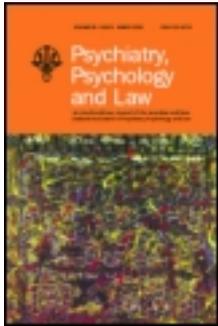


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Gender Bias in the Education System: Perceptions of Teacher–Student Sexual Relationships

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Research on perceptions of child sexual abuse has documented gender bias favouring female perpetrators. The current study aimed to determine if previous findings into perceptions of child sexual abuse translated to perceptions of abuse of adolescent students by school teachers using a theoretical framework of attribution and gender-development theory. Randomly selected participants (86 female and 44 males) responded to a brief vignette about a student–teacher sexual relationship (male teacher/female student or female teacher/male student). Results identified a gender bias in favour of female teachers on emotional reactions of anger and desire for consequences. Female participants expressed greater anger and rated the sexual relationship as more serious than their male counterparts. Results suggest that adolescent victims were seen as relatively mature and suffering less harm than younger aged victims. Finally, results suggest that attributions made by both men and women regarding teacher–student sexual relationships were consistent with traditional gender-role stereotypes.

Key words: attribution theory; child sexual abuse; gender bias; student–teacher sexual relations.

Research concerning child sexual abuse has increased substantially over the past few decades. The greater majority of this extensive literature has focused on the damaging psychological, physical and emotional effects on the young victims. However, another emerging area of focus in child sexual abuse concerns teachers abusing their positions of power by engaging in intimate, sexual relationships with students. Despite such relationships being a recognized community concern (Graves, 1994), few Australian studies have examined perceptions of teacher–student sexual relationships involving adolescent students.

Recent American research has acknowledged the importance of examining such perceptions (American Association of University Women [AAUW] 2001; Timmerman, 2003) with an American national study of eighth to eleventh graders revealing that 7% of students reported having been sexually victimized by a teacher or school employee.

When young children are sexually assaulted, the issue of responsibility is generally seen to be clear-cut, as the young victim is seen as not having any control over the situation. However, in the case of a teacher–student relationship where the

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victim is older, the victim may be seen as having more control and therefore there is the possibility that such relationships may not be viewed as abusive (Dollar et al., 2004; Kennel & Agresti, 1995; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997). For example, Corbett, Gentry, and Pearson (1993) suggest that adolescents appear uncertain as to whether a sexual relationship between a teacher and fellow student constitutes abuse. Perceivers may attribute causality to the victim in the belief that victims did little to avoid or contributed to the event. For example, while many may consider sexual contact with a young child to be completely unsolicited, others may consider a 15-year-old student capable of consent. Ford, Schindler, and Medway (2001) found that whilst school teachers, school psychologists and principals attributed most blame to the father-perpetrator of incest, they all attributed some blame to the victim, regardless of whether the vignettes used in the study depicted the child's behaviour as passive, resistant or encouraging towards the sexual abuse.

Of particular interest in the current study is the apparent gender double standard that exists in perceptions of teacher-student sexual relationships. Sentences handed down to female teachers who engage in sexual acts with students tend to be more lenient than those handed down to their male counterparts. For example, in 2005 Melbourne teacher, Karen Ellis, received a 6-month jail sentence, after pleading guilty to having sex with a 15-year-old male student (Hughes, 2006); while Tutor Fei "John" Xiong was sentenced for a maximum of 3 years for a similar sexual relationship with a 14-year-old female student (The Daily Telegraph, 2006). These sentences suggest a possible gender bias with male teachers usually receiving more severe sentences for sexual relationships than female teachers do.

Differential sentences for male and female perpetrators imply that the offences committed by the females are less serious

and less likely to have damaged the victim. However, male and female survivors of female-perpetrated child sexual abuse have been found to suffer adverse consequences, such as depression, anger, low self-esteem, difficulties in trusting others, suicidal thoughts, extreme fear, self-harming behaviours and sexual difficulties (Deering & Mellor, 2011). Male survivors have further been found to engage in externalizing behaviours (e.g. bullying and substance abuse) as a result of sexual abuse by female perpetrators and expressed intense anger/rage towards self and the perpetrator (Deering & Mellor, 2011). Similarly, survivors have expressed frustration at society's double standard in the treatment of child sex offenders with men receiving harsher penalties than women (Deering & Mellor, 2011).

