Shadows of doubt: Ambivalent acknowledgment of abuse and identification with the aggressor

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Child sexual abuse (CSA) not only poses a substantial risk to the mental and physical health of adult survivors, but it may also involve doubt around its labeling, a phenomenon known as ambivalent acknowledgment. The trauma literature suggests that ambivalent acknowledgment has clinical, legal, and social consequences, and that the unique victim-perpetrator dynamic, manifested in identification with the aggressor (IWA), may contribute to this phenomenon. However, no study has yet explored the relationship between IWA and ambivalent acknowledgment.
Objective: Addressing this gap, the present study examined the relationship between IWA and ambivalent acknowledgment, as well as the contribution of IWA profile type in explaining ambivalent acknowledgment beyond CSA features.
Participants and setting: The sample consisted of 437 CSA survivors, with a mean age of 34.10 (S·D = 9.5). Of these, 106 (24.3 %) acknowledged CSA, while the remaining 331 (75.7 %) reported ambivalent acknowledgment.
Methods: An online survey was conducted among Israeli female adults using self-report measures.
Results: Results indicated that ambivalent acknowledgment was related to higher levels of IWA, and respondents with a higher IWA profile were more than twice (OR = 2.59) as likely to belong to the ambivalent acknowledgment group, even after accounting for the perpetrator's gender, the perpetrator' role in the victim's life, the severity of the abuse, and the recurrence of the abuse.
Conclusions: These findings suggest that survivors' ambiguity around CSA labeling may be rooted in IWA. Therefore, the development of therapeutic approaches aimed at reducing IWA may help survivors to acknowledge their abuse.

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the most common forms of child maltreatment, with research estimating its prevalence to be between 8 % and 20 % (Borumandnia et al., 2024; Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). The consequences for survivors, as highlighted in various studies, are severe and long-term. Evidence has documented a range of negative outcomes in adult CSA survivors, including depression (Easton et al., 2019; Spatz Widom et al., 2007), anxiety (Lindert et al., 2014; Maniglio, 2013), dissociation (Kate et al., 2021; Lahav & Elklit, 2016; Lahav, Ginzburg, & Spiegel, 2020; Vonderlin et al., 2018), substance abuse disorders (Hailes et al., 2019), suicidality

(Angelakis et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2017), Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Boumpa et al., 2024; Hailes et al., 2019), and complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (Cloitre et al., 2019; Hébert & Amédée, 2020; Noll, 2021).

Nonetheless, the acknowledgment of CSA is far from trivial. In fact, according to the trauma literature, individuals who experience CSA may fail to label it as such (Artime et al., 2014; Holmes, 2008; Linde-Krieger et al., 2021; Stander et al., 2002; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2016). This failure has significant implications, as it challenges the ability of clinical and social authorities to provide CSA survivors with the help and support they may need. Therefore, understanding CSA acknowledgment and the factors involved is imperative.

Research on this subject has been sparse, primarily focusing on rape or involving male participants (e.g., Artime et al., 2014; Fondacaro et al., 1999; LeMaire et al., 2016; Lipinski et al., 2021; Marchewka et al., 2022; Wilson & Miller, 2016). Furthermore, the failure to label has mainly been explored in terms of *un-acknowledgment* (Littleton et al., 2007; Wilson & Miller, 2016), while the additional and distinct form of *ambivalent acknowledgment*—specifically, survivors' uncertainty regarding the labeling of their experiences (Cohen & Štulhofer, 2019; Johnstone, 2016; Lipinski et al., 2021)–has largely been overlooked. This is surprising, given that clinical writings suggest that victims' doubts about labeling CSA are not uncommon (e.g., Freyd, 1996; Herman, 1992; Van Der Hart & Nijenhuis, 1999). Lastly, studies aimed at identifying factors that explain failures in acknowledgment have mainly focused on features of CSA or rape (Littleton et al., 2018; Newins et al., 2018) and have not investigated the implications of the victim-perpetrator dynamic. The present study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring, for the first time, the contribution of identification with the aggressor (IWA) in explaining *ambivalent acknowledgment* among CSA survivors, beyond the effects of CSA features.

