

Who Is the Rotten Apple? Mock Jurors' Views of Teacher–Student Sexual Contact

Journal of Interpersonal Violence

2018, Vol. 33(9) 1449–1471

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DOI: 10.1177/0886260515618214

journals.sagepub.com/home/jiv



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Abstract

The present study investigated mock jurors' ($N = 541$) perceptions of a hypothetical case of teacher–student sexual contact. Mock jurors read a brief vignette describing an alleged sexual encounter where the gender and age of both the teacher and student were manipulated. Participants rendered legal decisions (i.e., verdict, degree of guilt, and sentence length), as well as culpability judgments pertaining to both the teacher and the student (i.e., blame, cause, and desire for the sexual contact). In addition, the effects of mock juror gender and attitudes regarding both rape myth acceptance and homophobia were investigated. Teacher gender and both teacher and student age predicted mock jurors' recommended sentences, with male teachers, older teachers, and younger students leading to greater sentences. Overall, student age was most consistently related to multiple culpability judgments, and the culpability judgments regarding the victim were the most consistently predicted by the independent variables. We did not find any evidence of homosexist attitudes, meaning that same-gender teacher–student contact was not judged any differently than opposite-gender contact. Worth noting, we found an interaction such that male students victimized by female

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teachers were judged to have wanted the contact more than any other gender combination, especially by male participants. The authors discuss these findings in the context of the child sexual abuse (CSA) literature concluding that many of the findings of more prototypical CSA cases extend to the teacher–student context. We also discuss the implications of these findings in terms of gendered judgments of adolescents who are victimized by teachers, possibly decided by legal professionals, school administrators, and jurors themselves. In particular, the three-way gender interaction can be interpreted in the context of stereotypes regarding sexual development marking sexual contact between adolescent males and older females as a “rite of passage” into adulthood.

Keywords

sexual abuse, child abuse, adolescent victims, sexual assault, cultural contexts, offenders

Sexual relationships between teachers and students are a major concern for society (Michaelis, 1996), school systems, students, and their parents; however, only a few studies have empirically investigated perceptions of these specific sexual interactions (e.g., Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, & Holt, 2004). Current research on this matter is scarce and what research is available is either dated (i.e., 10 to 20 years old) or focuses on attitudes toward collegiate-level sexual offenses and relationships between students and professors (e.g., Malovich & Stake, 1990; Reilly, Lott, & Gallogly, 1986). Few researchers have examined teacher and student sexual relations in lower level (elementary, middle, and high school) education (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001; Dollar et al., 2004; Timmerman, 2003; Wishnietsky, 1991).

In one study using a national sample of 8th- through 11th-grade students, 18% (25% girls, 10% boys) reported some form of sexual harassment from a school employee (AAUW, 2001; Bryant, 1993). These figures, combined with media coverage of high-profile cases (e.g., Mary Kay Letourneau [1997], Debra Lafave [2004], and more recently Stacey Dean Rambold [2014]), have raised concerns among schools and parents about the safety of their children. Furthermore, Corbett, Gentry, and Pearson (1993) found that adolescents themselves are unsure of whether a sexually intimate relationship between an adult teacher and one of their peers is “abuse” and/or is worth reporting. In addition, some researchers claim that adolescent girls may not recognize or report sexual harassment in an educational setting because they experience it more often than adolescent boys (AAUW, 2011; Leaper & Brown, 2008).

This lack of awareness and clarity on whether sexual contact between a student and a teacher is “abuse” implies that students perceive this kind of contact differently than other kinds of sexual contact between an adult and a minor. It is hard to imagine, for example, that students would hesitate to label sexual contact between a father and his daughter as abuse. Similarly, sexual contact between a stranger and a boy will almost universally be perceived as abuse. Why not, then, teacher–student sexual contact? Moreover, does this same confusion exist in adults’ judgments about teacher–student sexual contact?

Most likely, the confusion is related to questions of consent and mutuality in the contact. When teacher–student sexual contact occurs in high school in the context of a “relationship,” peers may perceive the student as fully consenting. Media coverage of high-profile cases frequently includes content relative to this consensual effect. Mary Kay LeTourneau, for example, argued that her sexual contact with Vili Fualaau was in the context of a mutual, loving relationship. They both repeatedly declared their love for each other in various media outlets.

At the very least, perceiving adult–minor sexual contact as mutual inserts shades of gray into the analysis of whether it is truly harmful (i.e., “abusive”) to the minor who is involved. From a legal perspective, these shades of gray could translate into either fewer guilty verdicts or lower recommended sentences for the offender, as compared with cases that are clearly perceived as being abusive. The purpose of this study was to investigate how mock jurors evaluate criminal cases in which a teacher has clearly had sexual contact with a student. To introduce these shades of gray, we manipulated the child’s age—middle (11 to 13 years old) or high school (14 to 17 years old) student—anticipating that participants would perceive sexual contact with a middle school student as more serious. We also manipulated the teacher’s age, gender, and student’s gender in the case vignette.

