



PII S0145-2134(97)00045-8

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: EFFECTS OF AGE, SEX, AND GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES

CARRI MAYNARD AND MICHAEL WIEDERMAN

Department of Psychological Sciences, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study examined how sex of the child and the adult and age of the child influence perceptions regarding the abusiveness of adult-child sexual interactions and attributions of blame and responsibility to the adult in such incidents. The relationship of gender-role attitudes to perceptions of child sexual abuse was also investigated.

Method: Undergraduate students ($N = 404$) read one of eight vignettes depicting a sexual interaction between a child and an adult in which sex of the child, age of the child, and sex of the adult were manipulated. Respondents then answered questions regarding their perceptions of the abusiveness of the incident and attributions of responsibility and blame to the adult.

Results: Scenarios depicting a 15-year-old were rated as less abusive, and less responsibility was attributed to the adult, relative to vignettes involving a 7-year-old. Respondents also rated scenarios depicting opposite-sex interactions as less abusive relative to scenarios describing same-sex interactions. When vignettes depicted a 15-year-old, less blame was attributed to the adult relative to when vignettes depicted a 7-year-old with an adult of either sex, with the least amount of blame being attributed to the adult involved with an adolescent of the opposite-sex. Gender-role attitudes were not significantly related to ratings of abusiveness or attributions of responsibility and blame.

Conclusions: These findings suggest that age of the child may influence ratings of abusiveness and attributions of responsibility and blame. Ratings of abusiveness and attributions of blame also appear to be influenced by the sex pairing in the interaction. © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Perceptions, Gender-roles.

INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC ATTITUDES CONCERNING child sexual abuse are important because they can affect the reporting of sexual abuse, the prosecution of perpetrators, and the provision of clinical services. Research has demonstrated that individuals with stereotypic beliefs will remember and interpret events about a target person in a way that will bolster and support the current stereotyped beliefs (Baron, Burgess, & Kao, 1991; Dawes, 1988). Williams and Farrell (1990) examined this phenomenon with regard to how allegations of sexual abuse were handled in the legal system. Examining 43 cases of child sexual abuse in day care settings, they found support for the hypothesis that cases fitting the stereotype of adult males fondling prepubescent females were likely to elicit

The current article is based on a thesis project completed by the first author in partial completion of the requirements for a Master's degree from Ball State University.

Received for publication August 12, 1996; final revision received February 5, 1997; accepted February 10, 1997.

Reprint requests should be addressed to Carri Maynard, Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43402.

©1997 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

a formal response whereas those at variance with this scenario required that additional aggravating conditions be present before formal actions were taken. These findings suggest that allegations of sexual abuse coming from a male child, or allegations involving a female adult, are less likely to receive legal action.

To better understand the factors which affect actions taken in allegations of child sexual abuse, previous research has examined the variables which affect people's perceptions of child sexual abuse and attributions of blame and responsibility for such incidents. Finkelhor and Redfield (1984) and Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) examined the effects of the age and sex of the child on attributions of blame in hypothetical child sexual abuse scenarios. They found a main effect for the child's age in attributions of blame, such that when an adolescent was depicted, the interaction was rated as less abusive and adolescents were blamed more relative to younger children. Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that, although there was no main effect for the child's sex, the sex of the child interacted with respondent sex. Male respondents attributed significantly less responsibility to the adult when the child was male than when the child was female, whereas female respondents saw adults as similarly responsible regardless of the sex of the child.

Finkelhor and Redfield (1984) suggested that the sex of the adult was an important variable in decisions and attributions about sexual abuse. Unfortunately, there has not been an adequate examination of the sex of the adult in relation to perceptions of child sexual abuse. It is highly possible that the sex of the adult may be related to attributions regarding the abusiveness of adult-child sexual interactions. Understanding the influence of the adult's sex as well as the child's sex may help explain varying reactions to child sexual abuse.

Although Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) did vary the sex of the adult, they used only opposite-sex interactions and they did not directly consider what effect varying the sex of the adult might have had on attributions of blame. Sex of the adult was not a factor in the analyses these authors performed; rather, effects of the adult's sex were interpreted based on the effect of the child's sex. By not directly examining the effects for sex of the adult, these authors introduced a potential confound into their study. Broussard and Wagner (1988) did vary adult sex as well as child sex. Although they reported no significant main effects for the sex of the adult on attributions of responsibility to the child or the adult, these authors did not report whether the adult's sex interacted significantly with the child's sex or respondents' sex on attributions of blame.

Researchers who have examined sex of the adult more directly have reported mixed results concerning the impact of this variable on people's perceptions of sexual abuse. For example, Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that the amount of responsibility attributed to the child or to the adult was not significantly affected by the sex of the adult.