One possible explanation for this apparent gender bias is society's gender roles. The belief that women are motherly, nurturing and caring, whereas men are more aggressive may affect public perception of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. As the belief of how females should behave towards children conflicts with the actual behaviour of sexual abuse, it is possible observers experience cognitive dissonance (when beliefs are inconsistent with behaviours), whereby beliefs are modified to be consistent with behaviours (Festinger, 1957). Saradjian and Hanks (1996, p.2) suggest this may occur through modifying the illustrated behaviour of abuse as "inappropriate affection" or through explanation that women are "physically closer to children than men." In this way, perceivers are able to maintain stability in their beliefs of gender appropriate behaviour.

Perceptions of sexual assault are also strongly influenced by the media who reinforce gender roles and reinforce stereotypes. Females are often depicted as victims of sexual crimes while men are portrayed as the perpetrators. Although the incidence of

female-perpetrated sexual assaults might be considerably less than male-perpetrated cases, current research suggests they still occur, with many of female perpetrators' victims being male (Denov, 2001, 2003). An Australian study conducted by Goldman and Goldman (1988) into the early sexual experiences of 991 first-year social science students revealed that 52% of male victims reported having been sexually abused by female perpetrators.

Another factor influencing the perceived prevalence of female sexual predators is the issue of underreporting. Deering & Mellor (2011) suggest that males may internalize early sexual encounters with women as a valuable sexual experience, whereby even if victims acknowledged the encounter as abusive, reporting the incident may be detrimental to their manly image. Likewise, Broussard, Wagner, and Kazelskis (1991) suggest that adolescent males may perceive a sexual experience with older women as valuable, due to the belief it is customary to perceive such relationships in this manner. For example, a male raped by two women when he was 9 years old later reported the abuse to his brother, in which his brother “laughed and [called me] a lucky bastard” (Deering & Mellor, 2011). This underreporting ultimately affects society's ability to address crimes of sexual assault by female predators as a serious issue and maintains stereotypes and myths that crimes of sexual content are committed by males.

In addition to the gender of the perpetrator influencing the perception of the offence, the gender of the perceiver is also important. For instance, Wellman (1993) found that women reported stronger beliefs, attitudes and emotional responses to child sexual abuse than males. Similarly, Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, and Holt (2004) found that male, as opposed to female, participants believed sexual experiences

involving a female teacher to have a positive impact on future sexual attitudes and the belief female teachers should receive fewer years of imprisonment than male teachers.

In summary, previous research has observed gender bias favouring female perpetrators in perceptions of child sexual abuse, although little is known about perceptions of abuse involving Australian adolescent students. Consequently, the aim of the present study was to investigate perceptions of teacher–student sexual relations. Based on previous research the following hypotheses were postulated:

Hypothesis 1. Participants would express greater anger, attribute greater responsibility, and desire harsher consequences for a male teacher having a sexual relationship with a female student than a female teacher having a sexual relationship with a male student.

Hypothesis 2. Greater responsibility and desire for harsher consequences would be attributed to a male student having a sexual relationship with a female teacher than a female student having a sexual relationship with a male teacher.

Hypothesis 3. Participants would express greater sympathy towards a female student having a sexual relationship with a male teacher than a male student having a sexual relationship with a female teacher.

Hypothesis 4. Participants would consider the psychological and emotional impact of a sexual relationship with an opposite-gender teacher to be more severe for female students than for male students.

Hypothesis 5. Female participants would express greater anger, attribute greater responsibility, and desire harsher consequences towards the teacher than male participants.

Hypothesis 6. Female participants were predicted to view the teacher–student sexual relationship as more serious and as having greater psychological and emotional impact on the student than male participants.

Method

Participants

A questionnaire was distributed to a randomly selected stratified sample of 250 female and 250 male members of a Sydney middle-class electorate selected from the electoral roll. Of the final sample of 130 respondents, 33.8% were men and 66.2% were women, 73.8% were parents, 36.3% had completed year 12 (HSC), 33.3% were university graduates and 10% were university postgraduates. In addition, 26.2% of participants reported having known someone involved in a teacher–student sexual relationship, and one participant reported having been personally involved in such a relationship. Age ranged from 17 to 86 years ($M = 47$, $SD = 16.47$).