The concept of IWA, originally developed by Ferenczi (1932, 1933) describes an automatic defensive reaction in which victims of abuse internalize and adopt the experiences of their perpetrators. IWA reflects profound changes in the inner world of the victim, who may merge psychologically with the aggressor (Dimitrijević et al., 2018; Frankel, 2002a; Lahav et al., 2019). Four interrelated components constitute the phenomenon of IWA: replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator; becoming hypersensitive to the perpetrator; adopting the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse; and identifying with the perpetrator's aggression (Lahav et al., 2019, 2024).

To anticipate attacks and limit hazards, abused individuals develop dissociated self-states that align with their aggressors (Amir, 2016; Lahav et al., 2019). They *replace their own sense of agency with that of the perpetrator*, losing connection to their own feelings, urges, and needs, and becoming submissive both behaviorally and mentally. They exhibit *hypersensitivity toward their perpetrators*; they become attuned to and learn their perpetrators' feelings, needs, moods, and intentions (Lahav, 2022). Simultaneously, they *adopt their perpetrators' experiences regarding the abuse*, feeling what their perpetrators feel and viewing their abuse from the perpetrators' perspectives. Lastly, they *identify with their perpetrators' aggression*, internalizing these violent urges, which may lead them to direct aggression toward both themselves and others (Lahav, 2021a; Lahav, 2021b; Lahav, Allende, et al., 2020).

The multifaceted process of IWA may result not only in victims' detachment from their emotional pain but also in their negation, minimization, and even justification of their own abuse (Lahav et al., 2017; Sultana & Lahav, 2023). IWA may be particularly prominent within a specific self-state of the victim, coexisting in a dissociative manner alongside other self-states that hold conflicting emotions and beliefs about the abuse (Davies & Frawley, 1994; Lahav, Allende, et al., 2020; Lahav, Ginzburg, & Spiegel, 2020). Thus, while the self-state that identifies with the aggressor may deny the abuse and fail to label it as such, other self-states may hold contradictory views (Davies, 2004; Howell, 2014; Lahav et al., 2017). The unresolved conflict may lead to substantial confusion and doubt regarding the labeling of the abuse, manifested in an *ambivalent acknowledgment* of CSA.

Even though IWA is claimed to be an automatic reaction in the face of abuse, theoretical and clinical literature implies the existence of distinct patterns of IWA among survivors (Frankel, 2002b). Recent studies that have detected distinctive profiles in survivors that reflected different levels of IWA support this view (Lahav, Allende, et al., 2020; Sultana & Lahav, 2023). For example, a previous study identified two distinct IWA profiles: one characterized by high levels across all four subscales and another marked by low levels in all subscales (Lahav, Allende, et al., 2020). Therefore, one might postulate that profiles of IWA might explain the variance in CSA labeling among CSA survivors. The current study explored this supposition. Specifically, three main objectives were set: 1) To explore the associations between IWA and *ambivalent acknowledgment* of CSA; 2) To identify IWA profiles and their prevalence among CSA survivors; 3) To assess the unique contribution of IWA profile type in explaining *ambivalent acknowledgment* of CSA, after accounting for the perpetrator's gender, the perpetrator' role in the victim's life, abuse severity, and recurrence of the abuse.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The research employed a convenience sample of Israeli adults, aged 18 and over, using an online survey distributed from December 2022 to March 2023. The survey was distributed on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) and through the research participation of undergraduate psychology students in exchange for credit, via the Tel Aviv University website. The survey was administered using Qualtrics software (QualtricsLabs, Inc., Provo, UT, US), and the average completion time for the questionnaire was approximately 30 min. The study was advertised as a research project examining the impact of challenging childhood experiences on adult health. The Tel Aviv University institutional review board (IRB) approved all procedures and instruments. Respondents were informed about the research goals, the nature of the questions, and the approval from the relevant IRB. They signed a consent form indicating that they understood the survey was anonymous and that they could withdraw their participation at any time, without repercussions.

A total of 977 responses were collected. The present sample consisted of 437 women classified as having a history of childhood sexual abuse based on the short form of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-SF; Bernstein et al., 2003), who provided data

regarding the study variables. Of the sample, 106 participants (24.3 %) indicated that they experienced CSA (*acknowledgment),* while 331 participants (75.7 %) were unsure whether they had experienced CSA (*ambivalent acknowledgment).* In this study, we could not include participants who indicated that they did not experience CSA (*un-acknowledgment*), as they did not provide any data concerning the abuse.