Other researchers have found that the adult's sex influences people's perceptions of child sexual abuse, typically through an interaction with the child's sex. Overall, results of these studies tend to correspond to cultural stereotypes. Broussard, Wagner, and Kazelskis (1991) found that college students tended to view an interaction of a male child with a female adult as less representative of child sexual abuse. Furthermore, respondents generally believed that male survivors of female perpetration were relatively unharmed by the experience.

Sex of the respondent has also been examined in relation to judgments concerning child sexual abuse. In general, female respondents are more likely to view adult-child interactions as representative of child sexual abuse and blame the child less, whereas men tend to rate adult-child sexual interactions as less abusive and attribute more blame to the child (Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984; Jackson & Ferguson, 1983; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984).

Although these apparent sex differences are important, Deaux (1984) noted that across research topics, effects due to sex of the respondent have been rather small in most cases. An alternative to using biological sex as a subject variable is to consider gender-role attitudes. Only one study of perceptions of child sexual abuse included potential relationships between gender-role attitudes and perceptions of child sexual abuse, finding that gender-role ideology correlated with survivor

blaming (Adams & Betz, 1993). It is important to note, however, that these results were obtained with a rather specialized sample; professional counselors.

It is evident that the age and sex of the child and the sex of the adult influence people's perceptions regarding the abusiveness of adult-child sexual interactions and the attributions of blame they make in such incidents. Overall, it appears that when the situation involves an older child or a male child with a female adult, the adult is less likely to be blamed, and the incident is less likely to be viewed as sexually abusive. However, the existing literature lacks a direct examination of the effects for sex of the adult and how this variable may interact with the sex and age of the child in explaining varying reactions to child sexual abuse. The current study was conducted to examine the relevant variables simultaneously by systematically varying the child's sex and age and the sex of the adult in vignettes depicting a sexual interaction between an adult and a child. In addition to examining how perceptions of abusiveness and attributions of responsibility and blame may vary as a function of the child's sex, the child's age, and the adult's sex, we examined gender-role attitudes as well as biological sex of the respondent in the current study.

We hypothesized that individuals who endorsed relatively more traditional gender-role attitudes would view scenarios depicting a female adult and scenarios with a male adolescent as relatively less abusive and, correspondingly, attribute less blame and responsibility to the adult. We also expected that scenarios depicting an adolescent with an adult of the opposite sex would be viewed as less abusive and less responsibility and blame would be attributed to the adult compared to scenarios depicting an adolescent with an adult of the same sex or a younger child with an adult of either sex.

METHOD

Measures

Demographics. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, sex, ethnicity, and year in school for use in describing the sample.

Sexual abuse vignette. Participants were presented with a written description of a sexual interaction between an adult and a child adapted from vignettes used by Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) and Broussard and Wagner (1988). Sex of the child, age of the child, and sex of the adult were experimentally manipulated, resulting in eight vignette conditions. The ages chosen for the child were 7 and 15 years. Use of the age 7 for the younger level was suggested by the finding that children ages 6–8 years are at relatively high risk for child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1979). Age 15 was chosen for the older character because 13–16 years appear to be ages at which boys are vulnerable to child sexual abuse by an adult (Finkelhor, 1979). In previous research using some version of this vignette, the child's response was also varied. In the present study, however, this variable was held constant across vignettes. A passive response was chosen because this response style appeared to be the most ambiguous and, therefore, less likely to constrain potential effects of the independent variables.

The vignette depicting a female child with a male adult appears below. Corresponding wording for male child, adolescent female, adolescent male, and female adult versions of the vignette are noted in parentheses at appropriate places.

Mary (Mark), a 7–(15–)year-old, was home alone when the 35–year-old man (woman) who lived next door came in to visit while Mary's (Mark's) parents were briefly out shopping. Mary (Mark) was sitting on the sofa in the living room. She (He) watched as the man (woman) walked toward her (him). The neighbor sat down and the two of them began talking. The neighbor told her (him) that they were going to play a new kind of game. The neighbor placed his (her) hand on Mary's (Mark's) leg and began rubbing Mary's (Mark's) body. Mary (Mark) watched silently.

The man (woman) told Mary (Mark) to lie down on the sofa, telling her (him) she (he) would enjoy this, that it would feel good. Mary (Mark) did nothing. The man (woman) continued rubbing Mary's (Mark's) body and then slowly undressed her (him). When Mary (Mark) was naked, the neighbor began kissing Mary's (Mark's) body, starting with Mary's (Mark's) face and working his (her) way down to Mary's (Mark's) thighs. Then the neighbor sat up and put Mary's (Mark's) hand inside the man's (woman's) slacks on the front of his (her) underpants and made Mary (Mark) rub the man's (woman's) body as the neighbor had done to her (him).