Because there is so little research on teacher–student sexual relationships, we could not place this study within that context. Instead, we draw largely on the extensive body of literature on perceptions of more “typical” child sexual abuse (CSA) cases, drawing distinctions where possible along the way.

The Role of Gender on Perceptions of Teacher–Student Sexual Contact

A number of researchers have explored perceptions of male versus female perpetrators of sexual abuse, but these cases are almost universally described as heterosexual and the child is typically young. Female perpetrators are convicted less often (Cramer, 1999), treated more leniently in terms of punishment

(Fallman & Christianson, 1999), and receive shorter sentences (Curry, Lee, & Rodriguez, 2004) than their male counterparts (Ahola, Christianson, & Hellström, 2009).

Whether victim gender matters in CSA cases is less clear. The lack of clarity may be due to the fact that some studies have found the influence of victim gender on jurors' perceptions to be moderated by other factors of the case, such as the perpetrator's sexual orientation (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Wakelin & Long, 2003; White & Kurpius, 2002; Wiley & Bottoms, 2009). Some have argued same-gendered sexual offenses are perceived as more abusive in comparison with cross-gendered sexual offenses (Drugge, 1992; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997). School administrators' views are also consistent with this finding, perceiving sexual relationships involving teachers and students of the same gender as more harmful than cross-gender teacher–student relations (Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995).

Along that line, other researchers have reported relatively positive judgments about cross-gender sexual interactions when the adult is a woman and the minor is an adolescent boy using both jury eligible undergraduate (Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Quas, Bottoms, Haegerich, & Nysse-Carris, 2002; Smith, Fromuth, & Morris, 1997; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984; Wiley & Bottoms, 2009) and high school (Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996) student samples. A possible explanation for this consistent finding is related to stereotypes regarding gender roles. For instance, Broussard, Wagner, and Kazelskis (1991) suggested that for cross-gender interactions, societal norms may influence juries to view a sexual encounter between an adolescent male student and a female teacher as less abusive and more as a triumphed sexual learning experience. In contrast, a sexual relationship between an adolescent female student and a male teacher is more often perceived as an abuse of power over the student-victim (Lee et al., 1996).

Given the complexity of the role of gender in these cases, Golding, Dunlap, and Hodell (2009) argued that jurors' perceptions of the interaction between victim and defendant gender is a better predictor of legal outcomes than their perceptions of either gender formed independently of one another. For this reason, we chose to fully cross both genders in this study, allowing for a complete study of the effects of perpetrator gender, victim gender, and same- and opposite-gender contact.

The Role of Age on Perceptions of Teacher–Student Sexual Contact

As with gender, both victim and defendant age may affect jurors' judgments in these kinds of cases within an educational context. CSA researchers have found that jurors consistently perceive sexual offenses involving young

children as especially abusive, coercive, harmful, and violent (Devine, Clayton, Dunford, Seying, & Pryce, 2001; Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Myers, 2002) compared with offenses involving adolescents. This finding has particular importance in terms of reporting CSA to authorities. For instance, Kennel and Agresti (1995) found that psychologists were directly influenced by child age, such that incidents concerning a younger child were more often reported than those involving an adolescent.

This age-related pattern is directly tied to the issue of mutual consent (i.e., rather than traditional legal consent); younger children are perceived as incapable of consenting to sexual acts with adults. Perceptions of motivation are also thought to interact with age-related outcomes. Mock jurors may reason that younger children are not motivated to engage in sexual acts, while adolescents are more likely to be. Consequently, less blame is often attributed to younger children in comparison with adolescent and teenage victims (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984) in CSA cases.

Maynard and Wiederman (1997) found that participants attributed more blame to a suspected adult perpetrator when the child was described as a 7-year-old versus a 15-year-old. However, the role of child age has not been sufficiently tested in the teacher–student context. Perceptions of CSA have focused on the analysis of jurors’ perceptions and legal judgments between mock cases involving elementary-aged children and high school–aged adolescents (e.g., Maynard & Wiederman, 1997), and have inadvertently disregarded cases involving middle school–aged children. Our study aims to further investigate the impact of child–victim age by experimentally contrasting the occurrence of an alleged teacher–student sexual encounter between two school settings: middle school and high school.

In terms of defendant age, there are a number of stereotypes pertaining to perpetrators of CSA. One common stereotype assumes that CSA perpetrators tend to be older individuals (Bolen, 2001). This age-related attraction to children is often interpreted as desperation for sexual contact that is satisfied by the sexual victimization of younger and more docile child–victim targets. Consequently, jurors may judge a sexual relationship between a teacher and student more severely the more they differ in age. Despite this common stereotype, there is a lack of empirical data to support it.

