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Attitudes regarding the perceived culpability of adolescent and adult victims of sexual assault

By Bianca Klettke and Sophie Simonis

Sexual abuse allegations are notoriously difficult to prosecute (Fitzgerald, 2006; Taylor, 2007). In fact, data from New South Wales indicated that 74% of alleged offenders in sex offence cases against an adult that proceed to trial in the Higher Courts, are acquitted of all charges (Fitzgerald, 2006). For sex offences alleged against a child, the acquittal rate is slightly lower at 61%. In comparison, the acquittal rate across all offences is 30%. Wundersitz (2003) found similar results with regards to sex offences against children in South Australia.

Several reasons have been suggested as to why the conviction rates in sexual assault cases are so low. For example, sexual assault frequently takes place with few or no witnesses other than the victim and the offender and results in what is often referred to as "oath against oath" trials (Taylor, 2007). There is often a lack of evidence beyond the victim's statement; research has shown that the presence of medical evidence in sexual assault cases perpetrated against children resulted in twice as many guilty pleas or convictions (Bradshaw & Marks, 1990). Regarding criminal offences generally, the strength of evidence tends to be positively associated with successful convictions (Devine, Clayton, Dunford, Seying, & Pryce, 2001).

In terms of sexual assault, how the victim is perceived by those involved in the legal decision-making process can affect the legal outcome (Lievore, 2005b; Taylor, 2007). The Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) suggested "juries can be influenced by their own experience and attitudes and may rely on common myths about sexual assault during decision-making" (VLRC, 2004, p. 38). Similarly, researchers have suggested that community attitudes may impact on sentencing in sexual assault cases (Clark, 2008). These attitudes often concern the extent to which victims of sexual assault - both adult and child - are seen as culpable or responsible for their own victimisation.

Adult victims

A significant body of research has examined "victim-blaming" attitudes, which hold that the victim's behaviour somehow caused the assault. With regards to adult sexual assault victims, undergraduate university students who perceived a victim's behaviour as sexually provocative attributed increased blame to the victim and were significantly more likely to indicate that the victim had caused her rape (Schult & Schneider, 1991). Another factor contributing to the perceived culpability of the victim is the degree of resistance against the alleged perpetrator. As Easteal (1992) pointed out, one misconception commonly found in the criminal justice system is the perception that the victim must have physically resisted the attack. Similarly, Kopper (1996) found that attributions of rape blame were more prevalent for a victim who did not initially resist the abuse compared to a victim who did resist the abuse from the beginning, based on a sample of undergraduate students. Research regarding the choice of clothes of the victim has indicated that women wearing revealing attire were perceived as having increased the sexual arousal of the perpetrator, which resulted in increased victim culpability by an undergraduate student sample (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). Further, also based on a sample of undergraduate students, Kowalski (1992) found that as the victim's nonverbal behaviour increased in sexual connotation, attributions of responsibility towards
the victim increased. The same trend was observed when the victim failed to say "no" to the sexual advances of the alleged perpetrator.

Child and adolescent victims

Similarly to the findings of adult sexual assault victims, research based on child victims has shown that as children get older they are perceived more negatively. For example, research has indicated that as adolescents approach adulthood, increased culpability is assigned to the victim (Back & Lips, 1998; Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Rogers & Davies, 2007). Using a sample of licensed practising psychologists, Kalichman (1992) found that victims of adolescent age were attributed more responsibility for the abuse than 7-year-old victims. As the age of children increases, sexual naïveté of children decreases. This notion suggests that as adolescents become older, they are at greater risk of being perceived as having potentially encouraged the sexual interaction, as indicated by a sample of laypeople (Davies & Rogers, 2009). Further, Maynard & Wiederman's (1997) findings based on an undergraduate student sample led them to suggest that adolescents were considered more likely to be able to physically resist an act of sexual abuse. In sum, as children develop into adolescents, they are starting to be perceived as "quasi-adults" (Finkelhor, 1984; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997); perhaps as they are increasingly perceived as understanding sexual meanings and therefore as being capable of consenting to sexual activity (Back & Lips, 1998).

While research has indicted that the older a child gets, the more negatively he or she is perceived, little research has investigated how older child victims of sexual abuse are perceived in comparison to adult victims of sexual abuse. There is an increasing understanding around the perceptions about younger, as well as adult, victims of sexual assault, yet little research has focused on "older" children, or adolescents, and their vulnerability to sexual assault as well as to laypeople's perceptions of their culpability.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions regarding this age group, and more specifically, the differences and similarities in perceptions of culpability of adolescent in comparison to adult sexual assault victims. Specifically, we predicted a) that misconceptions regarding the culpability of sexual assault victims are prevalent, and b) that a 15-year-old sexually abused female would be perceived similarly to a 20-year-old sexually abused female with regards to the perception of her culpability for the abuse.

Method

Participants

One-hundred-and-seventy-three participants completed the survey, comprised of 53 (31%) males and 120 (69%) females, aged 18 to 60 years of age. Due to the sexual nature of the survey content, participants were required to be at least 18 years of age. Participants were recruited via email using a snowball technique, that is, potential respondents who received an invitation to complete the survey were asked to forward the invitation to other potentially interested respondents.