Mary (Mark) did as she (he) was told. Then the neighbor undressed and laid on top of Mary (Mark) while he (she) fondled Mary's (Mark's) buttocks. The man (woman) fondled Mary's (Mark's) genitals as he (she) continued to caress Mary's (Mark's) body. Mary (Mark) lay completely motionless. Then the man (woman) got up and brought Mary (Mark) her (his) clothes and told her (him) not to tell her (his) parents what had happened. The neighbor told Mary (Mark) this game was to remain their secret.

Abusiveness, responsibility, and blame. After reading the assigned vignette, respondents were asked to rate, using a nine-point scale, the following: (1) the extent to which the incident described was an example of child sexual abuse; (2) the degree of responsibility attributed to the adult in the description; and (3) the degree of blame attributed to the adult in the description.

Requiring respondents to rate the degree of responsibility as well as degree of blame attributed to the adult was thought to be important as these have been shown to be distinct concepts (Shaver & Drown, 1986; Weiner, 1995). Responsibility is a label applied to the outcome of a process, whereas blame is the attribution made after the perceiver assesses and does not accept the validity of the offending person's justification or excuse (Shaver & Drown, 1986). Blame conveys emotional negativity whereas responsibility is more affectively neutral (Weiner, 1995). Thus, a person may be held responsible and blamed for an outcome or held responsible and not blamed. Traditionally, researchers in the field of child sexual abuse have asked for either attributions of blame or attributions of responsibility, but not both. In this study we attempted to correct this shortcoming by asking separate and distinct questions about responsibility and blameworthiness.

Gender-role attitudes. Participants completed the 25-item version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973) as a measure of gender-role attitudes. The AWS is a modified Likert-format instrument that measures attitudes regarding the rights, roles, obligations, and privileges that women should have in contemporary society. The AWS is the most commonly used measure of attitudes toward women (Beere, 1990). The 25-item version of the AWS has been shown to be highly correlated ($r = .95-.99$) with the original 55-item form (Smith & Bradley, 1980; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). A number of studies have provided normative information and evidence for criterion and convergent validity as well as internal consistency coefficients ranging from .81 to .90 (See Beere, 1990; Smith & Bradley, 1980; Yoder, Rice, Adams, Priest, & Prince, 1982 for reviews).

Respondents indicated their agreement with each statement on the AWS on a four-point scale ranging from "Agree Strongly" (0) to "Disagree Strongly" (3). This scale was scored by summing across items, with possible total scores ranging from 0 to 75. Higher scores indicated more egalitarian attitudes, and lower scores represented more traditional attitudes, regarding the roles of women.

Manipulation check. In an effort to ensure that respondents were attending to the independent variables in their respective scenarios, respondents were asked to complete a brief manipulation check questionnaire. Respondents were asked to identify, in a multiple choice format, the name and sex of the child and the sex of the adult in the scenario they read.

Table 1. Grand Means (Standard Deviations) and Score Ranges for Dependent Measures and Scores on the Attitudes Toward Women Scale and Correlations Among Dependent Measures ($N = 404$)

	Correlations		Range	Mean	SD
	Responsibility	Blame			
Ratings of Abuse	.37*	.47*	0–8	7.55	(1.30)
Ratings of Responsibility	—	.64*	1–8	7.50	(1.19)
Ratings of Blame		—	0–8	7.31	(1.45)
Attitudes Toward Women Scale					
Male Respondents			16–74	53.38	(9.37)
Female Respondents			41–75	61.38	(7.17)

* $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Procedure

At the point of signing up for the study, potential participants were unaware of the nature of the study. Upon arriving to the testing site, potential participants were given a verbal introduction to the nature of the study, but the words “child sexual abuse” were not used. Prior to receiving the questionnaires, participants read and signed an informed consent form spelling out their option to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No potential participant declined to participate upon learning of the sexual nature of the study and all participants completed the experiment. Respondents completed the measures in small, mixed-sex groups.

Approximately equal numbers of male and female participants were then randomly assigned to one of the eight vignette conditions. All respondents completed the demographic questionnaire first. The order of presentation of the vignette (and dependent variable questions) and the AWS was counterbalanced to control for possible order effects. Finally, upon completion of these measures, respondents returned the questionnaires and subsequently completed the manipulation check.

RESULTS

Participants

A total of 413 undergraduate students recruited from introductory psychology courses at a midsize, mid-western state university participated in the study for partial completion of the course. The sample was comprised of 208 men (50.4%) and 205 women (49.6%). The majority of the respondents (91.9%) were between the ages of 18 and 22 years. The sample consisted of 360 White (87.2%), 27 Black (6.5%), 10 Asian (2.4%), and 8 Hispanic (1.9%) students (six students identified their ethnicity as “other” and two students did not indicate their ethnicity). The majority of the respondents were either freshmen (64.4%) or sophomores (23.0%).

Of 413 initial participants, seven (1.7%) failed the validity check, apparently indicating that they had not paid close attention to the independent variables described in the experimental scenarios. The data from these individuals were dropped from subsequent analyses. In addition, two (.4%) individuals failed to answer the dependent variable questions, thus their data were not included in the following analyses.

