as a means of ensuring safety; however, these criminal records destabilize future accessibility to education and employment (Farrell et al., 2019). Additionally, while investigative interviewing guidelines endorse rapport building (Vallano & Schreiber Compo, 2015), field research demonstrates that police officers build little, if any, rapport in practice (Compo, Gregory, & Fisher, 2010), which could be particularly beneficial for reluctant victims. Sexually trafficked victims also report that some police officers engage in illegal activities such as requesting sexual intercourse from victims of sex trafficking, further heightening wariness of police (Maurrasse & Jones, 2016). Thus, their expressions of reluctance may be particularly prevalent in contexts such as police interviews, where the CSEA may not respect or trust the questioners.

3. Expanding the definition of reluctance

In the CSA (i.e., child sexual abuse) literature, "reluctance" is conceptualized as a lack of cooperation in the interview, and particularly as a child's failure to disclose or informatively describe abuse (Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2006). However, previous research typically involves younger children (i.e., $M_{age} = 6.9\text{--}9.7$ years old; Blasbalg et al., 2018; Orbach et al., 2007) who may not express themselves in the same way as sexually trafficked adolescents. Therefore, in the current study, we explored additional ways that uncooperativeness may manifest, such as overt challenges to one's role as an interviewee as well as covertly resistant responses.

Four studies are particularly relevant to understanding our current conceptualization of reluctance. Although Chamberlain, Patterson, Reid, Kavanagh, and Forgatch (1984) measure examined resistance in adult clinical samples, their work was the first published reluctance coding scheme at the question-level rather than a global measure. Hershkowitz and colleagues' (2006) measure was the first published reluctance measure in child interviewing literature ($M_{age} = 8.8$), and it served as the basis for a large portion of more recent reluctance literature (Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, & Winstanley, 2014; Ahern, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Blasbalg, & Karni-Visel, 2019; Blasbalg et al., 2018; 2019; Hershkowitz et al., 2015; Orbach et al., 2007). Lewy and colleagues' (2015) examination of children's reluctance ($M_{age} = 8.3$) is the only known study that integrated ideas from both Hershkowitz et al. (2006) and (Chamberlain et al., 1984). Finally, Lindholm and colleagues' (2015) is the only published study that has examined reluctance in CSEA interviews.

In existing reluctance literature, the most common-sensical expressions of reluctance are when the speaker either remains silent or explicitly refuses to talk (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). A less direct but still reliable indicator of reluctance is when the speaker sidetracks (i.e., the response is unrelated to the eliciting prompt), which is also consistently noted in the literature (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). Child interviewing literature notes that reluctant children may express an unwillingness to cooperate (e.g., "I don't want to talk about it") or an indication that answering questions is difficult or uncomfortable (Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015). Most reluctance research also considers expressions of ignorance (e.g., "I don't know"), uncertainty (e.g., "I'm not sure"), and clarification-seeking responses (e.g., "What do you mean?") as reluctant responses (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015).

There are several issues to address regarding these previous conceptualizations of reluctance. First, they may overlook other ways in which interviewees can overtly as well as covertly express reluctance. Research examining adult interviewees in different contexts,

such as suspect interrogations and politician interviews, has described how uncooperative respondents challenge the power dynamic of the interview (Cotterill, 2004; Haworth, 2006; Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003). This is particularly relevant in police interviews, in which each participant has a clearly defined role and these roles are unequal in terms of power and control (Haworth, 2006). Haworth (2006) and Chamberlain et al. (1984) both note that when the respondent interrupts the questioner, this challenges the expectations of a typical question-answer sequence. Additionally, the questioner is supposed to set the topical agenda, so when the interviewee asks uninformed, non-clarification seeking questions, this similarly challenges the dynamics of power and control (Haworth, 2006). Other strategies include challenging the purpose of the question (Bull, 2003), rejecting the narrative that the questioner attempts to put forth (Cotterill, 2004), and inappropriately swearing in formal contexts with participants of unequal status (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008).