Demographic characteristics and descriptions of study participants are shown in Table 1. The mean age of respondents was 34.1 years (SD = 9.5). The vast majority of respondents identified as Jewish (N = 405, 92.6 %), with 312 (77 %) stating they were secular. In terms of income levels, 242 (55.4 %) reported a below-average income, 106 (24.3 %) reported an average income, and 89 (20.4 %) reported an above-average income. Additionally, 230 respondents (52.6 %) were in a relationship. The mean years of education in the sample was 14.9 years (SD = 8.5), which is equivalent to an undergraduate degree in Israel.

Descriptive statistics for the study variables (abuse features, ambivalent acknowledgment, and IWA subscales and total score) are presented in Table 2. Most respondents reported that the abuser was male (*n* = 320, 73.2 %), and almost half identified the abuser as a parental figure (*n* = 209, 47.8 %). The vast majority indicated that the abuse occurred more than once (i.e., recurrent; *n* = 382, 87.4 %), and the mean level of CSA severity was 14.4 (SD = 5.6). The mean levels of IWA subscales and the total score were as follows: 33.48 (SD = 24.80) for adopting the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse, 35.80 (SD = 32.05) for identifying with the perpetrator's aggression, 54.36 (SD = 25.04) for replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator, 41.80 (SD = 29.27) for becoming hyper-sensitive to the perpetrator, and 40.00 (SD = 22.68) for the IWA total score.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Background variables

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire that assessed age, gender, education, relationship status, religiosity, and income.

2.2.2. Childhood sexual abuse and CSA features

The history of CSA was assessed using the Sexual Abuse subscale of the CTQ-SF (Bernstein et al., 2003). This subscale consists of five items that evaluate the frequency of sexually abusive experiences during childhood, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never true* to 5 = *very often true*). A cutoff score of ≥6 was used to classify participants as CSA survivors (Spinhoven et al., 2014). The severity of abuse was calculated as the sum of the items, ranging from 5 to 25, with a higher score indicating more severe sexual abuse.

The CTQ-SF has demonstrated strong convergent and discriminant validity (Bernstein & Fink, 1998) and high internal consistency for the Sexual Abuse subscale (Hagborg et al., 2022).

In the current study, the Sexual Abuse subscale exhibited high internal consistency (α = 0.94).

Additionally, participants were asked to provide further details about their abuse, including the perpetrator's gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*), the perpetrator's role in their life (1 = *parental figure*, 0 = *non-parental*), and whether the abuse occurred more than once (1 = *recurrent*, 0 = *one-time event*).

2.2.3. CSA acknowledgment

Acknowledgement of CSA was assessed using a single question: *Have you been sexually abused as a child (under the age of 18)?* The response options were *yes, no,* and *unsure.* Participants who answered *yes* were classified into the acknowledgment group, while those who answered *unsure* were classified into the ambivalent acknowledgment group. Participants who answered *no* were not included in the study, as they did not proceed to report on the characteristics or severity of the abuse, as well as IWA.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics and description of the study participants *(n = 437).*

Characteristic	M (SD) or f (%)
Religion (%)	
Jewish	405 (92.6)
Other	32 (7.4)
Religiosity (%)	
Secular	329 (75.2)
Religious/traditional	75 (17.1)
Age	34.1 (9.5)
Years of education (M, SD)	14.9 (8.5)
Income (%)	
Below average	242 (55.4)
Average	106 (24.3)
Above average	89 (20.4)
Relationship status (%)	
In a relationship	230 (52.6)
Not in a relationship	207 (47.4)

Table 2

Correlations between study variables *(n = 433)*.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perpetrator's role in the victim's life (parental figure)	–									
2. Perpetrator's gender (female)	0.38***	–								
3. Abuse severity	−0.12*	0.32***	–							
4. Recurrence of the abuse (recurrent)	0.26***	0.17***	0.46***	–						
5. Adopting the perpetrator's experience	0.34***	−0.33***	0.03	0.38***	–					
6. Identifying with the perpetrator's aggression	0.43***	−0.29***	−0.03	0.27***	0.70***	–				
7. Replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator	0.20***	−0.17**	0.17***	0.19*	0.60***	0.46***	–			
8. Becoming hypersensitive to the perpetrator	0.38***	−0.37***	0.03	0.34***	0.60***	0.52***	0.50***	–		
9. IWA total score	0.41***	−0.36***	0.05	0.35***	0.92***	0.83***	0.75***	0.76***	–	
10. Ambivalent acknowledgment	0.14**	0.21***	−0.74***	0.07	0.22***	0.26***	−0.02	0.21**	0.21**	–
M/ %	47.8 %	26.8 %	14.4	87.4 %	33.48	35.80	54.36	41.80	40.0	75.7 %
SD/ category	(Parental figure)	(female)	5.6	(Recurrent)	(24.80)	(32.05)	(25.04)	(29.27)	(22.68)	(Yes)