The Role of Juror Characteristics on Perceptions of Teacher–Student Sexual Contact

The influences of individual differences, especially participant gender and attitudes, on CSA cases are likely to generalize to alleged cases of teacher–student sexual interactions brought to trial. Participant gender has consistently

been identified as a factor impacting culpability perceptions and legal decisions in CSA cases. Female mock jurors are more likely to believe the child complainant's allegation (Bottoms, Golding, Stevenson, Wiley, & Yozwiak, 2007; Quas et al., 2002) and are more in favor of a conviction decision (Bottoms et al., 2007; Crowley, O'Callaghan, & Ball, 1994; Gabora, Spanos, & Joab, 1993; Quas et al., 2002) compared with male mock jurors. A few studies have explored participant gender in teacher–student relationships (e.g., Broussard et al., 1991; Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Fromuth, Kelly, Wilson, Finch, & Scruggs, 2013; Fromuth, Mackey, & Wilson, 2010). Consistent with the other CSA research, Broussard et al. (1991) found that women generally held more pro-victim attitudes than men. In contrast, male participants were affected by the gender dyad, and were less likely to view a sexual encounter between a male student and female teacher as a criminal case of CSA.

Female participants have also been found to hold more positive attitudes toward homosexuality (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999). To some individuals, homosexuality is viewed as morally wrong which suggests that these individuals may judge same-gender teacher–student sexual interactions as more egregious than those individuals who endorse more liberal views of homosexuality. If so, homophobia may influence perceptions of defendant guilt and exacerbate conviction rates for cases involving same-gender teacher–student sexual offenses.

Historically, men have been reported to endorse common rape myths more than women (Burt, 1980). Rape myth acceptance (RMA) attitudes have also been associated with both defendant and victim culpability judgments and legal decisions, but in the opposite direction of homophobic attitudes. Individuals who readily accept rape myths (e.g., “Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to”) are *less* likely to convict the defendant because they believe that victims brought the crime upon themselves in some way (e.g. dressing provocatively) or are somehow responsible for causing the sexual assault to occur (e.g. consuming too much alcohol at a party; Burt, 1980).

Study Overview

The purpose of the present study was to extend the literature on jurors' perceptions of CSA cases by exploring legal decisions about teacher–student sexual contact. We presented participants with a brief vignette describing a janitor walking in on a student and teacher, “partially clothed” and “kissing.” Given the importance of age and gender in CSA cases, we manipulated these variables for both the teacher and the student involved in the case. In addition, we measured the following participant characteristics: gender, homophobic attitudes, and rape myth attitudes.

Method

Design

We employed a 2 (teacher gender: man, woman) \times 2 (teacher age: 25 years, 40 years) \times 2 (student gender: boy, girl) \times 2 (student age: middle school, high school) \times 2 (participant gender: man, woman) between-subjects factorial design. Additional variables included RMA and homophobic attitude endorsement. Outcomes variables included conviction rate, guilt ratings, length of sentence, and defendant and victim culpability judgments.

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 553 participants. Twelve did not provide sufficient data to be included, leaving a total sample of 541 students (70%, $n = 376$ female; 91%, $n = 492$ Caucasian) who volunteered to participate in this study for course credit. Participants were undergraduate students ($M = 19.83$ years, $SD = 3.67$ years) enrolled in introductory psychology courses from two local colleges; a mid-sized public university (87%, $n = 480$) and a community college (13%, $n = 73$) in the southeastern United States. In our study, 18% ($n = 95$) of the participants were psychology majors, 35% ($n = 189$) possessed “neutral” political ideologies, and 25% ($n = 135$) practiced a specific religion “everyday.” The majority of our sample had never served jury duty (98%, $n = 523$) and identified with a “straight” sexual orientation (96%, $n = 518$).

Participant data were collected using Qualtrics, an online web survey site. Participants were instructed to read 1 of 16 randomly assigned experimental vignettes. They then responded to questions about the case via the Case-Related Questionnaire. Finally, participants completed a demographic survey, along with the two attitude scales.

Materials and Measures

Experimental vignettes. There were 16 experimental vignettes that differed only with respect to the four independent variables (i.e., teacher gender, student gender, teacher age, and student age). Student and teacher gender were manipulated using prototypical names, pronouns, and titles. Student age was manipulated by referring to the student as either in middle school or high school. Teacher age was manipulated directly by describing the teacher as either 25 or 40 years old. The vignette described a vague sexual encounter between a teacher and a student that was observed and reported by the school janitor. The pair was described as being found “partially clothed” and “kissing” during a meeting after school that was scheduled to discuss a class assignment.

Legal decisions. Three items on the Case-Related Questionnaire asked participants to make legal decisions about the specific vignette they were prompted to read. Legal decisions included a binary conviction decision (yes, no) and a continuous guilt rating (1 = *not at all guilty*, 7 = *definitely guilty*). If the defendant was found guilty, participants were asked to choose one of five sentence recommendations measured on a 5-point scale. The 5-point sentencing scale was based roughly on North Carolina's modified minimum and maximum sentencing guidelines for statutory sexual offenses (Smith, 2007). These guidelines were adjusted to create five categories of equal intervals: 1 = 10 to 13 months, 2 = 14 to 17 months, 3 = 18 to 21 months, 4 = 22 to 25 months, and 5 = 26 to 29 months.