At the same time, other research has demonstrated how interviewees often avoid answering questions while still giving the “illusion of compliance” through covert reluctance (Catoto, 2017; Cotterill, 2004; Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003; Haworth, 2006). This has received some recognition in existing literature, identifying responsive yet wholly uninformative answers as a form of reluctance (Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). However, less attention has been paid to answers that are superficially informative (Lindholm et al., 2015), including answers that either minimize (e.g., “Did you work together?”/ “I knew her”) or maximize (e.g., “Where did you work?”/ “Everywhere”) so as to undermine the value of the content. As well, little research has considered superficially acquiescent answers that attribute the information to the interviewer (e.g., “If you say so”). These more overtly reluctant and superficially compliant types of responses may have been overlooked by studies involving children, who may be less inclined to challenge the authority of adult interviewers overtly and are less sophisticated at covert forms of evasion.

Related to the fact that answers can be ostensibly responsive yet substantively uninformative is that answers can both express reluctance and be informative (e.g., “He touched me, I don’t want to talk about it”). Until recently (Blasbalg et al., 2018), research on children’s reluctance has dichotomized children’s responses as either informative or reluctant (Lewy et al., 2015; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lindholm et al., 2015). This suggests that reluctance (and reduced productivity) may be underestimated in interviews during which children provide some informative details alongside reluctance. From a practical perspective, it also raises questions regarding whether interviewers are trained to recognize and respond to reluctance that co-occurs with responsive details. While children may be informative, the presence of reluctance suggests that they are not being as informative as they could be if they overcame their reluctance and spoke openly (Blasbalg et al., 2018). Additionally, ignoring reluctance or discomfort and continuing to question children without addressing their reluctance is likely to adversely affect the interview quality (Ahern et al., 2014; Hershkowitz et al., 2006). When interviewers acknowledge and address all reluctance, with and without informative details, it is likely to increase the overall informativeness of children’s reports (Blasbalg et al., 2018).

The last issue related to previous conceptualizations of reluctance is the assumption that non-responses are indicative of reluctance. Most research on reluctance classifies expressions of ignorance, uncertainty, and clarification-seeking responses as reluctant (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). In fact, these typically comprise the majority of responses classified as reluctant (Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2015). However, interviewers are taught to encourage children to indicate when they “don’t know” or “don’t understand” questions (Lamb et al., 2018). Further, interviewers often feel compelled to ask children about details that they may not know (e.g., temporal information; Orbach & Lamb, 2007). In the only field study to examine children’s requests for clarifications in forensic interviews, interviewers successfully resolved their questions 80 % of the time (Malloy, Katz, Lamb, & Mugno, 2015), suggesting that these requests were genuine. Therefore, although these types of responses can be a strategy for evasion (the classic perjury-evading response is “I don’t recall”) and have been found to correlate with overt reluctance (Blasbalg et al., 2018; but see Andrews, Ahern, & Lamb, 2017), they raise difficulties in distinguishing between reluctance and cooperativeness.

4. The current study

This study examined both police interviews and court testimony of a small sample of CSEA questioned in Los Angeles County, California. We created a novel coding scheme to identify a wider variety of reluctance types by building upon prior research, most of which examined child and adolescent sexual abuse victims, theoretical work on adult evasiveness, and an initial informal screening of interviews. Because we had both police interviews and court testimony from the same victims, we were able to assess victims’ reluctance in both contexts.

Lindholm and colleagues (2015) conducted the first and only study examining reluctance in CSEA, and they found high rates of reluctant, or “evasive,” responses (17%) in a sample of 24 victims. However, they may have both understated and overstated reluctance. On the one hand, many of the types of reluctance noted above (e.g., interruptions) were overlooked, and are incorporated into our current coding scheme. Furthermore, whereas Lindholm and colleagues (2015) simply coded responses as informative or uninformative (and hence reluctant), we coded for reluctance even when it occurred in responses that were otherwise informative. On the other hand, Lindholm and colleagues classified don’t know responses, uncertain responses, and clarification-seeking responses as reluctant. Because the majority of interviews ($n = 15$) were mediated by an interpreter, it is likely that many of these responses reflected honest uncertainty or confusion. We tracked these types of responses, but reported them separately from reluctance.

We predicted that despite excluding don’t know responses, uncertain responses, and requests for clarification as reluctant, we would identify greater reluctance than previous reluctance measures (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). Given the widely disparate contexts of police questioning and courtroom testimony, we anticipated that reluctance would be more common in police interviews. We also conducted exploratory analyses to examine the relationship between individual victims’ reluctance in police interviews and their subsequent behavior in court.