Materials

Each participant read one of two short vignettes describing a hypothetical sexual relationship between a teacher and student. Vignettes were identical except for perpetrator and victim gender (female teacher–male student condition, male teacher–female student condition). Vignettes were a modified version of those used by Bush's (2006) study of public perceptions of child sexual abuse and media reports of an incident between 36-year-old Melbourne teacher Karen Ellis and her 15-year-old male student. To minimize the risk of participants responding to the highly publicized case, vignettes were modified regarding the position held by the teacher, sexual specifics and duration of the sexual relationship. In the current vignette, the student and teacher were described as having a sexual relationship which consisted of the pair having sex on three separate occasions. The encounters were described as neither forceful nor violent. The independent variables were perpetrator and participant gender. Participant gender was indicated by demographic

information, while perpetrator gender was manipulated by the vignettes describing “Matt” or “Amanda” as either the teacher–student.

The questionnaire which followed the vignette, contained items measuring the perceived seriousness of the behaviour, the participants' attributions of both the teacher's and student's responsibility for the incident, degree of sympathy for both the student and teacher, degree of anger towards the teacher, and a rating of the extent of negative consequences for the student. For all these items, a 7-point rating scale was used. Participants were also requested to indicate what the appropriate punishment should be for the teacher on an 11-point scale ranging from “no consequences” to a jail sentence of more than 10 years, and for the student on a 4-point scale ranging from “none” to “expulsion”. An open-ended question allowed participants to indicate what emotional and psychological effects, if any, the relationship would have on the student. Finally, demographic items measured age, gender, education level, if participants have children (if so, the ages of children) and whether participants had been exposed to any teacher–student sexual relationships either personally or through association.

Procedure

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Charles Sturt University. Of the 500 mailshots, half the participants were sent the female teacher–male student vignette and questionnaire while the other half were sent the male teacher–female student vignette and questionnaire, ensuring random allocation of participants to each condition. Participants received the information letter, a vignette, and a reply paid envelope. Completion and returning of the questionnaire was taken as participants' consent to participate in the study.

Results

Data were initially screened for accuracy and missing values. There were altogether 21 missing values in six of the variables. Consistent with recommendations by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001, p.62), mean substitution of missing values was implemented for continuous variables. Twenty-six participants provided more than one response on the teacher consequence variable. The item was designed to identify the maximum penalty considered appropriate for teachers sexually involved with students; therefore the most severe penalty selected was recorded as participants' response. Table 1 outlines the descriptive statistics for the dependent variables.

The distribution of scores for seriousness, teacher responsibility, teacher sympathy and anger towards the teacher were significantly skewed, as most participants perceived the sexual relationship to be very serious, the teacher to be very responsible for his/her actions and were considerably angry toward the teacher. Transformations using both the reflect and square root and the logarithmic procedure suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) were performed. However, as no transformations significantly improved normality, the

original data set was retained throughout subsequent analyses. Although this meant that there was a violation of the normality assumption, analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a robust technique and Green and Salkind (2003) suggest that ANOVA with sample sizes >30 , and cell sizes >15 per group are considered large enough to yield fairly accurate p -values. The current study's sample size of 130 and cell sizes of >15 meet Green and Salkind's rule of thumb.

Prior to conducting the main analyses, independent samples t -tests were conducted using a Bonferroni correction to check for demographic effects. The only significant relationship was a small negative correlation between age and perception of seriousness for the sexual relationship ($r = -.25, p = .005$), suggesting that older participants perceived the relationship to be slightly less serious than younger participants. Given the smallness of this correlation and the general lack of a relationship between the demographic factors and the dependent variables, no statistical control for demographic effects was used in the series of 2×2 ANOVAs that were performed to test the hypotheses. Given the number of analyses, a Bonferroni corrected alpha of .0056 was used.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for dependent variables.