Defendant and victim culpability judgments. The Case-Related Questionnaire contained six items intended to assess mock jurors' judgments of culpability for the defendant and victim. Participants were asked to assign defendant and victim *blame* as percentages adding up to 100, and to indicate on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *very little*, 7 = *very much*) their views of how much the defendant and victim *wanted* the contact and how much the defendant and victim *caused* the contact to occur. For the sake of simplicity, these latter four measures are referred to as "victim/defendant want" and "victim/defendant cause."

RMA. The RMA Scale (Burt, 1980) was used to assess participants' attitudes regarding rape. Rape myths are a series of stereotypical beliefs about the criminal act of rape, the perpetrator, and the victim. Those who score high on the RMA Scale are predicted to assign more responsibility to a sex offense victim, especially when the victim is female. The RMA Scale included eleven 7-point Likert items (-3 = *strongly disagree*, +3 = *strongly agree*). Examples of the items include "Any female can get raped," "In the majority of rapes, the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation," and "Women who get raped while hitchhiking get what they deserve." The RMA Scale had satisfactory internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$).

Degree of homophobia. The Homophobia Scale (Wright et al., 1999) was developed to assess the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of homophobia. This survey includes twenty-five 5-point Likert items (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) regarding attitudes toward homosexuality. After reverse scoring these 25 items, participants scoring high on this scale indicated stronger homophobic attitudes compared with those scoring low (i.e., a score of 0 being the least homophobic and 100 being the most homophobic). Examples of these items include "I think homosexual people

should not work with children,” “Homosexuality is acceptable to me,” and “Gay people make me nervous.” The Homophobia Scale also had adequate internal reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .95$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Before examining the effects of the manipulations on the dependent variables, we explored the descriptive statistics and interrelationships between all of our measures (Table 1). As expected, the dependent variables (i.e., legal decisions and culpability judgments) were correlated (all p s < .05). Therefore, we opted to run three multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) dividing the dependent variables into conceptual groups—legal decisions, defendant culpability judgments, and victim culpability judgments. In addition to the four independent variables, we also included three individual differences: participant gender, RMA scores, and homophobic attitude scores. Consequently, each MANCOVA included seven independent variables.

The authors made one additional decision regarding analyses. The sample size for this study was large ($N = 541$), resulting in an average cell size of 34. For this reason, we chose to simplify the results and reduce the risk of Type I errors by focusing our results primarily on findings with a p -value less than .01, although our tables do indicate comparisons that are significant at both the $p < .05$ and $p < .01$ levels.

Effects of Manipulations and Individual Differences on Legal Decisions

We asked participants to make three legal decisions: a binary conviction decision, a continuous guilt rating, and sentence length (if found guilty). The overwhelming majority of participants (93%, $n = 504$) indicated that they would convict the defendant. For that reason, we opted to drop both the binary conviction decision and the continuous guilt rating from the intended MANCOVA, converting the analysis to an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) with sentence as the dependent variable.

Three of the manipulations significantly impacted legal decisions at the $p < .01$ level: student age, $F(1, 466) = 12.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; teacher age, $F(1, 466) = 6.50$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$; and teacher gender, $F(1, 466) = 18.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. Generally, conditions involving middle school students, older teachers, and male teachers were assigned higher sentences. Means, 95% confidence intervals, and standard deviations for these differences in

Table 1. Univariate and Bivariate Statistics for Legal Decisions and Victim and Defendant Culpability Judgments.

Item	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Defendant guilt	6.41	1.15	—									
2. Conviction decision	Yes = 93% (n = 504) No = 7% (n = 38)		-.52**	—								
3. Sentence ^a	2.96	1.60	.32**	-.27**	—							
4. Defendant cause	6.44	1.07	.35**	-.17**	.20**	—						
5. Defendant want	6.47	1.08	.27**	-.10*	.10*	.47**	—					
6. Defendant/victim blame ^b	82%/18%	17%/17%	.31**	.24**	.37**	.37**	.15**	—				
7. Victim cause	2.08	1.40	-.18**	.19**	-.24**	-.36**	-.11*	.56**	—			
8. Victim want	2.72	1.65	-.20**	.26**	-.33**	-.26**	-.13**	.55**	.60**	—		
9. RMAS	-14.36	7.32	-.06	.06	-.02	-.11*	-.05	.17**	.10*	.12**	—	
10. HS	25.49	21.34	.01	-.002	.09*	-.05	-.09*	.07	-.03	.01	.27**	—
11. Participant gender	Women = 70% (n = 376) Men = 30% (n = 165)		-.06	.09*	-.07	-.11**	-.01	.16**	.06	.15**	.19**	.28**

Note. RMAS = Rape Myth Acceptance Scale; HS = Homophobia Scale.

^aSentence recommendations were rendered by participants who voted to convict the defendant (n = 504).

^bThese two items were forced to add up to 100% total, meaning that they were perfectly correlated and thus, were condensed into a single variable for the present table. Defendant blame was positively correlated with items 1 through 5 and negatively correlated with items 7 through 11. Victim blame was negatively correlated with items 1 through 5 and positively correlated with items 7 through 11.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 2. Means, 95% Confidence Intervals, and Standard Deviations for Significant Group Differences Regarding Sentence Recommendation.

