

## Chapter 6

# Effects of Victim Gender, Age, and Sexuality on Perceptions of Sexual Assaults Committed by Women

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Traditional approaches to the study of sexual offending have been largely conceptualised from a feminist viewpoint. Feminist explanations for rape and other sexual assaults focus around societal hatred of women, the existence of a rape supportive patriarchal culture, which endorses the sexual offending of females by males (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980). Burt asserted that rape myths—prejudicial and false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists—are prevalent in Western society. Rape myth endorsement is empirically related to the blaming of female rape victims (Krahé, 1988), traditional negative views about women (Burt, 1980), and hostile male aggression (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). However, traditional explanatory perspectives do not consider sexually abusive situations where the victim is not female and/or the offender not male. Indeed, although a considerable effort has been made to develop and validate etiological models of male sexual offending, few equivalent efforts have been made to understand female sexual offending (Gannon, Rose, & Ward, 2008), meaning that female sexual offending has not been considered as much of a viable research area as that of male sexual offending or indeed taken seriously as a significant sexual crime. Female sexual offending, where acknowledged, has been seen as a rare event (Lambert & Hammond, 2009), and thus victims of such crimes have been omitted from the bulk of discourse on sexual offending, either in relation to its effects, or on third party perceptions about such situations (Davies, 2002).

In recent years, a flurry of research has considered the perceptions that people make about sexual assaults committed upon male victims (see Davies & Rogers, 2006; Davies, 2011, for detailed reviews), but the majority of this research has portrayed the perpetrator as male. To date, there is much less research that details perceptions of female perpetration on either male adults or children. The traditional belief is that a woman cannot force a man to have sex or that a man

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would be unwilling if a woman forced sex upon him (Sarrel & Masters, 1982). Female perpetration of sexual offences, especially against those who were potentially bigger and stronger than them, has been deemed impossible, not only as a general myth but by researchers also. Subsequently, research into perceptions of female perpetration has been neglected due to researchers deeming it unimportant, impossible, or its depiction unrealistic (Davies, 2002).

Nevertheless, women do sexually offend, with it being estimated that up to a fifth of all child sexual abusers being female (see e.g. Fergusson & Mullen, 1999), although conviction of female sexual offenders is minimal (see e.g. Beech, Parrett, Ward, & Fisher, 2009). Women commit sexual offences against adult men and women, and children, both in situations involving sole offending and as a co-offender. Interestingly, there is evidence that females who act as sole offenders are most likely to abuse males (Musken, Bogaerts, van Casterens, & Labrijn, 2011), showing that female offenders can indeed abuse victims who are potentially bigger and stronger than them. Sexual offences committed by females elicit similar reactions in their victims as sexual offences committed by males. Post-abuse responses include short- and long-term emotional and behavioural issues, low self-esteem, anger, self-harm, substance abuse (see e.g. Hislop, 2001), sexual and relationship problems, and fear of members of the gender that abused them (Davies & Rogers, 2004) in both male and female survivors (Dube et al., 2005). Additionally, in some cases, further specific issues relating to female perpetration, such as feeling isolated and increased feelings of stigma occur (Bunting, 2005; Davies & Rogers, 2004).

What is known about women that do sexually offend is that they can be categorized into loose typologies (see Gannon et al., 2008, for a further discussion). According to Gannon et al., female sexual offenders include those that abuse adolescent males (what Matthews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989, called the “teacher-lover” subtype), those who offend against pre-pubescent children, those who offend with a male co-offender, and those who offend in the midst of a wider, more generic criminal career. Although these are by no means exhaustive categories they give a rough guide to how female sexual offences have been viewed within the perceptions literature and also within the media. Matthews and colleagues’ (1989) “teacher-lover” subtype is the one that seems to have received most attention in the media, not because it is considered particularly severe, but because it is one that is sensationalised and considered an educational or even a positive experience for the victim (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006; Davies & Rogers, 2004). Whilst film portrayals of the sexual abuse of females by males are done so sensitively, it is striking that films depicting sexual liaisons between women and adolescent boys often portray the event as positive or even humorous (Mendel, 1995).

The empirical investigation of the perceptions of the sexual victimisation of adult males by female perpetrators was subjected to a small amount of experimental work in the 1980s and 1990s. Smith, Pine, and Hawley (1988), for example, compared perceptions of male sexual victimisation when perpetrator gender was varied. They found that male victims of sexual assault by female perpetrators were

considered more likely to have encouraged the episode and to have derived sexual pleasure from it than was the case for men who were victims of male perpetrators. This difference was particularly pronounced for male respondents (47% said that the sexual assault of a man by a woman was pleasurable for the victim, compared with a figure of 9% for the female respondents). Smith et al. asserted that men's relatively positive views about sexual assaults carried out by female perpetrators was due to their endorsement of stereotypic views about male sexuality, such as men should always be ready for, and enjoy sex, with a willing woman.