Note. Directionality of biserial correlation is according to the category defined in the last row.

* p < 0.05.
** p < 0.01.
*** p < 0.001.

2.2.4. The Identification with the Aggressor Scale

IWA was assessed using the Identification with the Aggressor Scale (Lahav et al., 2019), a 23-item self-report questionnaire. The items reflected "possible reactions that people may experience as a result of child abuse." Participants were asked to rate the frequency with which they experienced each manifestation of IWA in relation to their perpetrator on an 11-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 % (never) to 100 % (all the time).

The scale consists of four subscales, calculated by averaging the relevant items: adopting the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse (e.g., *Some people feel that the point of view of their perpetrator is the right one*); identifying with the perpetrator's aggression (e.g., *Some people feel that they behave as aggressively as their perpetrator*); replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator (e.g., *Some people do not know what they want in the presence of their perpetrator*); and becoming hypersensitive to the perpetrator (e.g., *Some people 'read the thoughts' of their perpetrator*). Additionally, we utilized the total score, which was calculated as the average of all 23 items, ranging from 0 to 100. A higher score indicates stronger identification with the aggressor. The IAS has demonstrated strong construct and criterion validity, as well as high internal consistency (Lahav et al., 2019). In this study, the internal consistency was high: α = 0.89, α = 0.94, α = 0.77, α = 0.87, and α = 0.94 for the four subscales and the total score.

2.2.5. Analytic strategy

The analyses were performed using R software. Of the total sample size of 437 participants, there was no missing data, so no imputation procedures were needed for our study. We applied Mahalanobis' distance to our raw data, in order to detect and omit multivariate outliers (Leys et al., 2018). Four outlier observations were identified and excluded from our analysis. All continuous data were tested for univariate and multivariate normality. We used the Mardia test for multivariate normality and the Anderson-Darling test for the residuals, which helps avoid the false acceptance of the normality assumption in smaller samples (Razali & Wah, 2011). To explore the relationship between the study variables and *ambivalent acknowledgment*, we conducted correlation and association analyses, utilizing Pearson's correlation coefficient, point-biserial association, Wilcoxon's *r*, and the χ^2's ϕ measure of association (Hollander & Wolfe, 1999). Using the four subscales of the IWA scale, respondents were classified into profiles of IWA levels via a Latent Profile Analysis analytic scheme. We determined the number of latent profiles and the appropriate model for this work using AIC, BIC, Entropy, and BLRT measures (Ferguson et al., 2020; Nylund et al., 2008), as well as the integrated hierarchical procedure by Akogul and Erisoglu (2017).

To explore the contribution of the IWA profiles beyond that of the covariates (i.e., perpetrator's gender, perpetrator's role in the victim's life, abuse severity, and recurrence of abuse) in explaining the probability of *ambivalent acWknowledgment*, we applied a hierarchical logistic regression model. The model was tested for multicollinearity, influential values, and the assumption of linearity. All assumptions of logistic regression were met in our analysis. Model diagnostics included the commonly used Cragg and Uhler's (Nagelkerke) pseudo-R^2 value, the Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test, and the Omnibus test of model coefficients to assess the improvement of the nested model.

3. Results

3.1. Associations between study variables

As shown in Table 2, ambivalent acknowledgment was significantly associated with higher levels across all IWA subscales and the total score, except for the subscale measuring the replacement of one's agency with that of the perpetrator. Additionally, ambivalent acknowledgment was linked to having a perpetrator in a parental role and to female perpetrators, as well as to lower abuse severity scores. Among participants in the ambivalent acknowledgment group, a higher proportion reported being abused by a perpetrator who was a parental figure or female, while the severity of abuse was lower compared to those in the acknowledgment group. However, ambivalent acknowledgment was not associated with the recurrence of abuse.