For the remaining 404 participants, Table 1 provides the correlations among the three dependent measures as well as the range of scores, grand means, and standard deviations for the three dependent measures and scores on the AWS.

Gender-Role Attitudes

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kleinplatz, McCarrey, & Kateb, 1992; Malovich & Stake, 1990; Stein & Weston, 1982), median splits were performed on AWS scores to categorize

respondents as relatively traditional or nontraditional in their gender role attitudes. There was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores for men and for women, $F(1, 403) = 91.05, p < .001$, thus median splits of the AWS were performed separately for men and women. The median score for men was 53, whereas the median score for women was 62.5. Men ($n = 101$) and women ($n = 100$) who scored above the median for their sex were considered to hold relatively nontraditional, egalitarian views regarding the roles of women. Those men ($n = 90$) and women ($n = 100$) who scored below the median for their group were categorized as having relatively traditional views about women's roles. There were 13 men whose scores on the AWS were exactly at the median. The data from these respondents were excluded from the following analyses, resulting in the exclusion of 3.2% of the effective sample. This did not result in a significant change in either the demographic composition of the resulting sample or the mean scores on the dependent measures.

Separate 2 (sex of child) \times 2 (age of child) \times 2 (sex of adult) \times 2 (sex of respondent) \times 2 (gender-role attitude) analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed for each of the three dependent variables. As inspection of the means and standard deviations displayed in Table 1 indicates, there was little variance to be explained. The majority of respondents indicated that they believed the scenario they read was an example of child sexual abuse and attributed all of the responsibility and blame to the adult in the scenario, thus the means for each of the dependent measures are quite high.

Ratings of Abusiveness

There was a statistically significant main effect for the age of the child, $F(1, 359) = 6.99, p < .01$. Examination of the means revealed that scenarios depicting a 15-year-old ($M = 7.38$) were rated as significantly less abusive compared to those scenarios describing a 7-year-old ($M = 7.73$).

There was a statistically significant interaction between the sex of the child and the sex of the adult, $F(1, 359) = 5.12, p < .05$, indicating that respondents rated the interaction as less abusive when it depicted an opposite-sex interaction relative to same-sex interaction. Respondents rated the interaction as less abusive when it depicted either a male child with a female adult ($M = 7.71$), or a female child with a male adult ($M = 7.70$), relative to when the vignette depicted a male child with a male adult ($M = 7.45$) or a female child with a female adult ($M = 7.36$). None of the remaining higher order interactions were statistically significant.

Attribution of Responsibility to the Adult

Similar to ratings of abusiveness, there was a statistically significant main effect for age of the child, $F(1, 359) = 18.73, p < .001$. The adult was seen as significantly less responsible when the child was 15 years old ($M = 7.24$) than when the child was 7 years old ($M = 7.76$). None of the higher order interactions were statistically significant.

Attribution of Blame to the Adult

There was a statistically significant main effect for age of the child, $F(1, 359) = 21.62, p < .001$. However, the main effect for age of the child was qualified by a statistically significant three-way interaction involving sex of the child, age of the child, and sex of the adult, $F(1, 359) = 3.83, p < .05$. Examination of the means suggested that less blame was assigned when the scenario depicted a 15-year-old boy with a female adult or a 15-year-old girl with a male adult. To simplify the analysis of this three-way interaction, the independent variables sex of the child and sex of the adult were combined into one variable having to do with whether the sex of the child and the adult were the same (male/male or female/female) or different (male/female or female/male).

A 2 (age of the child) \times 2 (same versus different child/adult sex) ANOVA was then performed. There was a statistically significant main effect for the age of the child, $F(1, 387) = 21.98, p < .001$, which was qualified by a marginally significant interaction between the age of the child and pairing of the child/adult sex, $F(1, 387) = 6.62, p < .06$.

Equal amounts of blame were assigned to the adult when a 7-year-old child was involved with an adult of the opposite-sex ($M = 7.69$) or an adult of the same-sex ($M = 7.58$). Significantly less blame was assigned to the adult when involved with a 15-year-old, and the least amount of blame was assigned to the adult involved in an opposite-sex interaction with a 15-year-old. When a 15-year-old male with a female adult or a 15-year-old female with a male adult was depicted in the scenario, less blame was attributed to the adult ($M = 6.74$) relative to when a 15-year-old was involved in a same-sex interaction ($M = 7.19$).

None of the remaining three-way interactions from the original five-way ANOVA, including the hypothesized interaction between sex of the child, age of the child, and gender-role attitude, were statistically significant. None of the two-way, four-way, or five-way interactions were statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

The results from the current study indicate that, overall, respondents' ratings of abusiveness and attributions of responsibility and blame to the adult were high across all experimental conditions. That is, regardless of the age of the child, the sex of the child, and the sex of the adult, respondents generally perceived the interaction to be an instance of child sexual abuse and the adult was seen as being responsible and to blame for his or her actions with the child. This suggests that participants in this study were fairly consistent in recognizing the abusive nature of a sexual interaction between an adult and a child and, correspondingly, attributed high amounts of responsibility and blame to the adult.