Group Variable	Sentence Recommendation		
	<i>M</i>	95% CI	<i>SD</i>
Student age			
Middle school	3.37**	[3.17, 3.57]	1.58
High school	2.81**	[2.62, 2.30]	1.53
Teacher age			
25 years old	2.93**	[2.73, 3.12]	1.62
40 years old	3.26**	[3.06, 3.45]	1.52
Student gender			
Boy	3.03	[2.83, 3.22]	1.58
Girl	3.15	[2.95, 3.34]	1.58
Teacher gender			
Man	3.33**	[3.15, 3.51]	1.54
Woman	2.79**	[2.58, 3.00]	1.58
Participant gender			
Man	2.97*	[2.72, 3.21]	1.50
Woman	3.13*	[2.97, 3.30]	1.61

Note. This table includes only the 93% ($n = 504$) of participants who voted to convict the defendant. Significance tests are based on the ANCOVA reported in the results.

CI = confidence interval; ANCOVA = analysis of covariance.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

sentence length are presented in Table 2. No interactions between group variables were observed for sentence length at the $p < .01$ level.

Effects of Manipulations and Individual Differences on Defendant Culpability Judgments

Next, we examined the impact of the four manipulations and the additional three individual difference variables on the following defendant culpability judgments: defendant blame, defendant want, and defendant cause. There were three significant main effects. One of the manipulations affected defendant-related attitudes: student age, $F(3, 501) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, which most strongly impacted the defendant blame judgment, $F(1, 503) = 10.37$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, with defendants being assigned higher blame when the student was in middle school (Table 3).

In addition, two individual differences were also related to defendant culpability judgments: participant gender, $F(3, 501) = 4.87$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and rape

Table 3. Means, 95% Confidence Intervals, and Standard Deviations for Significant Group Differences Regarding Defendant Culpability.

Group Variable	Defendant Blame (%)			Defendant Cause			Defendant Want		
	M	95% CI	SD	M	95% CI	SD	M	95% CI	SD
Student age									
Middle school	85**	[83, 87]	16	6.46	[6.32, 6.60]	1.16	6.39*	[6.24, 6.54]	1.21
High school	79**	[77, 81]	16	6.44	[6.32, 6.55]	0.98	6.55*	[6.44, 6.66]	0.93
Teacher age									
25 years old	81	[79, 83]	16	6.39	[6.26, 6.52]	1.12	6.42	[6.30, 6.55]	1.09
40 years old	83	[81, 85]	17	6.51	[6.39, 6.63]	1.00	6.52	[6.39, 6.65]	1.06
Student gender									
Boy	81	[79, 83]	17	6.34	[6.20, 6.49]	1.23	6.36	[6.22, 6.51]	1.25
Girl	82	[80, 84]	16	6.56	[6.45, 6.66]	0.86	6.59	[6.48, 6.69]	0.85
Teacher gender									
Man	83	[81, 85]	17	6.48	[6.36, 6.60]	1.06	6.49	[6.63, 6.62]	1.10
Woman	80	[78, 82]	16	6.41	[6.28, 6.55]	1.11	6.45	[6.32, 6.58]	1.06
Participant gender									
Man	78**	[75, 81]	18	6.27	[6.09, 6.45]	1.18	6.48	[6.33, 6.64]	1.03
Woman	84**	[82, 85]	15	6.53	[6.42, 6.63]	1.01	6.47	[6.35, 6.58]	1.10

Note. Significance tests are based on the MANCOVA reported in the results. CI = confidence interval; MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

myth attitudes, $F(3, 501) = 4.58, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .03$. Participant gender most strongly impacted defendant blame, $F(1, 503) = 9.28, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .02$, whereas women viewed the defendant as more blameworthy compared with men (Table 3). Rape myth attitudes also influenced mock jurors' views of defendant blame, $F(1, 503) = 12.61, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$; increased endorsement of rape myths was associated with decreased defendant blame. No interactions between group variables were observed for defendant culpability judgments at the $p < .01$ level.

Effects of Manipulations and Individual Differences on Victim Culpability Judgments

For the final analysis, we ran an additional MANCOVA, this time on the three victim culpability judgments: victim blame, victim want, and victim cause. This set of analyses had the largest number of significant effects. Three of the manipulations had significant multivariate effects at the $p < .01$ level: student age, $F(3, 501) = 3.96, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .02$; student gender, $F(3, 501) = 8.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$; and teacher gender, $F(3, 502) = 5.34, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$.

Table 4. Means, 95% Confidence Intervals, and Standard Deviations for Significant Group Differences Regarding Victim Culpability.