5. Method

5.1. Sample

Pursuant to the California Public Records Act (California Government Code 6250, 2010), researchers obtained trial transcripts of a multi-victim criminal case involving charges of pimping and pandering of a minor filed under Sect. 236 and Sect. 266 of the California Penal Code (human trafficking, pimping/soliciting of a minor). The case was tried by a jury in Los Angeles County in 2017, and the defendant was found guilty of 15 counts, including human trafficking of a minor by force or fear (Pen. Code §236.1, subd. (c)(1)); pandering by procuring a minor under the age of 16 to be a prostitute (§266i, subd. (b)(2)); pimping a minor under the age of 16 (§266 h, subd. (b)(2)); and assault by means of force likely to produce great bodily injury (§254, subd. (a)(4)). In a 2018 appeal the convictions were upheld.

We examined both the police interviews ($n = 8$ victims, 1558 utterances) and courtroom examination transcripts ($n = 6$ victims, 1961 utterances) conducted with female CSEA victims aged 15–17 years old ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.29$). The victims were associated with the same sex trafficker and were thus interviewed by the same group of police officers, and for those who testified, were questioned by the same lawyers in court. Three victims did not testify in court, and another two victims only appeared for the preliminary hearing, so their preliminary hearing transcripts were read in as evidence and subsequently coded for the current study. For analyses, the victims were

Table 1
Victim Reluctance Codes.

Type	Definition	Example
Refusal to answer	Victim states that he/she will not answer a question.	Victim: "I won't tell you that." "I skip that question."
Silence	When the victim didn't speak for 10+ seconds after being asked a question.	Questioner: "So is that something you're willing to do? [21 s pause] You sad about something? Hmm?" Questioner: "So you know the motel where you got picked up?"
Sidetrack	A question or response that is <i>overtly</i> off topic.	Victim: "I'm gonna tell you one time I'm not testifying against him."
Don't like/want	Saying they don't want to answer or they don't like to talk about it.	Victim: "I don't want to do this."; "I really don't like talking about this."
Expresses discomfort	When the victim is hesitant to answer and gives an explanation that they are uncomfortable, it is hard emotionally, or they are fearful.	Victim: "This is just really hard for me to go through."
Expresses frustration	Exclamative or vocalization of current exasperation or frustration.	Victim: "Oh my god!"; "I'm sick of this."
Challenge motivation	Victim expresses lack of trust or skepticism in interviewers' motivation.	Victim: "I know you're trying to catch me in a lie."; "So you're putting words in my mouth now?"
Challenge question	Challenge question: Victim <i>explicitly</i> challenges why the interviewer asked that question, or why the victim has to answer. This also includes challenges of the question being "dumb" or "stupid."	Victim: "Why do you want to know where I live?"; "This is stupid."
Question is repetitive	Victim states that the questions asked during the current interview are repetitive. This does not include comments about repetitive questions across multiple interviews.	Victim: "I told you this already."; "Y'all are asking the same questions."
Answer is unnecessary	Victim believes that the interviewer should already know the answer or could ask another source for that information.	Victim: "You already know who I'm talking about."; "You're playing stupid."
Denies assertion	Victim challenges accuracy of interviewers' information or denies an assertion of fact made by the interviewer. This is only in response to statements.	Questioner: "[X] told me that you worked with that pimp." Victim: "She's a liar. I never paid his pockets." Questioner: "Is he a pimp?"
Quasi-acquiescent	The victim does not confirm or deny with an explicit yes/no response but gives a more vague and less explicit answer. This does not include expressions of uncertainty or estimation (e.g., "I think so").	Victim: "If you say so."
Underinformative		
a. Uninformative	The answer can be implied from the question.	Questioner: "Who introduced you to the game?" Victim: "Just somebody in the game."
b. Echo	The most extreme version of an underinformative response where the victim exclusively repeats content from the previous question.	Questioner: "Tell me more about him asking weird, irrelevant questions." Victim: "He was asking weird, irrelevant questions."
c. Minimize	Victim downplays their answer, or seems to "dance around" the question.	Questioner: "You worked with her right?" Victim: "I was down there."
d. Maximize	Victim response is so vague or broad that it is not truly informative. This does include use of every but only when "every" is not plausible or informative.	Questioner: "I was told that you mainly worked Fig." Victim: "I worked everywhere."
Profanity	The use of profanity, excluding when the victim is recounting dialogue and the use of "hoe" in "hoe partners."	Victim: "What the f**ks that mean?"; "They are full of sh*t."
Interrupt	When the victim interrupts the questioner, indicated by a clearly incomplete question. This was defined as a non-grammatical phrase and/or phrase that doesn't make sense in isolation. It did not include victims' facilitators that may have interrupted the interviewer.	Questioner: "Who is-"
Uninvited question	When the victim responds to the interviewers' question with another question. Clarification-seeking questions, rhetorical questions, or questions recounted in dialogue were excluded.	Questioner: "What happened with you and [defendant]?" Victim: "What'd you hear?"