Contrary to expectation, respondents with more traditional gender-role attitudes did not rate interactions involving an adolescent male as less abusive, nor did they attribute less responsibility to the adult in these interactions relative to interactions involving younger male children or female children of either age. Rather, ratings of the abusiveness and responsibility were related to the age of the child. Specifically, the sexual interaction was rated as significantly less abusive, and more responsibility was attributed to the adult when the child was 15 years old versus when the child was 7 years old, regardless of the sex of the child and the sex of the adult. These results are consistent with those of Finkelhor and Redfield (1984) who found that a community sample rated vignettes as less abusive when they involved adolescent compared to prepubescent youths.

In the United States, the typical age of onset for sexual intercourse is 16 for males and 17 for females (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), and the media frequently depict adolescents who are sexually active. So, it is possible that a 15-year-old was viewed as more capable of providing informed consent to engage in sexual activity with an adult without the behavior automatically qualifying as abuse. Furthermore, perhaps respondents believed that a 15-year-old should be more capable of resisting, both verbally and physically, the unwanted sexual advances of an adult. As the adolescent depicted in the scenarios offered no resistance, participants apparently held the adult less responsible for the outcome. In contrast, participants may have considered a 7-year-old as absolutely too young to provide consent to be sexually involved with an adult, regardless of the fact that the child offered no resistance (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984). In other words, participants in the current study may have read more consent into the behavior of the 15-year-old characters compared to the 7-year-old children even though the child response was consistently passive across all vignettes.

Regardless of the age of the child, respondents rated opposite-sex interactions as less abusive

relative to same-sex interactions. This finding suggests that respondents' ratings of abusiveness may have been influenced by the heterosexual versus homosexual nature of the interaction. It is possible that respondents viewed the adult involved in a same-sex interaction as having a homosexual orientation. Previous research has demonstrated that heterosexual individuals generally possess negative attitudes toward homosexual behavior (Kite & Whitley, 1996), which may explain why participants in the current study apparently viewed the descriptions of same-sex interaction more negatively than descriptions of opposite-sex interaction. Thus, those interactions which may have been viewed more negatively in general appear to have been rated as relatively more abusive.

The results were more complicated regarding respondents' attributions of blame to the adult. As predicted, there was a significant three-way interaction between the age of the child, the sex of the child, and the sex of the adult in the amount of blame attributed to the adult. When the scenario described a 7-year-old with an adult of either sex, equal amounts of blame were attributed to the adult. Although respondents viewed the adult involved with an adolescent as relatively less blameworthy in general, the adult was blamed least when the scenario involved a 15-year-old with an adult of the other sex.

As indicated previously, blame conveys emotional negativity, thus one might assume that respondents attributed more blame to the adult in those situations respondents found most upsetting. It would appear that respondents were equally upset by the depiction of a young child engaging in sexual activity with an adult of either sex; therefore, equal amounts of blame were attributed to both the male and female adult. With a 15-year-old, however, it appears that the same-sex versus opposite-sex pairing of the participants made a difference in how disturbing the respondents found the interaction. As indicated previously, it is possible that respondents viewed the adult in the same-sex interaction as having a homosexual orientation, which may be associated with generally negative views attitudes and judgments. The amount of blame attributed to the adult in this situation may have been influenced by more general views regarding heterosexual versus homosexual individuals, resulting in relatively more blame being assigned to the adult compared to when the vignette depicted an adolescent with an adult of the opposite-sex.

The finding that less blame was attributed to the female adult in the interaction involving a 15-year-old male may be related to greater acceptance of adult females' sexual interaction with young people (Wagner, Aucoin, & Johnson, 1993). Broussard and colleagues (1991) similarly found that respondents were less likely to consider an adult female's sexual interaction with a 15-year-old male as an example of child sexual abuse compared to an adult male's sexual interaction with a 15-year-old female. They hypothesized that the absence of resistance may have been taken as an indication that the interaction was an acceptable means of providing sex education, or initiation, for boys. Furthermore, the tendency for respondents to consider male-female sexual interactions as less representative of child sexual abuse is supported by previous research indicating that the majority of abused boys report that they were molested by men, with a much smaller percentage reporting molestation by women (Dhaliwal, Gauzas, Antonowicz, & Ross, 1996; Faller, 1989; Roane, 1992). This suggests that either male minor-female adult sexual interaction is rare, or that this type of interaction is more acceptable and, therefore, not reported as abuse.