3.2. Profiles of identification with the aggressor

Results for the finite mixture models produced by the LPA procedure are shown in Table 3. Class-varying models could not be fitted for all profile classes and were therefore excluded from our analysis. Based on a comparison of the AIC and BIC values, the best-fitting models were the class-invariant unrestricted parameterization models (model 3) with four and two profiles, respectively. While these models are less parsimonious compared to the restricted model (model 1), they allow for non-zero values of both the variances and covariances of each profile, while imposing a fixed value for each profile (i.e., $COV_{ij}^{p} = const, \sigma_{ij}^{p} = const, \forall p$, where p is the number of latent profiles). According to the Akogul and Erisoglu (2017) procedure, the best-fitting model was the one with two profiles, which also resulted in a higher entropy value of 0.85, considered satisfactory by common standards used in the Social and Behavioral Sciences (Clark & Muthén, 2009; Nylund et al., 2008).

The model of choice generated two distinct profiles representing *high* and *low* levels of identification with the aggressor. Profile 1 comprises a total of 175 respondents (40.4 %), characterized by high levels across all four subscales of the IWA. Profile 2 includes the remaining 258 respondents (59.6 %), characterized by low levels on the same four IWA subscales. The centroid values of each profile's components do not overlap and fall outside the 90 % confidence interval for the true mean of their counterparts. These findings are further supported by a series of Mann-Whitney tests conducted to evaluate the median-ranked differences between profiles for their respective centroid values ($p < 0.001$, for all four tests). Therefore, we conclude that the procedure generated two statistically distinct and unique profiles. The profile centroid values are shown in Fig. 1.

3.3. Profiles of identification with the aggressor and ambivalent acknowledgment

Results of the logistic regression model estimating the odds of ambivalent acknowledgment are shown in Table 4. Fit indices indicated a good fit of the model to the data ($\chi_8^2 = 9.4, p = 0.31$), and a satisfactory improvement over the null model ($R^2 = 0.48, \chi_4^2 = 167.68, p < 0.001$). The perpetrator's gender, role in the victim's life, and recurrence of the abuse had no significant effect in either the first or the final model. The severity of the abuse significantly contributed to the model; the odds of ambivalent acknowledgment were 66 % lower for each incremental increase in the severity of the abuse scale (OR = 0.66) in the final model. IWA profiles also significantly contributed to the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.02, \chi_3^2 = 9.02, p = 0.002$), with belonging to the profile associated with higher IWA scale scores significantly increasing the risk of ambivalent acknowledgment by >150 % (OR = 2.59). Respondents who had higher levels of identification with their aggressor were more than twice as likely to belong to the ambivalent acknowledgment group.

4. Discussion

In many cases, childhood sexual abuse does not follow a clear-cut pattern. Contrary to common perceptions, CSA survivors may describe a loving and close relationship with the perpetrator, with the abuse blending into the relationship rather than standing apart from it (Ellis, 2019; Halvorsen et al., 2020). The abuse may be subtle or unfold over a long period, blurring the lines between what the child perceives as "normal" and what is defined as abusive. These elements can make it difficult for the child to identify the abusive

Table 3

Latent profile analysis fit indices *(n = 433)*.

Model	Class	AIC	BIC	Entropy	PV of BLRT
1	1	16,387.95	16,420.52	1	
1	2	15,786.88	15,839.8	0.87	0.01
1	3	15,703.79	15,777.06	0.74	0.01
1	4	15,621.74	15,715.37	0.79	0.01
3	1	15,709.7	15,766.69	1	
3	2[a]	15,591.93	15,669.28	0.85	0.01
3	3	15,592.68	15,690.38	0.66	0.16
3	4	15,589.22	15,707.27	0.67	0.04