Variable	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sympathy towards teacher	1–7	2.28	1.47
Sympathy towards student	1–7	4.04	1.83
Anger towards teacher	1–7	5.10	1.87
Teacher responsibility	1–7	6.40	1.07
Student responsibility	1–7	3.72	1.68
Seriousness of sexual relationship	1–7	6.36	1.34
Teacher consequences	1–10	5.78	2.17
Student consequences	1–4	2.32	.87
Emotional and psychological impact on student	1–7	4.63	1.77

Teacher-related hypotheses

The descriptive statistics for the perceived seriousness, teacher sympathy, teacher responsibility and teacher consequences by condition are shown in Table 2. There was a significant difference on the anger towards teacher item. As can be seen in Table 2, female participants expressed significantly greater anger toward the teacher than male participants ($F(1, 126) = 13.56, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$). Similarly, female participants rated the teacher–student sexual relationship as significantly more serious than male participants ($F(1, 126) = 13.16, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$). Partial eta squared for both anger and seriousness

Table 2. Mean ratings for teacher-related analyses.

Participants	Conditions								
	Female teacher/ Male student			Male teacher/ Female student			Total		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Seriousness</i>									
Female	6.66	0.96	41	6.64	1.05	45	6.65	1.00	86
Male	5.41	2.02	22	6.18	1.26	22	5.80	1.71	44
Total	6.22	1.53	63	6.49	1.13	67	6.36	1.34	130
<i>Sympathy</i>									
Female	2.40	1.61	41	2.04	1.38	45	2.21	1.47	86
Male	2.87	1.46	22	2.00	1.30	22	2.43	1.44	44
Total	2.56	1.57	63	2.03	1.35	67	2.28	1.47	130
<i>Anger</i>									
Female	5.20	2.00	41	5.78	1.36	45	5.50	1.71	86
Male	3.46	1.90	22	5.18	1.56	22	4.31	1.93	44
Total	4.59	2.12	63	5.59	1.45	67	5.10	1.87	130
<i>Responsibility</i>									
Female	6.56	0.87	41	6.51	0.87	45	6.53	.86	86
Male	5.86	1.46	22	6.40	1.22	22	6.14	1.36	44
Total	6.32	1.15	63	6.48	.99	67	6.40	1.07	130
<i>Consequences</i>									
Female	5.68	2.10	41	6.56	2.04	45	6.14	2.10	86
Male	4.41	1.90	22	5.77	2.20	22	5.09	2.14	44
Total	5.24	2.10	63	6.30	2.11	67	5.79	2.17	130

suggests a medium to large effect size. There was greater variability in male's scores on ratings of seriousness than female participant's scores, suggesting females were much more consistent in their ratings, while there was inconsistency in males ratings (e.g. some male participants perceived the relationship as serious, while others did not).

Male and female participants did not significantly differ in their ratings of sympathy toward the teacher ($F(1, 126) = .63, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 < .01$), teacher responsibility ($F(1, 126) = 4.20, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) or consequences for the teacher ($F(1, 126) = 7.22, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$).

There were no significant main effects for teacher gender on the measures of sympathy towards the teacher ($F(1, 126) = 5.00, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$), teacher responsibility ($F(1, 126) = 1.62, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$), or seriousness of the sexual relationship ($F(1, 126) = 2.58, p > .0056$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$).

However, in the case of anger, participants expressed significantly greater anger toward a male teacher engaged in teacher-student sexual relations than a female teacher ($F(1, 126) = 13.25, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$). The effect size for teacher gender suggests a medium to large effect size. Similarly, participants desired harsher consequences for a male teacher engaged in a sexual relationship with a female student ($F(1, 126) = 8.53, p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$). There were no significant interactions between participant and teacher gender on any of the dependent variables.

Student-related analyses

The means and standard deviations for student sympathy, student responsibility, consequences and perceived emotional and psychological impact on the student by participant and teacher gender are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean ratings for student-related analyses.

Participants	Conditions								
	Femal teacher/ Male student			Male teacher/ Female student			Total		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Sympathy</i>									
Female	4.22	1.70	41	4.27	1.90	45	4.24	1.80	86
Male	3.18	1.71	22	4.10	1.90	22	3.64	1.84	44
Total	3.86	1.76	63	4.21	1.87	67	4.04	1.83	130
<i>Responsibility</i>									
Female	3.76	1.64	41	3.40	1.62	45	3.57	1.63	86
Male	3.60	1.56	22	4.45	1.84	22	4.02	1.75	44
Total	3.70	1.60	63	3.75	1.75	67	3.72	1.68	130
<i>Consequences</i>									
Female	2.40	.80	41	2.44	.92	45	2.42	.86	86
Male	2.00	.76	22	2.23	.97	22	2.11	.87	44
Total	2.25	0.80	63	2.37	.93	67	2.32	0.87	130
<i>Impact</i>									
Female	4.88	1.62	41	4.89	1.67	45	4.88	1.63	86
Male	3.64	1.60	22	4.64	2.17	22	4.14	1.95	44
Total	4.44	1.70	63	4.80	1.84	67	4.63	1.77	130