With regard to less blame being attributed to the male adult in the sexual interaction with the 15-year-old female, perhaps the age of the girl in this scenario did not fit the participants' stereotype of the prepubescent child sexual abuse survivor. Faller (1989) reported that the mean age of onset of abuse was 5.5 years for girls. Furthermore, cultural beliefs about adolescent sexuality may explain why participants in the current study seemed relatively less upset by the opposite-sex interactions with a 15-year-old. It is possible that the relatively young respondents in the current study believed that sexual interaction between an adult male and adolescent female was a relatively less reprehensible sexual interaction than such an interaction between a female adult and female

adolescent or between a female child and an adult of either sex, particularly since the girl offered no resistance.

The fact that the three-way interaction was marginally significant for the amount of blame attributed to the adult but not for the amount of responsibility provides support for the position that responsibility and blame are separate constructs which should be used as distinct variables in research. The correlation between responsibility and blame reveals that while the two are strongly related, as would be expected from conceptually similar constructs, respondents in the current study did not perceive them as being identical.

Responsibility reflects who an individual perceives as producing the outcome of an event. Blame, on the other hand, reflects disagreement with what an individual did and conveys that the person assigning the blame believes that the blamed individual has done something for which he or she should be ashamed (Shaver & Drown, 1986). In the current study, respondents indicated that the adult was responsible for the outcome in all instances of sexual contact with a youth. However, there were certain circumstances in which the respondents did not express equal amounts of disapproval for the adults' actions and, therefore, attributed less blame to the adult.

The importance of assessing both responsibility and blame lies in determining which ultimately has more influence on the steps taken following an allegation of child sexual abuse. If blame is more important, the results of this study suggest that less serious consequences may result for an adult who engages in sexual activity with an adolescent of the opposite-sex. Indeed, this hypothesis is supported by William and Farrell (1990) who found that cases involving adolescents with an adult of the opposite-sex were less likely to elicit a formal response.

Contrary to expectation, those individuals who endorsed traditional gender-role attitudes did not rate any particular scenario as less abusive, nor did they attribute less responsibility and blame to female perpetrators relative to male perpetrators. These results suggest that participants in the current study, regardless of their own gender-role beliefs, recognized that both men and women can be the perpetrators of abusive behavior.

Sex differences in ratings of abusiveness and attributions of responsibility and blame to the adult were most notable in their absence. This is contrary to the results reported by Broussard and colleagues (1991) who found that female respondents rated vignettes as more representative of child sexual abuse than did their male counterparts. Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that sex of the respondent significantly interacted with the sex of the child. Results of the current study, however, support Deaux's (1984) position that main effects due to respondent sex are small or nonexistent in most cases.

Unfortunately, the nonsignificant findings for gender-role attitude do not support the use of this gender construct as an alternative to sex of respondent. Apparently, this gender construct was simply not an important variable in judgments regarding child sexual abuse. Perhaps a better alternative would be to examine sexual role beliefs, or respondents' own perceptions of appropriate sexual behavior for men compared to women, in future research.

In addition, it is important to note that in the current study examination of attributions of responsibility and blame were limited to the adult depicted in the scenario. Previous research by Broussard and Wagner (1988) and Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) examined the amount of fault attributed to the child as well as the adult. However, neither study correlated fault attributed to the child with fault attributed to the adult. Accordingly, it is difficult to determine if responsibility and blame attributed to the child are simply the inverse of attributions made to the adult (i.e., a decrease in blame attributed to the child is accompanied by a corresponding increase in blame attributed to the adult). Examination of the mean attributions to the child and the adult in previous studies would suggest that the two are inversely related. However, the finding by Broussard and Wagner (1988) that passive response style made a difference in the amount of responsibility attributed to the child but not to the adult suggests that it is inappropriate to make such an assumption at this point.

Until further research examines this issue, it will be important to include attributions of responsibility and blame to the child as well as to the adult in future investigations. It is possible that, although there were not sex of respondent or gender-role differences in the amount of responsibility and blame attributed to the adult, such differences may exist with regard to attributions made toward the child. This hypothesis is supported by Jackson and Ferguson's (1983) finding that there was a sex difference in survivor blame but not offender blame.

When considering the implications of the results of the current study, it is important to recognize that the child-adult interactions described in the vignettes were extrafamilial in nature. Based on the results of this study, it is not possible to determine if respondents' ratings would have been the same for vignettes in which the mother or father of the child was the offending adult. Future researchers should examine whether the variables manipulated in the current study influence ratings of abusiveness and attributions of responsibility and blame in intrafamilial sexual abuse.

Finally, in the current study respondents were not asked about their own histories of sexual contact with an adult when they were a child. Accordingly, it was not possible to examine how such a history might have influenced respondents' judgments. Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) found that respondents who reported being molested attributed less fault to the survivor than did respondents without such an abuse history. This variable was not examined in the current study, however, due to multiple methodological concerns regarding assessment of history of child sexual abuse.