also categorized based on their subsequent trial involvement: the victims who testified in court ($n = 570$ utterances), the victims who only attended the preliminary hearing ($n = 265$ utterances), and the victims who did not attend trial or a preliminary hearing ($n = 723$ utterances).

5.2. Development and implementation of coding

Following the norm in forensic interviewing literature (e.g., Ahern, Andrews, Stolzenberg, & Lyon, 2018), we identified four types of responses as “non-responsive:” (1) no response (i.e., silence, off-topic); (2) “I don’t know/remember”; (3) uncertain responses (e.g., “I’m not sure”); or (4) clarification-seeking responses. If one of the types co-occurred with an informative response (e.g., “I don’t know; I think it was late”), it was coded as informative.

To identify reluctance, we developed a novel coding scheme that identifies 16 types of reluctance (Table 1). The coding scheme distinguishes between reluctance types that are similar but show a progression in resistance and uncooperation; for example, when the child refuses to answer a question, this is more reluctant than when a child says they don’t want to answer a question, which in turn is more reluctant than expressing discomfort in answering. Victims’ responses could contain multiple forms of reluctance (e.g., “Y’all keep asking me the same questions, and I’m irritated” contains both “question is repetitive” and “expresses frustration”). As well, reluctant and responsive statements were not mutually exclusive; thus, responses that informatively answered the interviewers’ questions could still contain reluctance (e.g., “Yes, he was there. Why do you keep asking me about this?”).

Three independent coders assessed victims’ responses for reluctance, both utilizing the current measure and each of the four previous studies highlighted in the introduction (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015). If explicit definitions of codes were not included in the published manuscripts or appendices, attempts were made to obtain more information regarding the definitions of the codes through contact with the authors. In cases of uncertainty, the definitions were interpreted liberally. For example, Lindholm et al. (2015) defined “evasive” responses as “unclear references, imprecise feedback, and vague descriptions;” we interpreted this as including any of the four types of underinformative responses in our scheme. The Appendix describes whether and how each previous reluctance measure captured the reluctance types identified in the current study.

5.3. Inter-rater reliability

Reliability was analyzed among the three independent coders throughout the development of the coding guide as well as during the final coding of the transcripts. We report the Prevalence-Adjusted Bias-Adjusted Kappa (PABAK) and the prevalence index. Because many types of reluctance have high prevalence indexes, Cohen’s Kappa is difficult to interpret meaningfully, and PABAK has been recommended as an alternative measure (Brennan & Stillman, 1992; Byrt, Bishop, & Carlin, 1993). We have also reported the percent agreement as it is a more familiar and intuitive inter-rater agreement index.

PABAK exceeded 0.90 for all variables, and percent agreement exceeded 94% for all variables; the prevalence index for individual variables was high (> 0.72). All disagreements were resolved by discussion. For the coding of content captured by previous reluctance

Table 2
Prevalence of Reluctance Tactics in Current and Previous Measures.