Smith and colleagues' (1988) findings were furthered in a set of studies in the 1990s by Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson. They investigated a number of factors that influenced judgements towards unwanted sexual attention in hypothetical situations. In their 1993 study, male and female respondents were asked to indicate how they thought they would feel if they became the victim of a sexual assault by a person who was either the same or the opposite sex as themselves. Women said that they would respond with a strong negative reaction to a man's uninvited genital touch, with a sense of physical violation and fear of physical harm. However, men considered that they would find the same genital touch by a female initiator to be only minimally negative. Both men and women felt that a genital touch from a same sex person would be very negative. In a follow-up to this study, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1994) asked college men to rate their reactions on a number of variables, including feelings of pleasure and violation, to an uninvited sexual advance from a female acquaintance. They found that men were more negative towards this situation if the female used a high level of force, or if she was portrayed as unattractive. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson explained these findings in terms of gender role socialisation that has encouraged men to be dominant and to initiate sexual behaviour while the same behaviour by women is discouraged, or is not expected. Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson's explanation for this is that a man's sexual initiation is seen as more threatening, and thus more serious, than that of a woman. Male subjects were less tolerant than female subjects of this male refusal. Some were scathing: one said "Don't be a wuss," another said that he would love a woman to do that to him, although others labelled her as "forward" or "pushy." Moreover, even in situations involving minor sexual violations (such as non-consensual kissing), participants regarded it as more acceptable for a woman to violate a man's sexual consent than the other way round (Margolin, 1990).

Traditional gender stereotypes of male and female sexual behaviour also explain how perceptions of the "teacher-lover" subtype of child sexual abuse are that the situation is non-serious or even positive for the victim, even when the victim in these situations is below the legal age of consent. In actuality, this type of abuse is not a positive experience and the sexual abuse of an adolescent male by an older female is in every way as negative and damaging as that of other types of sexual abuse (Davies & Rogers, 2004). Yet, even professionals who work with children express attitudes and perceptions that endorse the view of "teacher-lover" abuse being non-serious or positive. For example, Eisenberg, Owens, and Dewey (1987), investigated attitudes towards child victims of incestuous abuse by an adult family

member amongst health professionals (health visitors, nurses, and medical students), and they found that 33% of the sample believed girls would be more seriously affected by incest than boys. Respondents also felt that abuse that did not involve sexual intercourse was less damaging to victims of either sex, and that abuse which involved female perpetrators, such as mother-on-son or sister-on-sister abuse, was less serious than abuse involving a male perpetrator. In another early study on this subject, Broussard and Wagner (1988) manipulated perpetrator gender, victim gender, and victim response (resisting, passive, or encouraging) in a student sample and found that a child aged 15 years who resisted during a sexual assault by an adult was considered less responsible than a child who behaved in a passive or encouraging manner. Interestingly, Broussard and Wagner found that whilst the perpetrator was considered more responsible than the victim in all conditions, less responsibility was attributed to the perpetrator when the child was encouraging, male, and assaulted by a female. Broussard and Wagner showed that child victims were attributed some responsibility where the abuse is seen as non-detrimental (in that the victim was judged as having no negative effects of the abuse), or even seen as a positive or “educational” experience for the victim (where no negative effects of the abuse were perceived). As with the adult studies, male respondents were more blaming than females. In 1993, Wagner, Aucoin, and Johnson replicated Broussard and Wagner’s (1988) study. They sampled American psychologists and found them subject to the same attributional biases as students—namely that 15-year-old male victims of female perpetrators were more negatively evaluated than younger children, female victims, or those assaulted by males. Even those who work in occupations involved directly in child protection are not immune to negative attributional biases. Heatherton and Beardsall (1988) found UK child protection workers to consider female sexual perpetration less serious than that of male sexual perpetration, less criminal and the crime less likely to be punished by imprisonment and less worthy of social service involvement. They argued that the idealisation of women as nurturing and not capable of sexually abusing children in a criminal manner. Denov (2001) summarised this attitude as such that female sexual offending is reframed from the sphere of intentional criminality to one that is more in line with cultural views about women—that is, that her behaviour is deemed less criminally severe, and in terms of uncontrollable mental illness, or likely controlled by someone else (such as, a male co-perpetrator). These attitudes are also endorsed by female perpetrators themselves, who are likely to frame the motivation for their abusive behaviour as one of loss of control or mental illness (Beech et al., 2009). These attitudes can mean that victims of female-perpetrated sexual offences are not taken seriously and their perpetrator less likely to be punished (Davies, 2002).