The results of the current study point to the need to educate the public on the variety of situations which constitute child sexual abuse. Specifically, it is important that the general public be aware that adolescents may be subjected to unwanted sexual interactions with adults and this type of activity is sexual abuse, even if the youth does not actively resist the adult's advances. Education programs would hopefully serve to increase the reporting of cases of sexual abuse which do not fit the stereotype. Furthermore, it would be important to educate relevant professionals (i.e., mental health professionals, judges, physicians, teachers, law enforcement officers) who encounter child sexual abuse cases to increase the likelihood that appropriate actions are taken when a report of sexual abuse is made which does not fit the stereotype. This would, in turn, increase the probability that the child and adult in these cases would receive potentially helpful mental health services.

In conclusion, results of the current study suggest that when an adolescent is involved in an unwanted sexual interaction with an adult, the incident is seen as less abusive and the adult held less responsible relative to the same interaction involving a younger child. Opposite-sex interactions, regardless of the age of the child, are also rated as less abusive relative to same-sex interactions. Furthermore, when an adolescent is involved in a sexual interaction with an adult of the opposite-sex, the adult appears to be blamed less than when the adult and adolescent are of the same-sex. Whether the opinions expressed by this group of undergraduate students is representative of the public at large requires further research. Results from this study should be considered preliminary in nature, with future research being directed at the assessment of attitudes concerning child sexual abuse among nonstudent populations. Future research should increasingly focus on samples drawn from both rural and urban populations, as well as samples of professionals who deal with child sexual abuse cases, to determine factors underlying individual differences in attitudes, judgments, and attributions regarding child sexual abuse.

Acknowledgement—The authors would like to thank Bernard Whitley, Jr. and Gayle Iwamasa for their helpful suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Adams, E., & Betz, N. (1993). Gender differences in counselors' attitudes toward and attributions about incest. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *40*, 210–216.

- Baron, R., Burgess, M., & Kao, C. (1991). Detecting and labeling prejudice: Do female perpetrators go undetected? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *17*, 115–123.
- Beere, C. (1990). *Gender roles: A handbook of tests and measures*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Broussard, S., & Wagner, W. (1988). Child sexual abuse: Who is to blame? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *12*, 563–569.
- Broussard, S., Wagner, W., & Kazelskis, R. (1991). Undergraduate students' perceptions of child sexual abuse: The impact of victim sex, perpetrator sex, respondent sex, and victim response. *Journal of Family Violence*, *6*, 267–278.
- Dhaliwal, G. K., Gauzas, L., Antonowicz, D. H., & Ross, R. R. (1996). Adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse: Prevalence, sexual abuse characteristics, and long-term effects. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *16*, 619–639.
- Dawes, R. M. (1988). *Rational choice in an uncertain world*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Deaux, K. (1984). From individual differences to social categories: Analysis of a decade's research on gender. *American Psychologist*, *39*, 105–116.
- Faller, K. (1989). Characteristics of a clinical sample of sexually abused children: How boy and girl victims differ. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *13*, 281–291.
- Finkelhor, D. (1979). *Sexually victimized children*. New York: Free Press.
- Finkelhor, D., & Redfield, D. (1984). How the public defines sexual abuse. In D. Finkelhor (Ed.), *Child sexual abuse: New theory and research* (pp. 107–133). New York: Free Press.
- Jackson, T., & Ferguson, W. (1983). Attribution of blame in incest. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *11*, 313–322.
- Kite, M. E., & Whitley, B. E. (1996). Sex differences in attitudes toward homosexual persons, behaviors, and civil rights: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *22*, 336–353.
- Kleinplatz, P., McCarrey, M., & Kateb, C. (1992). The impact of gender-role identity on women's self-esteem, lifestyle satisfaction, and conflict. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, *24*, 333–347.
- Laumann, E. O., Gagnon, J. H., Michael, R. T., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Malovich, N. J., & Stake, J. E. (1990). Sexual harassment on campus: Individual differences in attitudes and beliefs. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *14*, 63–81.
- Roane, T. H. (1992). Male victims of sexual abuse: A case review within a child protective team. *Child Welfare*, *71*, 231–239.
- Shaver, K., & Drown, D. (1986). On causality, responsibility, and self-blame: A theoretical note. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *50*, 697–702.
- Smith, R., & Bradley, D. (1980). In defense of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale: An affirmation of the validity and reliability. *Psychological Reports*, *47*, 511–522.
- Smith, J., Helmreich, R., Stapp, J. (1973). A short version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS). *Bulletin of Psychonomic Society*, *2*, 219–220.
- Stein, S. L., & Weston, L. C. (1982). College women's attitudes toward women and identity achievement. *Adolescence*, *17*, 895–899.
- Wagner, W. G., Aucoin, R., & Johnson, J. T. (1993). Psychologists' attitudes concerning child sexual abuse: The impact of sex of perpetrator, sex of victim, age of victim, and victim response. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *2*, 61–74.
- Waterman, C., & Foss-Goodman, D. (1984). Child molesting: Variables relating to attribution of fault to victims, offenders, and nonparticipating parents. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *20*, 329–349.
- Weiner, B. (1995). Inferences of responsibility and social motivation. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology: Vol. 27* (pp. 1–47). Hillsdale, NJ: Academic Press.
- Williams, L., & Farrell, R. (1990). Legal response to child sexual abuse in day care. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *17*, 284–302.
- Yoder, J., Rice, R., Adams, J., Priest, R., & Prince, H. (1982). Reliability of the Attitude Toward Women Scale (AWS) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ). *Sex Roles*, *8*, 651–657.