Type	Police		Court		OR	Lindholm et al. (2015)	Lewy et al. (2015)	Hershkowitz et al. (2006)	Chamberlain et al. (1984)
	N	%	N	%					
Refusal to answer	32	2.1%	5	0.3%	8.20	X	X	X	X
Silence	4	0.3%	3	0.2%	1.68	X	X	X	X
Sidetrack	36	2.3%	1	0.1%	46.36	X	X	X	X
Don’t like/ want	6	0.4%	6	0.3%	1.26		X	X	
Expresses discomfort	1	0.1%	3	0.2%	0.42		X	X	
Expresses frustration	6	0.4%	3	0.2%	2.52				
Challenge motivation	27	1.7%	0	0.0%	70.45				
Challenge question	19	1.2%	6	0.3%	4.02				X
Question is repetitive	11	0.7%	9	0.5%	1.54		X		
Answer is unnecessary	8	0.5%	0	0.0%	21.51				
Denies assertion	83	5.3%	14	0.7%	7.83			X	
Quasi-acquiescent	29	1.9%	4	0.2%	9.27				
Underinformative	36	2.3%	8	0.4%	5.77				
a. Uninformative	3		0			X	X	X	
b. Echo	10		2			X	X	X	
c. Minimize	16		5			X			
d. Maximize	7		1			X			
Profanity	61	3.9%	13	0.7%	6.11				
Interrupt	86	5.5%	26	1.3%	4.34				X
Uninvited question	98	6.3%	14	0.7%	9.33				
Total reluctance ^a	411	26.4%	107	5.5%	6.21	6.8/0.9%	6.2/1.5%	10.8/1.8%	10.6/2.0%

^a Total reluctance is less than the sum of N’s because 21.3 % of reluctant utterances contained multiple forms of reluctance.

measures, all discrepancies were discussed and resolved with 100% mutual agreement. Although disagreements were rare, the discrepancies amongst coders involved ambiguity in previous descriptions of codes, in which case liberal interpretations were adopted.

Our analysis plan was to first descriptively examine the prevalence of reluctance and non-responses in the police interviews and in court. Next, we descriptively compared previous reluctance measures to the current measure. Afterwards, Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMMs), which control for the repeated nature of the questioning and specific response proclivities, compared the presence of reluctance in both the police interviews and courtroom questioning as well as across CSEA groups based on trial involvement.

6. Results

6.1. Prevalence of reluctance

In the police interviews, 26.4% of responses contained at least one form of reluctance ($M = 51$ utterances per interview), and in courtroom examinations, 5.5% of responses contained at least one form of reluctance ($M = 18$ utterances per examination; see Table 2). Regarding non-responses, 9.7% ($M = 19$ utterances per interview) of responses in police interviews were non-responsive and 7.0% of responses in courtroom examinations were non-responsive ($M = 23$ utterances per interview). If one assumed non-responsiveness was also indicative of reluctance, the total reluctance would be 31% ($M = 61$ utterances per interview) in the police interviews and 11% ($M = 37$ utterances per interview) in the courtroom examinations.

6.2. Previous reluctance measures

Next, researchers examined previous studies' measures of reluctance. Table 2 describes whether previous measures captured each reluctance type (indicated by "X") as well as the total amount of reluctance that they would have captured in the current sample (i.e., "Total Reluctance"). As seen in Table 2, previous measures identified less than half of the reluctance captured by the current measure. While the current study identified reluctance in 26.4% of responses in police interviews, the most successful previous measure (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006) identified less than 11%. Similarly, while the current study identified reluctance in 5.5% of responses in court, the most successful previous measure (Chamberlain et al., 1984) identified 2%.

6.3. Reluctance in police interviews and courtroom examinations

Several analyses examined the reluctance in the different interviewing settings (i.e., police interviews, courtroom examinations) and different groups of CSEA based on trial involvement. A GLMM comparing the presence of reluctance in both interviewing settings found significantly more reluctance in the police interviews ($B = -1.14$, $SE = 0.17$, $Z = -6.58$, $p < .001$) compared to courtroom questioning.

Next, exploratory analyses compared the rates of reluctance in police interviews across the three groups of CSEA, based on trial involvement (i.e., testified in trial, testified only at preliminary hearing, did not testify at all). Analyses found that the victims who did not testify at all were the most reluctant in their police interviews (40.4% of utterances; $B = 1.03$, $SE = 0.33$, $Z = 3.18$, $p = .001$), followed by the victims who only testified in their preliminary hearings (19.4% of utterances; $B = -0.82$, $SE = 0.37$, $Z = -2.24$, $p = .025$). The victims who testified in trial were the least reluctant in their police interviews (9.6% of utterances).