Two-way ANOVA did not detect any significant main effects for participant gender on ratings of sympathy towards the student ($F(1, 126) = 3.28, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$), student responsibility ($F(1, 126) = 2.10, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$), consequences for the student ($F(1, 126) = 3.57, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$), or perceived emotional and psychological impact on the student ($F(1, 126) = 5.40, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .04$).

Similarly, ratings of sympathy toward the student ($F(1, 126) = 2.04, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$), student responsibility ($F(1, 126) = .68, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .01$), consequences for the student ($F(1, 126) = .77, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 < .01$) or perceived emotional and psychological impact on the student ($F(1, 126) = 2.47, p > .0056, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .02$), did not significantly differ according to teacher gender. There were no significant interactions between participant and student gender on any of the dependent variables.

Emotional and psychological effects on students

The responses to the open-ended question that allowed participants to nominate possible emotional and psychological effects the teacher–student sexual relationship might have on the student were content analyses. Six categories were identified and these are shown in Table 4.

Of the 116 participants who responded to this item, quite a few gave more than one response resulting in a total of 172 responses for this item. The most common response was relationship and trust issues ($N = 53$), followed by negative emotional effects ($N = 37$). Seventeen participants believed students would suffer no consequences or negative effects, 13 believed the sexual encounters to have a positive impact on the students’ psychological and emotional well-being and 13 were unsure of the possible impact on students’.

Participants’ first responses by participant and teacher gender are shown in Table 5. Chi-square tests indicated that neither participant gender $\chi^2 = 3.07,$

Table 4. Categorization of participant responses according to themes.

Categories	Themes
Relationship and trust issues	Difficulty trusting future partners and/ or authority figures, social maladjustment/ withdrawal issues
Negative emotional effects	Low self-esteem, depression, guilt, anger, confusion, anxiety, embarrassment, humiliation Feelings of abuse
No negative consequences	No perceived negative emotional effects or consequences
Positive effects	Suggestion students would benefit in a positive manner from a teacher–student sexual relationship, responses including the word “crush” or “love”
Other	Responses uncommon among participants, e.g. references to intimacy and sexual difficulties, counselling, social support, reactions of friends and family and students taking responsibility for their own actions
Unsure of consequences	Responses consistent with participants being unsure of consequences

df = 5, $p > .05$ nor teacher gender $\chi^2 = 7.73$, df = 5, $p > .05$ significantly influenced participants’ perceptions of the possible emotional and psychological effects of the teacher–student sexual relationship on students.

Discussion

As predicted, participants expressed greater anger and desired harsher consequences

for a male teacher engaged in a sexual relationship with a female student than a female teacher having a sexual relationship with a male student. These results are consistent with previous research findings that less severe punishment was considered appropriate for female perpetrators of child sexual abuse than for male perpetrators (Dollar et al., 2004; Kelly, 1990; Kite & Tyson, 2004). Contrary to our first hypothesis, however, there was no difference in the male and female teacher’s perceived responsibility for the incident, with both the male and female teacher being seen as having a high level of responsibility. Thus, despite similar levels of perceived responsibility, there was more anger towards the male teacher and a high level of retribution. This gender bias, which the effect sizes indicate is quite substantial, may reflect the influence of society’s schema. Thus, although the female teacher is seen as having the same level of responsibility as the male teacher, such behaviour is seen as inconsistent with society’s schema of women as nurturing and caring, and consequently, in terms of cognitive dissonance theory, is explained in ways that engenders less anger and warrant a lesser punishment. Conversely, given the societal schema that sexual offenders are male, participants may have perceived the male teacher to present a greater risk of reoffending than female teacher, resulting in higher consequence ratings for the male teacher.