Materials

Perceptions of Sexual Abuse Questionnaire
The survey comprised 28 questions addressing respondents' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, a sexually abused 15- or 20-year-old female victim. This paper focuses on one of the constructs that was assessed, namely the degree of culpability assigned to the victim. Culpability was defined as the degree to which the participant perceived the victim as accountable for the abuse and was comprised of items regarding the responsibility, blame, consent and guilt of the victim (Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Kopper, 1996).

Participants were asked to respond to each question based on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Uncertain, to Agree and Strongly Agree. Two randomised versions of the survey for both age groups (i.e., 15- or 20-year-old) were developed to avoid order effects (i.e. that the ordering of questions or ordering of the two age groups would affect responses to later questions).

**Procedure**

Each participant was invited via email to participate in the study. Interested participants were prompted to click on a link provided in the email if they chose to participate. Participants were randomly allocated to either version of the survey. Participants were then directed to the Plain Language Statement and were asked to indicate their consent by proceeding to click on the "I agree" option which led to the full survey. Upon completion of the survey, participants were prompted to submit their survey by clicking on the "submit" button. Prior ethics approval for this project was attained by Deakin University.

**Results**

**Child sexual abuse perception items**

Descriptive statistics were obtained for each of the perception items. Participant responses as measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree were collapsed into three categories. That is, Strongly Disagree and Disagree were collapsed into an overall "Disagree" category, while Strongly Agree and Agree were collapsed into one "Agree" category. Differences between age categories were measured by Chi Square. Significant results are reported at $p < .05$.

The results in Table 1 indicate that the majority of respondents disagreed that a 15-year-old (83%) or a 20-year-old (84%) female who did not physically resist her sexual abuse, can be attributed partial responsibility. Consistent with our hypothesis, there were no significant differences in the perceptions of 15-year-olds and 20-year-olds. With regards to verbally resisting the abuse, an equal majority of participants disagreed that a 15- (78%) or 20-year-old (72%) female who did not verbally resist her sexual abuse, can be attributed partial responsibility. Overall, these finding suggest that there is little difference in the perceived responsibility for her own sexual abuse, when comparing an adolescent to an adult female. However, it is noteworthy that 29% (for the 20-year-old) and 22% of participants (for the 15-year-old) were either unsure, or agreed, that a victim should be attributed partial blame if she did not verbally resist her abuse. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that there may be an expectation of the victim to verbally resist her abuse, despite legislation in several jurisdictions that explicitly rejects this expectation (Taylor, 2007; see also Fileborn 2011).
Table 1: Responsibility attributed to a 15-year-old and 20-year-old female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception question</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility in relation to physical resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 15-year-old female who did not try to physically resist her sexual abuse can be attributed (partial) responsibility.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 20-year-old female who did not try to physically resist her sexual abuse can be attributed (partial) responsibility.</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility in relation to verbal resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 15-year-old female who did not try to verbally resist her sexual abuse can be attributed (partial) responsibility.</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 20-year-old female who did not try to verbally resist her sexual abuse can be attributed (partial) responsibility.</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that 71% of participants do not blame a 15-year-old female for her abuse, even if she behaved affectionately. A moderately higher proportion blamed a 20-year-old female (81%), however, this difference was not statistically significant. It is interesting to note that, while not statistically significant, this may suggest a trend for 20-year-olds to be perceived more favourably, and less blameworthy than 15-year-olds.

Overall, a victim was seen as more blameworthy if she behaved in what participants thought was a promiscuous, rather than affectionate manner. That is, close to half of all respondents either disagreed or were unsure whether a 15- or 20-year-old should be attributed blame when having behaved promiscuously and there was no significant difference between attitudes to 15- or 20-year-old female. Importantly, these results indicate that 45% of respondents attribute some form of blame if a sexual assault victim behaved "promiscuously".

Table 2: Blame attributed to a 15-year-old and 20-year-old female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception question</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blame due to acting affectionately</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 15-year-old female acts affectionately she may invite a sexual act and can be attributed (partial) blame for her sexual abuse</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 20-year-old female acts affectionately she may invite a sexual act and can be attributed (partial) blame for her sexual abuse</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blame due to having behaved promiscuously</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 15-year-old female should not be attributed (partial) blame for her sexual abuse even if she behaved promiscuously.</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 20-year-old female should not be attributed (partial) blame for her sexual abuse even if she behaved promiscuously.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note a While the use of the word "promiscuous" is problematic, as it implies a negative connotation with regards to female sexuality, the researchers did not define promiscuity in this context and left the interpretation of the word open to the respondents of the study.

The results in Table 3 indicate that respondents had some understanding of the law regarding sexual consent. For example, findings show that the majority of participants (90%) agreed that sexual acts between a 20-year-old female and a legal adult did not constitute a crime.
compared to only 14% in relation to a 15-year-old female. The difference between the two age groups was statistically significant.