7. Discussion

The results supported both hypotheses: our reluctance measure captured more reluctance than previous measures even when excluding expressions of ignorance, uncertainty, and clarification-seeking responses, and the CSEA victims expressed more reluctance during their police interviews than in courtroom examinations. Exploratory analyses revealed that victims' reluctance during their police interviews was significantly associated with their subsequent trial involvement. That is, if they were more reluctant during the police interviews, they were less likely to appear in court. These findings have implications for future conceptualizations of reluctance as they illustrate the importance of considering the age of the victim and the circumstances under which the victim is questioned when identifying reluctance.

The current study defined several novel, or frequently overlooked, forms of reluctance, such as asking uninvited questions, interrupting the questioner, denying assertions, using profanity, and challenging aspects of the interview (e.g., the interviewer's motivations or questions). We identified reluctance tactics that have previously been identified only in the adult evasiveness literature (e.g., Catoto, 2017; Cotterill, 2004; Gnisci & Bonaiuto, 2003; Haworth, 2006). Previous work with minor victims of sex crimes has focused on children and young adolescent victims of abuse (e.g., Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015), and these younger children may not express themselves in the same way as older adolescents, particularly adolescent victims of sex trafficking.

Overt reluctance, such as explicitly refusing to answer, likely requires a willingness to challenge adults and their roles as interviewers (who expect respect and attempt to control the questioning). It is interesting to note that three of the least common reluctance tactics used by CSEA victims were silence, expressing discomfort, and saying that they didn't like or want to talk, together comprising less than 5% of their reluctant responses. These three tactics have been noted in the CSA interviewing literature (e.g., Blasbalg et al., 2018; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015), which further demonstrates that CSEA victims express reluctance differently than younger CSA victims. Rather, CSEA victims often expressed their reluctance more overtly, using tactics that challenged

the power dynamics in their interviews, particularly with police officers.

Covert reluctance (such as quasi-acquiescence and minimizing and maximizing responses) likely requires a degree of sophistication in crafting responses that only seem to be cooperative, and these also appeared with some frequency among CSEA victims. While previous CSA literature has identified some of these covert tactics (Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015), they may occur less frequently in interviews with children because of the advanced sophistication that is required.

Previous measures also overlooked and underestimated reluctance in part because they dichotomized informativeness and reluctance (Chamberlain et al., 1984; Hershkowitz et al., 2006; Lewy et al., 2015; Lindholm et al., 2015), whereas the current measure considered reluctance separate from informativeness. We found that many types of reluctance frequently co-occurred with informativeness (e.g., “Yeah he did. Why do you wanna know?”). Because research suggests that appropriately responding to reluctance increases the informativeness of children’s accounts (Blasbalg et al., 2018), it is imperative that all reluctance is identified in children’s interviews.

Regarding our second hypothesis, we found that the CSEA victims expressed more reluctance in the police interviews compared to courtroom questioning. There are a number of differences between police interviews and courtroom examinations that could account for these differences, and future work can tease apart the reasons. The police were questioning victims at an early phase in the investigation, and likely were gathering information that the victims had never before divulged (Farrell, McDevitt, & Fahy, 2010, 2019). Furthermore, police typically use techniques such as minimizing and maximizing tactics (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004), which are not allowed in court, and these may be particularly likely to elicit reluctant responses. Reluctance in police interviews may also be exacerbated by previous negative experiences that CSEA have had with law enforcement (Farrell et al., 2019; Maurrasse & Jones, 2016). Courtroom examinations, on the other hand, are highly formalized interactions in which questioning is more controlled and for which victims are probably better prepared. Attorneys rely on closed-ended questions to control the information and often leave little, if any, room for the witness to elaborate (Andrews & Lamb, 2014). Spontaneous statements by the victim will lead the judge to intervene. It is also reasonable to assume that the victims who agree to testify in court will be less reluctant than victims who do not testify based simply on the fact that they have *agreed* to testify. Additionally, victims who testify may have been instructed about what questions to expect from both parties, which may further decrease reluctance during courtroom testimony. Thus, the timing and structure of courtroom examinations limits opportunities, and perhaps the motivation, for witnesses to be explicitly reluctant compared to police interviews.