Group Variable	Victim Blame (%)			Victim Cause (%)			Victim Want		
	M	95% CI	SD	M	95% CI	SD	M	95% CI	SD
Student age									
Middle school	15**	[13, 17]	16	1.93	[1.77, 2.10]	1.39	2.50**	[2.30, 2.69]	1.61
High school	21**	[19, 23]	16	2.21	[2.05, 2.38]	1.40	2.92**	[2.72, 3.11]	1.66
Teacher age									
25 years old	19	[17, 21]	16	2.26	[2.08, 2.44]	1.53	2.93	[2.73, 3.13]	1.70
40 years old	17	[15, 19]	17	1.88	[1.74, 2.03]	1.22	2.48	[2.29, 2.68]	1.56
Student gender									
Boy	19	[17, 21]	17	2.16	[1.98, 2.33]	1.50	2.91**	[2.70, 3.13]	1.81
Girl	18	[16, 20]	16	2.00	[1.84, 2.15]	1.28	2.50**	[2.33, 2.68]	1.42
Teacher gender									
Man	17**	[15, 19]	17	2.03	[1.88, 2.19]	1.34	2.52**	[2.34, 2.70]	1.56
Woman	20**	[18, 22]	16	2.13	[1.95, 2.31]	1.46	2.94**	[2.73, 3.15]	1.72
Participant gender									
Man	22**	[19, 25]	18	2.20	[1.98, 2.42]	1.44	3.10**	[2.81, 3.38]	1.84
Woman	16**	[15, 18]	16	2.03	[1.89, 2.17]	1.38	2.55**	[2.39, 2.70]	1.53

Note. Significance tests are based on the MANCOVA reported in the results. CI = confidence interval; MANCOVA = multivariate analysis of covariance.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

= .03. Student age significantly impacted both victim blame, $F(1, 503) = 10.37, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and victim want, $F(1, 503) = 7.14, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .01$, with higher scores attributed to the high school student (Table 4). The latter two manipulations—student and teacher gender—were qualified by a three-way interaction with participant gender, $F(1, 501) = 4.87, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .03$, which exerted its strongest influence on victim want, $F(1, 503) = 10.03, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .02$. To follow-up, we ran separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) exploring the teacher gender by student gender interaction separately for male and female participants. Significant teacher by student gender interactions were found for both male, $F(1, 161) = 17.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$, and female mock jurors, $F(1, 372) = 6.37, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$, although the means fell into different patterns and the size of the effect was stronger for male mock jurors (Figure 1). We did not find any additional interactions for victim culpability judgments at the $p < .01$ level.

Just as with defendant-related legal decisions, rape myth attitudes and participant gender were significantly related to victim culpability judgments, $F(3, 501) = 5.14, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .03$ and $F(3, 501) = 4.87, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .03$, respectively. Higher rape myth attitudes predicted higher victim culpability judgments: victim cause, $F(1, 503) = 8.40, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .02$; victim want,

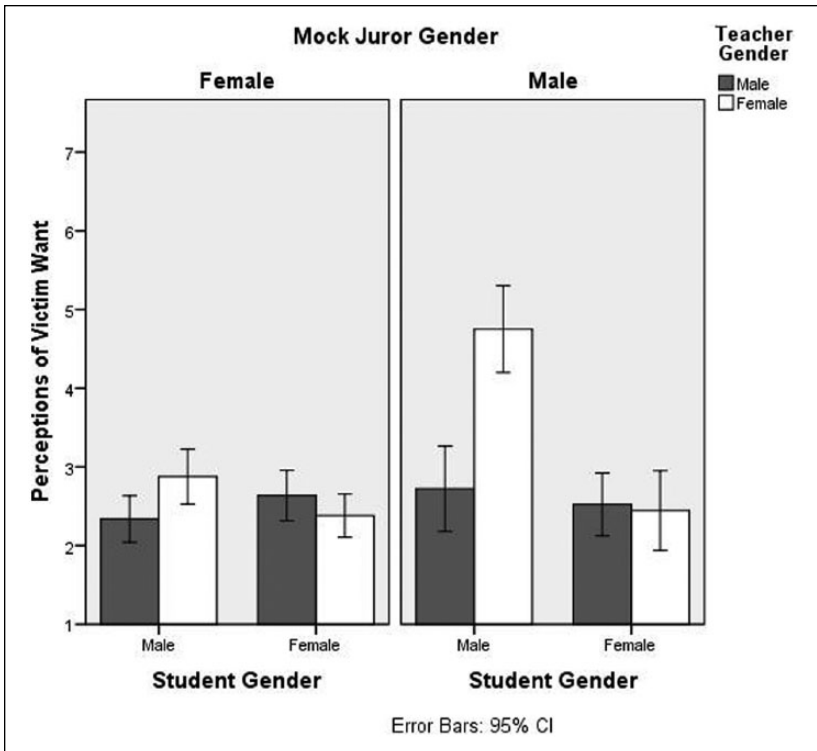


Figure 1. Mean values for participants' judgments of how much the victim "wanted" the contact with the teacher as a function of participant gender, student gender, and teacher gender.