RÉSUMÉ

Objectif: Cette étude a examiné la façon dont le sexe de l'enfant et de l'agresseur ainsi que l'âge de l'enfant influencent la façon dont les comportements sexuels abusifs entre adulte et enfant sont perçus ainsi que la part de la responsabilité et du blâme qu'on attribue à l'adulte. L'étude s'est aussi penchée sur les liens qui pourraient exister entre les attitudes reliées aux rôles et au sexe et la façon dont les abus sexuels sont perçus.

Méthode: On a donné à lire à 404 étudiants de premier cycle huit historiettes décrivant une interaction sexuelle entre un enfant et un adulte en manipulant les variables suivantes : le sexe de l'enfant, son âge et le sexe de l'adulte; après quoi les étudiants ont répondu à des questions sur leurs perceptions des mauvais traitements et de la part de responsabilité et de blâme qui revenaient à l'adulte.

Résultats: Les historiettes qui décrivaient une victime de 15 ans ont été perçues comme moins abusives et les étudiants étaient moins portés à blâmer l'adulte, comparé aux historiettes où figuraient des enfants de 7 ans. Les étudiants considéraient moins graves les interactions entre personnes du sexe opposé comparé aux interactions entre personnes du même sexe. Peu importe le sexe de l'agresseur, le cas de la victime âgée de 15 ans suscite moins de blâme envers l'agresseur que le cas où la victime est âgée de 7 ans. La situation qui suscite le plus de tolérance est celle où la victime est un ou une adolescente et l'agresseur est du sexe opposé. On a noté peu de liens entre les attitudes reliées aux rôles sexuels d'une part, et à la notion de maltraitance ou à l'attribution du blâme et de la responsabilité, d'autre part.

Conclusions: Ces constats suggèrent que l'âge de l'enfant aurait une influence sur la perception de la gravité de la maltraitance et sur l'attribution du blâme et de la responsabilité. Ces facteurs semblent aussi varier selon le lien entre le sexe de la victime et celui de l'agresseur.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: El presente estudio examina cómo el sexo del niño y del adulto y la edad del adulto son variables que influyen en las percepciones sobre la consideración como maltratante de una interacción sexual adulto-niño/a y sobre las atribuciones de culpa y responsabilidad al adulto con respecto a tales incidentes. Se investigan también las relaciones de las actitudes con respecto al rol y el género con las percepciones con respecto al abuso sexual infantil.

Método: Un grupo de estudiantes de pregrado compuesto por 404 sujetos leyó una de entre ocho tipos de viñetas que representaban una interacción sexual entre un niño y un adulto en la cual el sexo del niño, la edad del niño y el sexo del adulto fueron manipulados. Los sujetos respondieron posteriormente a preguntas relativas a sus percepciones sobre la consideración que hacían del incidente como maltratante y sobre las atribuciones de responsabilidad y culpa hacia el adulto.

Resultados: Las situaciones en las que se representa a un niño/a de 15 años fueron puntuadas como menos maltratantes, y en ellas se le atribuyó menos responsabilidad al adulto que en las situaciones que implican a un niño de 7 años. Las situaciones en las que se describen interacciones entre sexos opuestos eran consideradas como menos maltratantes en comparación con las situaciones que describen interacciones entre sujetos del mismo sexo. Cuando se representa a un adulto en interacción con un adolescente de 15 años, se le asignaba menos culpa que cuando la interacción es con un niño de 7 años, cualquiera que sea el sexo del niño. La menor cantidad de culpa fue atribuida a un adulto implicado en una interacción sexual con un adolescente del sexo opuesto. Las actitudes hacia el género/rol no estaban significativamente relacionadas con las puntuaciones de consideración como maltratante, ni con las atribuciones de responsabilidad y culpa.

Conclusiones: Estos resultados sugieren que la edad del niño/a puede influir en la consideración de una situación de interacción sexual con un/a niño/a como maltratante o no y en la atribución de responsabilidad y de culpa del adulto. Estas mismas variables parecen estar afectadas por el tipo de emparejamiento sexual existente en la interacción.