Exploratory analyses revealed that reluctance exhibited during the police interview was significantly associated with subsequent trial involvement. More reluctant interviewees were less likely to appear in court. This raises concerns regarding the prosecution of these cases because successful sex trafficking prosecution is often dependent on the cooperation of the victims (United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2016). In addition, this finding suggests that if reluctance is identified in earlier interviews, targeted therapeutic intervention for reluctant victims could increase victims’ willingness to participate in subsequent legal proceedings.

7.1. Limitations and future work

Because this was a small sample of CSEA victims from a single court case, one cannot generalize these findings to CSEA victims in general. Rather, the primary purpose of the study is to identify and more clearly define types of reluctance that one may encounter when interviewing CSEA victims, and older victims generally. This coding scheme can be used in future research in a number of important ways.

First, little research has examined when children develop the cognitive abilities and motivations to employ more sophisticated evasiveness tactics. Social and cognitive factors likely contribute to whether children exhibit certain types of reluctance, and thus these are likely to vary with age. Based on the abilities of different ages to respond evasively, this variation may also improve our determination of whether non-responses such as don’t know responses are reluctant or cooperative. For example, younger children might express reluctance through expressions of ignorance, but as they mature and adopt more sophisticated strategies, they may use these responses more honestly. Conversely, perhaps even sophisticated adolescents use don’t know answers more often when they are reluctant, such that they are positively related to other types of reluctance.

Similarly, some of the responses we identified as reluctant, such as minimizing and maximizing, might be clear evidence of reluctance among older victims, but evidence of immature responding among younger children. Young children often exhibit formal reticence, whereby they provide minimally sufficient responses to questions based on the form of the question; for example, they tend to provide unelaborated yes/no answers to questions that can be answered yes or no, even if the interlocutor anticipates elaboration (Lyon, McWilliams, & Williams, 2019). Furthermore, what looks like reluctance among older children might simply signal fatigue or distractibility among younger children. We suspect that older children and adolescents learn to exhibit reluctance by “playing dumb,” that is, they respond in ways that would look like normative responding among young children.

Second, research can explore the factors related to different ways in which victims express reluctance. Victims may exhibit overt and covert forms of reluctance differently based on their relationship with the questioner and the type of questioning, as noted above with respect to police and court questioning. Child and adolescent victims’ reluctance may also be differentially affected by the topic of the question, particularly when intimate details are requested that induce shame, fear, or guilt. Moreover, the way in which victims express reluctance may provide insight into their reasons for resistance. For example, “It’s hard to talk about,” may derive from feelings of shame and embarrassment, whereas “Why should I talk to you?” may express a lack of trust in the criminal justice system.

Third, research can explore reluctance-minimizing strategies for victims that are appropriately tailored to their development, their specific concerns or difficulties, and how they express reluctance. Researchers have explored how interviewer support and rapport building can reduce reluctance in CSA victims (Blasbalg, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Karni-Visel, & Ahern, 2019; Blasbalg et al., 2018; Lamb

et al., 2018). However, there is little research that considers adolescents as a developmentally distinct age group (Cronch et al., 2006), although they will likely require supportive strategies that are tailored to their development. As discussed above, CSEA victims provide additional challenges because of their increased reluctance and previous life experiences.

Finally, research can help to further refine types of reluctance. Even within the types of reluctance identified here, victims may express reluctance in more or less overt ways. For example, references to repeated questions can be overt (e.g., “You keep asking the same thing over and over”) or covert (e.g., “As I’ve said...”). Because of the rigidity of courtroom examinations, victims may have expressed reluctance in subtle ways that were not detected in the current coding scheme.

7.2. Conclusion

These findings have important implications for the questioning of CSEA victims as well as other victims. Research should examine a variety of questioning settings to identify how different populations express reluctance, and subsequently, how interviewers’ questions, supportive statements, and unsupportive statements affect reluctance. If we overlook or misinterpret reluctance, we fail to thoroughly understand what youth are saying, which is essential to comprehending their interactions with interviewers and how interviewers’ behaviors affect their cooperation.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.104994>.

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