

MOCK JURORS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT MATURITY IN TEACHER-STUDENT SEXUAL OFFENSES



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INTRODUCTION

Much ambiguity surrounds laypeople's knowledge about consent laws in the United States, as these laws differ by state. This confusion may influence mock jurors' judgments about child sexual abuse (CSA) cases.

Previous research suggests that views of adolescents' maturity levels and capabilities to consent to sexual activity increased with age (Reitz-Krueger et al., 2016). Further, women are more likely to assign severe legal sanctions to perpetrators in CSA cases (Fromuth et al., 2001), while men have been found to view these sexual encounters as less egregious (Anderson et al., 2015; Fromuth & Holt, 2008). The genders dyads of teacher-student pairs also impact mock jurors' legal judgments of sexual encounters (Anderson et al., 2015; Fromuth et al., 2001).

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine whether teacher gender, student gender, and student age affects mock jurors' views of the student's maturity level in a hypothetical CSA case. We were also interested in participant gender differences and the extent to which perceived student maturity predicted case-related outcomes.

METHOD

- Participants:** 525 (61% female, 78% Caucasian) jury-eligible adults ($M = 26.81$ years).
- Design:** 2 (teacher gender: male, female) x 2 (student gender: male, female) x 2 (student age: 11-year old, 15-year old) x 2 (participant gender: male, female) **between-subjects factorial design.**
- Procedure:** Participants were asked to read a vignette describing a teacher-student sexual interaction. Next, participants responded to six "student maturity" items: the decision to be sexually involved, responsibility, maturity to consent, "want" to be sexual, actually consent, and decision to be sexually active. **Two case-outcomes were also explored:** teacher guilt and sentencing recommendation.



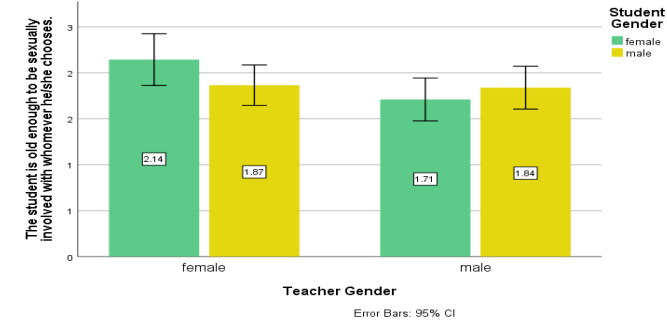
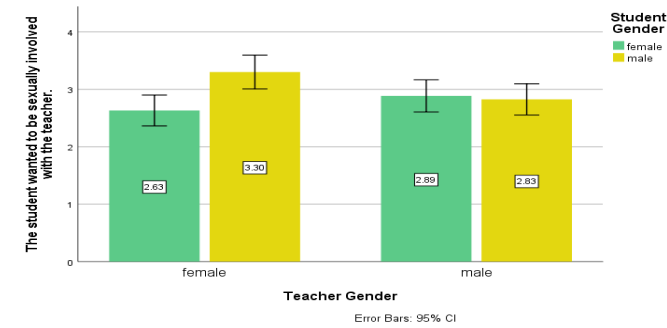
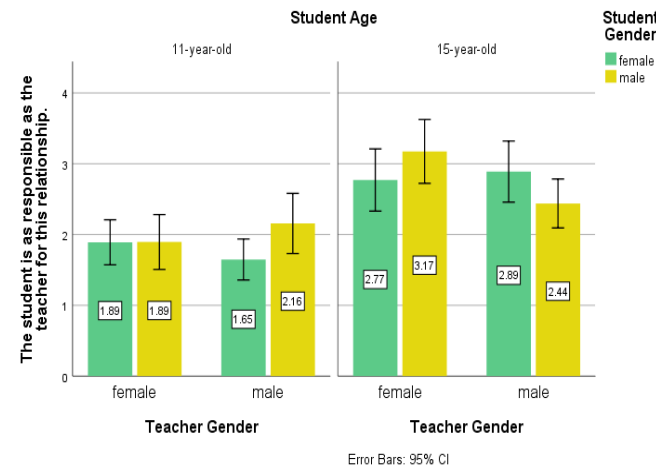
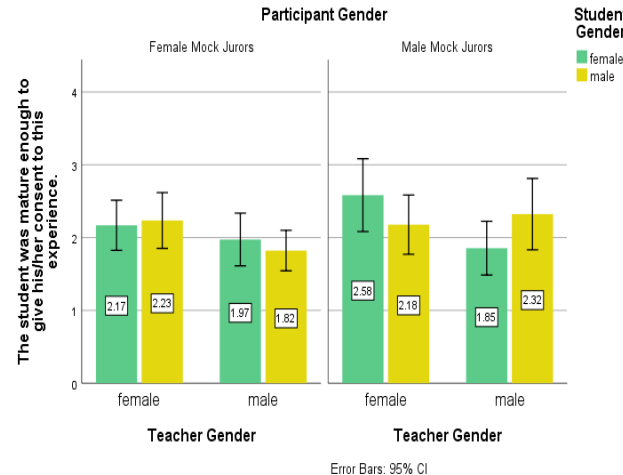
Scan here to see our proposal and learn more about this study!