The student victims were seen to carry some responsibility for the incident, although considerably less than that of the teachers. However, contrary to our second hypothesis, participants did not attribute greater responsibility or desire for harsher consequences to a male student having a sexual relationship with a female teacher than a female student having a sexual relationship with a male teacher. Similarly, participants did not express greater sympathy towards a

Table 5. Frequencies by participant and teacher gender.

Free Response 1:	Participant gender			Teacher gender		
	Male (N)	Female (N)	Total	Male (N)	Female (N)	Total
1. Relationship and trust issues	9	27	36	21	15	36
2. Negative emotional effects	7	13	20	9	11	20
3. No consequence or negative effect	6	8	14	7	7	14
4. Positive effect	5	7	12	3	9	12
5. Other	5	16	21	11	10	21
6. Unsure of consequences	5	8	13	10	3	13
Total	37	79	116	61	55	116

female student having a sexual relationship with a male teacher than a male student having a sexual relationship with a female teacher, contrary to Hypothesis 3. Overall, the level of sympathy for the student was close to the midpoint of the scale. Finally, in relation to the student victim, participants also did not consider the psychological and emotional impact of a sexual relationship with an opposite-gender teacher to be more severe for female students than for male students, contrary to Hypothesis 4.

The fact that the results relating to the victim did not confirm our hypotheses and are different from those of previous studies in which younger victims have featured, suggests that the adolescent students were perceived as relatively mature and responsible. In addition, the fact that the psychological and emotional impact ratings were relatively low, suggests the possibility that 15-year-old students may be perceived as less susceptible to psychological and emotional trauma from sexual victimization than younger victims. Some of the comments written on the questionnaires support the idea that the students were seen as more mature. For example, one male participant, stated, “In 2007, a 15-year-old female is not a child”, a sentiment echoed by another participant who stated “I think 15-year-old girls are sexually mature enough to handle the situation. What may cause more

emotional/psychological damage is everyone else’s reaction to the incident! After all if she were 1 year older the relationship would be perfectly legal”. In the case of the male victim, a participant wrote “whilst there may be minor emotional impact from the relationship, I believe most 15-year-old boys would be more than willing participants to satisfy their own sexual desires”. While these comments are extreme, the overall ratings suggest that similar, albeit possibly less extreme, sentiments were held by many of the participants.

Regarding the effects of participant gender, the results indicated that female participants expressed significantly greater anger toward the teacher, irrespective of the teacher’s gender, and perceived the sexual relationship to be more serious than male participants. This is consistent with Wellman’s (1993) results that women report stronger beliefs, attitudes and emotional responses to child sexual abuse than males. It is also consistent with the role stereotype that women are more sensitive to issues concerning inappropriate sexual relationships than men for a number of reasons, such as the stereotypical belief that women in particular should nurture and protect children.

While the effect sizes indicate that participant gender had a medium to large effect it is worth noting that there was greater variability in male’s scores on

ratings of seriousness suggesting a much less consistent attitude to such behaviour among males.

Despite the difference in the rating of seriousness, and contrary to our expectations, female participants did not differ from males in their ratings of teacher responsibility, degree of punishment desired, or perceived psychological and emotional impact on the student,

Although the sample size was relatively small and there was a disproportional number of female respondents, the advantage of this study is that it relied on a true random sample, making the results of the study generalizable to other middle-class inner metropolitan populations. Although some literature has examined gender differences in perceptions of teacher–student sexual relationships, most have examined these attributions at primary school or tertiary education level, and have neglected secondary school. Although the current study failed to find a gender bias in favour of female students in regards to perceived responsibility or sympathy, the high student responsibility ratings suggest that adolescent students may not be perceived as victims, requiring further research to explore possible age effects and to gain a richer understanding of this complex issue.

In conclusion, the current study identified a gender bias in favour of female teachers in teacher–student sexual relationships involving adolescent students, on emotional reactions of anger and desire for harsher consequences. Similarly, consistent with a females' gender-role stereotype, female participants expressed greater anger and rated the sexual relationship as more serious than their male counterparts. These findings shed new light on a relatively untouched area of research, as few Australian studies have examined perceptions of teacher–student sexual relationships involving secondary school students. Finally the current study has contributed to a growing body of research in child sexual

abuse, and has identified a number of worthy considerations, in particular the possibility of an age effect, whereby adolescent students may not be perceived as victims.

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