Moreover, while the majority of participants (80%) agreed that a 20-year-old female understands the implications of sexual consent, close to half of them (38%) also agreed to this statement when evaluating a 15-year-old female within the same context. Analyses of all participant responses to this perception item found an overall significant difference. Overall results corresponding to consent, suggest there is a difference in public perceptions, regarding the sexual consent of a female mature minor with a legal adult compared to the sexual consent of a 20-year-old female, though well over a third still felt a 15-year old would have the level of understanding to consent to sexual acts.

Table 3: Consent associated with a 15-year old and 20-year-old female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception question</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consent and criminal offence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 15-year-old female consents to a sexual act with a legal adult, then the act does not constitute a criminal offence.</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 20-year-old female consents to a sexual act with a legal adult, then the act does not constitute a criminal offence.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implication of consent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 15-year-old female understands the implications of consenting to sexual acts.</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 20-year-old female understands the implications of consenting to sexual acts.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results presented in Table 4 indicate that the majority of participants (90%) disagreed with the statement that a 15-year-old who wears sexually revealing clothing should be attributed guilt for her sexual abuse. A similar trend in response patterns was revealed (88%) when a 20-year-old female was evaluated in the same context. These responses were not significantly different.

In addition, approximately two-thirds of participants agreed, that is, if a 15- (69%) or 20-year-old female (64%) behaved in a sexually provocative manner, she should not be attributed guilt. Conversely, 31% (for 15-year-olds) and 36% (for 20-year-olds) of respondents were unsure or disagreed. Analyses for all participant responses to this perception item, revealed no overall significant difference across victim age. Overall results regarding the level of guilt attributed to a victim of sexual assault indicate that more guilt is attributed to a victim who behaved in a sexually provocative manner than who wore sexually revealing clothes.

Table 4: Guilt attributed to a 15-year old and 20-year-old female

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception question</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guilt due to having worn revealing clothes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 15-year-old female wears sexually revealing clothes she can be attributed (partial) guilt for her sexual abuse.</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If a 20-year-old female wears sexually revealing clothes she can be attributed (partial) guilt for her sexual abuse.</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt due having acted in a sexually provocative manner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even if a 15-year-old female behaves in a sexually provocative manner, she should not be attributed (partial) guilt if she is sexually abused.

Even if a 20-year-old female behaves in a sexually provocative manner, she should not be attributed (partial) guilt if she is sexually abused.

Discussion

Overall, two conclusions can be drawn from this research. Firstly, as predicted, misconceptions regarding the culpability of victims of sexual assault are still common. This finding is somewhat surprising, particularly when considering that the majority of the sample was female, many of whom were university educated. Further, the observation that sexual assault victims are still attributed culpability has historically been associated with a reluctance to report the abuse (Easteal, 1992). It has been estimated that less than 30% of sexual assaults are ever reported (Taylor, 2007). The perception of being blamed for their abuse has served as a barrier to victims accessing formal support systems (Ahrens, 2006; Lievore, 2005a; Ullman & Filipas, 2001).

As a way of addressing these misconceptions, previous research has emphasised that education campaigns regarding sexual assault are needed as primary prevention (Boursnell, Lee, & Chang, 2008; Purvis & Joyce, 2005). The findings of this research are no different. Education campaigns are needed to combat misconceptions about sexual assault, specifically, that victims of sexual assault are never to blame for the abuse. Such an education campaign may ultimately lead to a change in perceptions and greater reporting rates.

Secondly, as predicted, our findings indicate that an adolescent victim of sexual assault is perceived similarly to an adult victim of sexual assault (except with regard to consent). While not statistically significant, there seems to be a trend for 15-year-olds to be viewed more negatively than 20-year-olds. This finding is perplexing and can perhaps be attributed to the negative media images of adolescents portrayed in the media. Consequently, it may indeed be the case that, as suggested elsewhere, 10-year-olds are the "ideal" sexual assault witnesses - they are young enough to still maintain some level of sexual naiveté, yet are old enough to be credible witnesses (McCaulay & Parker, 2001). Finally, this finding also has implications for the conviction rates of offenders - as the rates for adult victims of assault are even lower than those for child victims (Fitzgerald, 2006), the perception that a 15-year-old is similar to a 20-year-old may have the detrimental consequence of resulting in lower conviction rates compared to younger child victims.

With regards to the limitations of this study, the gender distribution as well as education level of the sample could have been more evenly distributed. That is, respondents were more likely to be female and well-educated. However, given that previous research on perceptions of sexual assault victims has largely been based on convenience samples comprised of undergraduate students, this study has utilised a sample from the general public. Further research based on randomly selected members of the general public using similar methodological techniques as employed in this study and drawn evenly across different generations, could improve knowledge in this area.

In conclusion, our research has indicated that misconceptions about victims of sexual assault are still prevalent. Moreover, older children (i.e., adolescents), are perceived similarly to
adult victims of sexual assault. While research comparing these two age groups is still in its infancy, the results show that an education campaign may be beneficial in rectifying these misconceptions and in increasing the level of justice victims receive.

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References


**Footnote**

1. More information about the statistical methods used can be obtained from the lead author.