A clear power differential seems to be overlooked by laypeople....

Mock jurors viewed the **15-year-old male student** to be "as responsible as the teacher" when a **female teacher** was involved in the case.

Male mock jurors perceived a **female student** to be "mature enough to consent" to a sexual encounter with a **female teacher**.

Student maturity items predicted legal outcomes.



DISCUSSION

- Greater student maturity ratings predicted lower teacher guilt ratings and shorter sentencing recommendations.
- Mock jurors rated the **15-year-old student** as responsible as the teacher for the sexual encounter.
- Mock jurors viewed the **15-year-old student** to be mature enough to consent to a sexual encounter with their teacher despite being younger than the minimum "age of consent" (The Crime Victims' Institute, 2011).

*Note: all results were reported using $p < .05$

Significant Main Effects		
Variables	Results	Mean & Standard Deviation
15-year-old	Mature enough to be sexually involved with the teacher	M = 2.62, SD = 1.82
	Just as responsible for the sexual encounter as the teacher	M = 2.81, SD = 1.71
	Mature enough to provide consent	M = 2.68, SD = 1.70
	Want to be sexually involved with the teacher	M = 3.47, SD = 1.55
	The student consented to the sexual contact	M = 3.62, SD = 1.75
	The student is old enough to be sexually involved with whomever	M = 2.32, SD = 1.54
Female Teacher	Students were viewed to be mature enough to give consent	M = 2.27, SD = 1.60
Male Participant	Viewed the student as wanting to be sexually involved with the teacher	M = 3.23, SD = 1.71

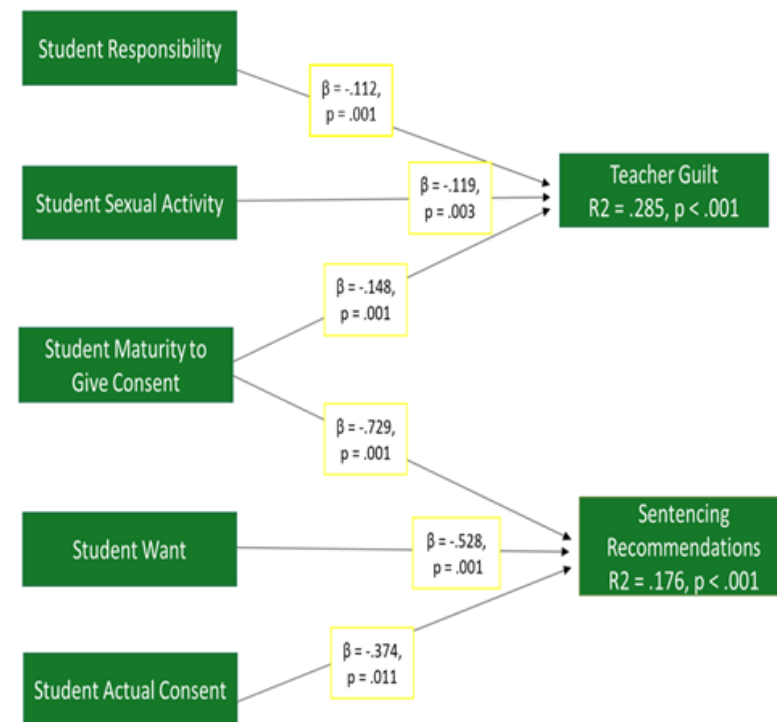
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Vignette with All Conditions

[Mark/Emily] is [an 11-year-old enrolled at Erie Middle School/a 15-year-old enrolled at Erie High School]. [Mark/Emily] is struggling to pass [his/her] [science/chemistry] class taught by [Ms. Sarah Nelson/Mr. Jim Nelson], [his/her] 30-year-old teacher. [Ms./Mr.] Nelson noticed that [Mark/Emily] was struggling with the class assignments and offered to privately tutor [Mark/Emily] twice a week after school in [her/his] classroom. One afternoon while [Mark/Emily] was working on [his/her] homework assignments for the week, [Ms./Mr.] Nelson confessed to [Mark/Emily] that [she/he] had developed romantic feelings for [him/her]. Then, [Ms./Mr.] Nelson kissed [Mark/Emily] on the lips. That same night in [Ms./Mr.] Nelson's classroom, the two engaged in sexual intercourse.

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Student Maturity Items Predicting Legal Outcomes



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