Note. Female participant \times Male student \times Male teacher ($n = 107$, $M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.55$, 95% CI [2.05, 2.63]); Female participant \times Male student \times Female teacher ($n = 89$, $M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.66$, 95% CI [2.54, 3.22]); Female participant \times Female student \times Male teacher ($n = 93$, $M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.56$, 95% CI [2.31, 2.95]); Female participant \times Female student \times Female teacher ($n = 87$, $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.29$, 95% CI [2.11, 2.65]); Male participant \times Male student \times Male teacher ($n = 43$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.76$, 95% CI [2.19, 3.25]); Male participant \times Male student \times Female teacher ($n = 40$, $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.72$, 95% CI [4.22, 5.28]); Male participant \times Female student \times Male teacher ($n = 46$, $M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.35$, 95% CI [2.13, 2.91]); Male participant \times Female student \times Female teacher ($n = 36$, $M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.50$, 95% CI [1.95, 2.93]). CI = confidence interval.

$F(1, 503) = 10.46$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$; and victim blame, $F(1, 503) = 12.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Participant gender was specifically related to victim blame, $F(1, 503) = 9.28$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, and victim want, $F(1, 503) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, where men attributed higher victim culpability judgment scores to student-victims compared to women (Table 4).

Discussion

Legal cases in which teachers are accused of sexual assault against a student may be perceived as a gray area in terms of whether they truly constitute sexual abuse of a minor. Students report that they are confused about whether sexual contact with a teacher is “abuse” (Corbett et al., 1993). The media has occasionally focused considerable attention on cases where the teacher and student purport to be in a mutual, loving relationship (e.g., Mary Kay LeTourneau and Vili Fualaau [1997]), and that blurs the lines of whether the contact would be judged as abusive, regardless of its illegality. The purpose of this study was to explore mock jurors’ perceptions of a hypothetical case of teacher–student sexual contact.

We confirmed that many of the common findings pertaining to juror decision-making for CSA cases also extend to the school context. Analogous to “traditional” CSA research (e.g., Devine et al., 2001), cases involving younger victims (middle school students, ages 11 to 13 years old) were viewed as more abusive and deserving of a harsher sentence than those cases that involved older victims (high school students, ages 14 to 18 years old). Also consistent with previous research (e.g., Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984), mock jurors in the current study viewed the defendant as more culpable and attributed less responsibility to the victim when the case involved a middle school student than a high school student. In addition, we found empirical evidence to support the sentencing disparities reported in previous studies and news stories highlighted by the media: Participants rendered more lenient sentencing recommendations in cases that involved a female teacher compared with those that involved a male teacher. Similar to the CSA literature, participant gender effects were observed in the present study; women were found to hold more pro-victim attitudes than men. For example, women generally prescribed harsher punishments in the form of longer sentencing recommendations and found the defendant to have been more culpable for the occurrence of the sexual contact instead of the student-victim.

We found a ceiling effect with regard to legal decisions, in that the vast majority of our participants voted to convict the defendant. Even so, there was sufficient variability in sentencing decisions such that mock jurors recommended a longer sentence when the case involved a middle school student, an older and more experienced teacher, a male teacher, and when the mock juror participant was a woman.

Even though we found statistically significant group differences for a number of our dependent measures, it is worth noting that the absolute sizes of the mean differences were on the small side. This appears to be due to the fact that the patterns of responses for the sample overall leaned toward

blaming the defendant for the conduct and convicting the defendant for the behavior. These patterns tend to be found in the CSA literature (Vidmar, 1997), as well. Despite what might be perceived as small differences, the results of this study suggest that many of the findings reported in “traditional” CSA case research can in fact be generalized to cases involving alleged teacher–student sexual contact. And, although the differences may be small, we argue that they can still affect outcomes of these cases and should be considered important for that reason.

The strongest effects we found in our study pertained specifically to participants’ views of the *student’s* culpability for the sexual encounter described in the hypothetical CSA case. Mock jurors perceived high school students to have desired the sexual encounter with their teacher more than middle school students. Perhaps mock jurors considered high school students to be more knowledgeable of what constitutes inappropriate teacher–student contact and/or are more capable of resisting sexual advances from a teacher (Maynard & Wiederman, 1997). Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found the typical age that adolescents begin engaging in sexual intercourse is 16 years for boys and 17 years for girls. We suggest that mock jurors in our study viewed the high school student to be more motivated to initiate or reciprocate sexual contact with a teacher compared with the middle school student, thereby explaining the greater degree of culpability assigned to the high school student–victims.

Participants in our study suggested that a male student desired the sexual encounter more than a female student. This result empirically validates previous research findings; male victims of CSA are often viewed as more responsible for the sexual encounter than female victims (e.g., Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Rogers & Terry, 1984). Importantly, however, there were no gender differences in our measure of victim *blame*. This finding is inconsistent with commentary and concerns about sexist judicial decisions in these and related kinds of cases. For example, in a teacher–student case in Montana, the judge implied that the 14-year-old female student was partially to blame for the incident involving her male teacher, noting that she “appeared older than her chronological age” (Walsh, 2014). Examples of cases of under-aged girls being blamed in the courtroom for their sexual assault are so prevalent that some commentators have dubbed victim blaming in these cases the “Lolita defense” (Polizzi, 2013). Our results provide some hope that this “defense” is not actually persuasive to jurors, who typically decide on the guilt of the defendant. Unfortunately, though, judicial discrimination could still manifest in sentencing, as it arguably did in the Montana case where the judge initially sentenced the teacher to one month in jail (Walsh, 2014). (This ruling was overturned and the teacher ended up being sentenced to 10 years.)