More recent experimental studies have shown that the attributional biases that were in operation in the 1980s and early 1990s have not changed over time. Within US samples (Back & Lips, 1998; Maynard & Wiederman 1997; Quas, Bottoms, Haegerich, & Nysse-Carris 2002), UK samples (Davies & Rogers, 2004; Rogers & Davies, 2007), as well as, an Indian sample (Mellott, Wagner, & Broussard, 1997) all have shown that when the victim is a 15-year-old male and the perpetrator an adult female, the victim is considered more responsible than are younger children, or those assaulted by male perpetrators.

Although children below the age of puberty do not tend to be attributed responsibility for their assault, in one study by Rogers and Davies (2007) even a 10-year-old male victim was attributed negative evaluations when he was assaulted by a woman. Rogers and Davies also found that while men deemed a 10-year-old victim too young to be judged blameworthy, the victim was seen as having a causal role in their assault, despite being 6 years below the legal age of consent in the country the study was conducted (the UK). Although men had as much sympathy with the victim's plight as women did and felt that the police should take the assault very seriously, men still saw the assault as having only a moderately negative impact on the victim's life. Female perpetrators were considered less responsible, less blameworthy (particularly by men), and less guilty than male perpetrators. Thus, even though respondents were just as pro-victim towards victims of female versus male perpetrators, for example, by treating the assault as very severe and attributing victims little causal role in it, they still perceived female perpetrators less negatively than male perpetrators. This is worrying data if the same negative attributional biases are apparent towards real world cases.

In addition to age and gender effects, more recent work is beginning to investigate other variables that may influence perceptions of female sexual offending and the victims of such violence. A follow-up study to Smith et al. (1988) and Davies et al. (2006) showed that in adult cases, the victim's sexual orientation influences perceptions of male victims and female perpetrators of sexual offences. Davies et al. found that in sexual assaults by a female perpetrator, men blamed heterosexual male victims more than they blamed gay male victims. According to Davies et al., men will deride male victims in the belief that men who are attracted to women should always take, rather than resist, any opportunity of sex with a willing woman. Following this line of thought, being a gay male actually reduces negative attributions when the perpetrator is female, because his natural preference is not towards women. Davies et al. (2006) term this finding the *sexual preference effect*. The sexual preference effect appears to be a robust one and has since been replicated in a number of different sexual assault situations. Davies and Boden (in press), for example, replicated this finding in an adult sexual assault situation. Additionally, Davies, Austen, and Rogers (2011) showed the sexual preference effect also occurs with a sexual assault situation involving an adolescent victim, aged 15 years. Investigating the effects of sexual orientation on perceptions of adolescent victims is important as many individuals are aware of their sexuality before they legally reach the age of consent (Troiden, 1993). Davies et al. (2011) found that a sample of UK students blamed a 15-year-old male victim of sexual abuse more and considered the assault less severe, when he was portrayed as being either heterosexual and assaulted by a woman, or gay and assaulted by a man. The sexual preference effect is worthy of further research, utilising more generalisable samples; but still, these findings show how, in real world cases, secondary victimisation might occur towards victims dependant on the interaction of who they are and who is their perpetrator.

The above findings taken as a whole extend the traditional theoretical feminist analysis of rape and sexual assault to show that not only do negative views about gender roles contribute to negative judgements towards female victims of male perpetrators, but they also influence negative evaluations of male victims of female perpetrators. Findings from experimental studies are important on a practical level.

Treatment services need to be aware of the negative attributional biases that the victim might have been subjected to from people to whom they have disclosed, and should be prepared to counter these attributions throughout treatment. Given that even those working in child protection are not immune to negative attributional biases, this needs to be addressed in the training of staff who do work with sexual abuse survivors. It is imperative that treatment services do not assume the same biases as the public regarding female perpetration of sexual offences, yet research suggests that sometimes they do (e.g. Heatherton & Beardsall, 1988). Indeed, Denov (2004) reported that less than half of sexual abuse survivors reporting female-perpetrated sexual assaults experienced positive effects of treatments from those providing the service. The majority experiences from treatment services were negative. Negative experiences from those that victims disclose to, creates a situation of secondary victimisation (Williams, 1984), which compounds the situation. This is simply not adequate and training for individuals treating female perpetrators should encourage workers to consider their own biases that could affect their treatment of female perpetrators, such as the fact that they might consider offences by women to be less severe than those by men (Davies & Rogers, 2004). In addition, findings from experimental research such as this also guide the treatment of perpetrators, with criminal justice and legal services needing to further recognise female sexual perpetration (Denov, 2003). Finally, it is important for those working in treatment services not to be biased by the victim's (perceived) sexuality, even when the victim is below the legal age of consent when dealing with cases where a male victim is abused by a member of the gender that he would normally be attracted to. Those working with victims of sexual abuse need to be aware that the sexual preference effect can induce negative attributional biases towards some victims more than others. Victims of sexual offences, regardless of their gender, age, sexuality, or the gender of their perpetrator, need to be confident that they will receive positive treatment post-assault from those that they disclose to, and it is the duty of those working with such victims to ensure that this occurs for all, not just some.

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