Note. [a] The best fitting model. AIC = Akaike information criterion, BIC = Bayesian information criterion, BLRT = Bootstrap likelihood ratio test. Lower AIC, BIC values indicate a better fitting model. Higher entropy values indicate higher probabilities of each subject being assigned to a single profile. PV of the BLRT measures the statistical significance of the increase in model fit between the *k-1* and *k* profile models.
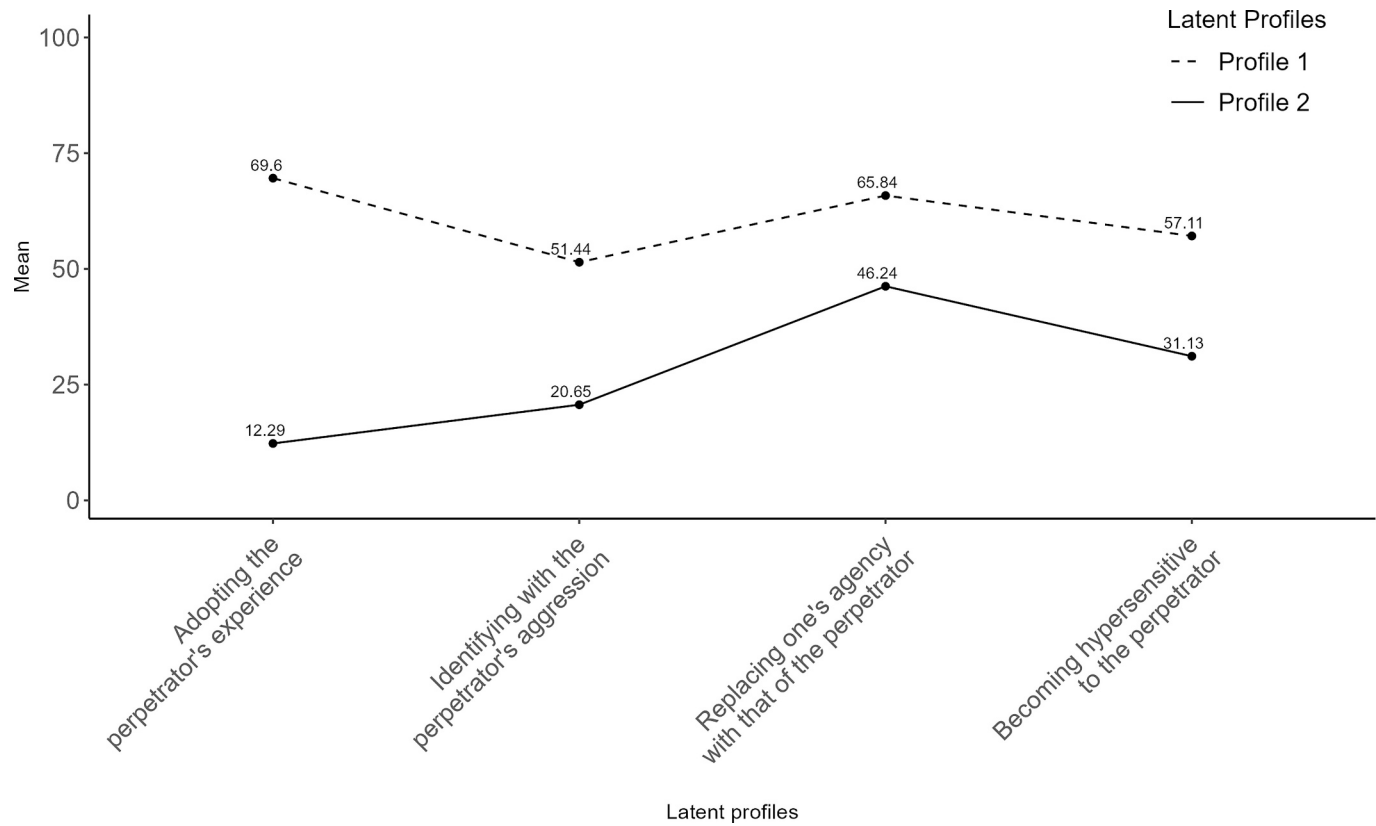
Fig. 1. Centroid values for the IWA subscales as classified by the LPA process.

Table 4

Estimates of the contribution of study variables to the probability of ambivalent acknowledgment of the abuse *(n = 433)*.

	β	OR	R^2	Improvement over last model (χ^2)
Step 1				
Perpetrator's role in the victim's life (parental figure)	0.49	1.63		
Perpetrator's gender (female)	0.19	1.20		
Abuse severity	−0.42**	0.66		
Recurrence of the abuse (recurrent)	0.43	1.54	0.48**	167.68**
Step 2				
Perpetrator's role in the victim's life (parental figure)	0.20	1.22		
Perpetrator's gender (female)	0.09	1.09		
Abuse severity	−0.42**	0.65		
Recurrence of the abuse (recurrent)	−0.34	1.41		
IWA profile (high)	0.95*	2.59	0.50**	9.08*

Note.
* $p < 0.01$.
** $p < 0.001$.

dynamics at play, and may result in confusion and doubt even years after the abuse has ended (Jackson et al., 2015; Lahav et al., under review).