While we may not have found evidence of female victim blaming that has been noted in the media, the authors are concerned about the apparent sexism in presuming that a male student *wanted* the situation to occur, especially when the sexual contact was with a female teacher. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth & Holt, 2008). Gender role stereotypes and sexual scripts postulate that a sexual relationship between a female adult and a male adolescent is viewed as least abusive and most normative compared with the three other teacher–student gender dyads, thereby leading to a greater acceptance of such sexual relationships (Broussard et al., 1991; Dollar et al., 2004) especially by male participants (Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Fromuth et al., 2013; Fromuth et al., 2010). Some researchers have suggested that sexual encounters between female adults and male adolescents are valued (and even coveted) as “status-enhancing” sexual learning experiences (Broussard et al., 1991; Nelson & Oliver, 1998). This “rite of passage” hypothesis has been supported in both commentary (e.g., Lauerman, 2005; Morris, 2009) and psychological research (e.g., Broussard et al., 1991; Nelson & Oliver, 1998).

This status-enhancing attitude is particularly important relative to the reporting of inappropriate teacher–student sexual relations. For instance, a male student may not report the sexual relationship or encounter with his female math teacher because he is “proud of his sexual achievements.” Likewise, a male school superintendent may not believe a report of sexual contact between a female teacher and male student to be a “real” case of CSA, thus, deciding not to alert the proper authorities. Prosecutors might use similar reasoning when deciding not to file charges in cases that involve male students.

Harmful and discriminatory consequences could also occur due to this “rite of passage” attribution if the case makes it to the courtroom. For instance, jurors’ perceptions of the student’s *desire* for the alleged sexual contact with a teacher may compromise the student’s credibility and potentially result in fewer guilty verdicts when the student is a boy. It should be noted, though, that we did not find strong evidence to support this speculation in the present study.

The sexual contact attitude might affect judicial decisions as well. One of the more surprising contexts in which it appears to play out is in cases where male statutory rape victims are ordered to pay child support. Leaving aside the debate over whether these individuals should have to pay child support at all, the language of the courts in these cases provides additional evidence of gendered norms. For example, in *County of San Luis Obispo v. Nathaniel J.* (1996) the court said,

The law should not except Nathaniel J. from this responsibility because he is not an *innocent victim* [emphasis added] . . . It does not necessarily follow that a minor over the age of 14 who *voluntarily* [emphasis added] engages in sexual intercourse is a *victim* [emphasis added] of sexual abuse. (p. 845)

Undoubtedly, there are a few limitations to our methodology that should be addressed and considered by future researchers. Most importantly, the sample used in the current study was of undergraduate students rather than community members or actual jurors, thus, limiting our ability to generalize the results we found to actual jury members (Bornstein, 1999; Fox, Wingrove, & Pfeifer, 2011; McCabe & Krauss, 2011). Undergraduate students are only a few years older than actual high school students and may be more likely to identify with the high school student described in the case vignette. Therefore, this particular sample may view sexual contact between high school students and their teachers differently than respondents who are older (e.g., college graduates) and more aware of what constitutes teacher–student sexual contact. Future research should be conducted targeting actual jurors as well as eligible individuals who are more likely to be selected as jurors in cases of teacher–student sexual offenses.

In addition to sample differences, we might question whether we would find different results if we modified our measures. For example, we asked mock jurors who voted to convict the defendant to render a sentencing recommendation, which is not representative of traditional American trial procedures where judges decide punishment. Also, we used the word “blame” in measuring culpability of the defendant and student. Given that the word “blame” has such strong connotations, we may have artificially influenced the findings.

We sought to contribute to the small body of literature examining perceptions of teacher–student sexual abuse. In particular, we were interested in exploring mock jurors’ perceptions of these cases given different combinations of teacher–student ages and genders. Because an experimental study measuring perceptions of this particular kind of sexual misconduct is new to the field, we purposely kept the scenario we presented brief and somewhat ambiguous. The strength of this approach is that it allows for detecting variability in responses that would not likely be there if the scenario described a clear-cut case of misconduct. However, this strength is also a weakness in that we cannot pinpoint the participants’ reasons for making their judgments. In the future, we hope that researchers will take a more nuanced approach to studying this topic, to gain knowledge about which specific biases and attitudes seem to be contributing to varied evaluations of these cases.

Perhaps surprisingly, many of our findings suggest that the factors of age and gender affect mock jurors’ judgments similarly to any other kind of CSA

case. These findings have important implications at all levels of the legal process, from reporting to deciding to prosecute and from jurors' decisions of guilt to judicial decisions of sentence. This field of research is small and much of it is dated (e.g., Broussard et al., 1991; Dollar et al., 2004; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997), yet the social problem is just as prevalent as it ever was. For that reason, we hope that more researchers will focus their lens on the topic.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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