The current study explored, for the first time, the implications of the complex victim-perpetrator dynamic for ambivalent acknowledgment of CSA. Our results indicated that ambivalent acknowledgment was related to higher levels of all IWA subscales and the total score, with the exception of replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator. Moreover, our findings revealed that respondents in the higher IWA profile were more than twice as likely to belong to the ambivalent acknowledgment group. This effect remained significant after accounting for CSA features.

The association between IWA and doubt regarding the labeling of CSA may reflect the effects of the specific relational dynamics that abuse victims internalize. Specifically, our results indicated that adopting the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse, identifying with the perpetrator's aggression, and becoming hypersensitive to the perpetrator were all related to ambivalent acknowledgment. Conversely, the relationship between replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator and ambivalent acknowledgment was non-significant.

Adopting the perpetrator's experience concerning the abuse can lead victims to rationalize or minimize the abuse, fostering confusion and self-doubt about its harmfulness (Lahav et al., 2017; Sultana & Lahav, 2023). Identifying with the perpetrator's aggression may result in adopting sadistic attitudes toward oneself, self-blame, and justifications for their own abuse (Ferenczi, 1932; Siegel et al., 2022). This aligns with previous studies showing that feelings of guilt or responsibility can hinder the acknowledgment of abuse (Ellis, 2019; Rausch & Knutson, 1991; Tyler & Melander, 2009). Additionally, developing hypersensitivity to the perpetrator–becoming highly attuned to their feelings, needs, and wants–may increase victims' empathy toward their abusers (Lahav, 2022) and complicate their ability to recognize the situation as abusive. Thus, victims with high scores on these aspects of IWA may deny, minimize, or rationalize the abuse. Furthermore, the coexistence of dissociative self-states, which hold detached and often opposing views and feelings concerning the abuse, may lead to inner struggles regarding CSA acknowledgment, manifested in ongoing uncertainty and doubt (Lahav et al., under review).

Conversely, the current results indicated that replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator was not related to ambivalent acknowledgment of CSA. Unlike the other three components of IWA, which reflect the acceptance of and fusion with various aspects of the perpetrator's psychological experience, replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator signifies the victims' mental submissiveness and a loss of connection with their own inner world (Lahav et al., 2024). This distinction may explain why replacing one's agency with that of the perpetrator is not associated with ambivalent acknowledgment. It suggests that although this facet of IWA enables victims to cooperate with their abusers without resistance, it does not increase their tendency to question whether their abuse actually happened.

Our results further documented the unique contribution of IWA in understanding ambivalent acknowledgment. In line with previous studies among abuse survivors (Lahav, Allende, et al., 2020), the current analyses revealed two IWA profiles among participants, reflecting high versus low IWA scores. Additionally, in our final regression model, which included IWA profile type and CSA features, we found that IWA profile type had a significant effect on explaining ambivalent acknowledgment. Respondents who belonged to the higher IWA profile were 2.59 times more likely to be in the ambivalent acknowledgment group. This effect was significant beyond the influences of CSA features, including the perpetrator's gender, the perpetrator's role in the victim's life, the recurrence of the abuse, and abuse severity.

Although CSA features were treated as covariates in this study, analyses of their effects revealed interesting results. Correlation analyses indicated relationships among the perpetrator's gender, the perpetrator's role in the victim's life, abuse severity, and ambivalent acknowledgment. These findings are consistent with previous studies among survivors of rape or CSA, which revealed associations between unacknowledged sexual violence and having a perpetrator who is someone with whom they have a close relationship (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Halvorsen et al., 2020; Lipinski et al., 2021), having a female perpetrator (Artime et al., 2014; Depraetere et al., 2020; Stander et al., 2002), as well as lower physical force and the absence of threats during the event (Artime et al., 2014; Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Littleton et al., 2018). One explanation for these results is that stereotypes may shape CSA labeling.

Specifically, it has been argued that when abuse aligns with typical expectations–such as involving a male, violent, stranger perpetrator–victims are more likely to acknowledge it than in situations where the abuse deviates from the stereotypical script (Cleere & Lynn, 2013; Kahn et al., 1994; LeMaire et al., 2016; Littleton et al., 2018).

Yet, the results of our hierarchical logistic model, which included all study variables, indicated that CSA severity was the only characteristic of abuse with a significant effect (alongside IWA profile type) in explaining ambivalent acknowledgment. Specifically, our findings revealed that the odds of ambivalent acknowledgment were 66 % lower for each incremental increase in the severity of CSA. In contrast, the perpetrator's gender, the perpetrator's role in the victims' lives, and the recurrence of CSA had a non-significant effect. These findings imply that the severity of abuse plays a critical role in shaping survivors' acknowledgment of their experiences. It may be that harsher abuse limits victims' ability to question its occurrence, providing a stronger source for self-validation. Additionally, severe and brutal abuse may align with the stereotypical view of CSA, making it easier to acknowledge.

The current investigation should be considered in light of its limitations. First, this study was based on self-reported data, which may be subject to response biases. Second, CSA was assessed using the CTQ-SF, which may be influenced by participants' subjective views. Moreover, although the current analyses considered the perpetrator's gender, their role in the victim's life, the severity of the abuse, and the recurrence of the abuse, other important abuse features that may be linked to IWA and ambivalent acknowledgment of CSA–such as the victim's age at the time of CSA, the time elapsed since the abuse ended, and whether victims had ongoing contact with the perpetrator–were not explored. Thus, future studies that investigate these abuse characteristics and incorporate data concerning CSA from clinical interviews are necessary. Third, the current study relied on convenience sampling, which may limit the ability to generalize the results to the population at large. Moreover, the advertisement for this study, which highlighted the consequences of difficult childhood experiences on adult health, may have attracted individuals with unique background characteristics. Lastly, the study employed a cross-sectional design; therefore, one cannot draw conclusions about whether IWA shapes ambivalent acknowledgment, reflects its consequences, or both. Longitudinal research that assesses the relationships between IWA and ambivalent acknowledgment is needed.

Bearing these limitations in mind, the present study nonetheless represents a step toward understanding ambivalent acknowledgment among CSA survivors. Ambiguity surrounding CSA labeling may negatively impact the reporting of sexual violence (Hlavka, 2014), thereby hindering society's efforts to combat childhood sexual abuse (Tinkler et al., 2018) and allowing its perpetuation. Furthermore, such doubts present challenges for legal prosecution, as survivors' ambivalent acknowledgment is often interpreted as an indicator of their lack of credibility (Bracewell, 2018; Martschuk et al., 2024). Ambivalent acknowledgment of CSA may also have implications for survivors' mental health, although the nature of these implications is still debatable. While some evidence suggests that not acknowledging abuse may protect individuals from posttraumatic distress, such as self-blame and diminished self-esteem (Artime & Peterson, 2015; Conoscenti & McNally, 2006; Layman et al., 1996), other studies indicate that survivors who struggle to label their abuse experience similar or even greater psychological distress than those who acknowledge their abuse (Danese & Widom, 2020; Frazier & Seales, 1997; Marx & Soler-Baillo, 2005). Moreover, evidence suggests that those who do not define their experiences as abuse are also less likely to seek therapeutic interventions or assistance and support (Fondacaro et al., 1999; Littleton et al., 2017; Wood & Stichman, 2018), and may be at risk for re-victimization (Holmes, 2008; H. Littleton et al., 2009, 2017).

Thus, the present study, which uncovers the contribution of identification with the aggressor in explaining ambivalent acknowledgment, has important clinical and legal implications. The results imply that developing therapeutic approaches that target IWA and reduce survivors' attachment to their abusers may help them validate their experiences and acknowledge their abuse. In addition, the current findings call for the legal system to consider the potential effects of the relational dynamics between victims and their perpetrators on survivors' acknowledgment of their abuse. Understanding survivors' ambiguity around CSA labeling as rooted in the automatic defensive reaction of IWA may lead to substantial changes in how survivors' ambivalent acknowledgment is treated in the legal field.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Edna Porat-Moeller: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Anastasia Keidar:** Methodology, Data curation. **Lee Gafter:** Formal analysis. **Yael Lahav:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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