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Child abuse in the eyes of the beholder: Lay perceptions of child sexual and physical abuse

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose was to explore the effects of victim and perpetrator gender, type of abuse, and victim-perpetrator relationship on university students' and non-students' perceptions of different kinds of child abuse.

Method: One hundred and ninety-nine participants (including university students and non-student adults) evaluated each of 24 vignettes (within-subjects design) describing an abusive interaction between a child and an adult. The following four variables were manipulated: the victim's gender, the perpetrator's gender, the type of abuse (physical, relatively mild sexual, or relatively severe sexual), and the perpetrator's relationship to the victim (parent or babysitter). Participants rated each vignette on a number of dimensions: degree of trauma and severity, likelihood of general occurrence and reoccurrence, victim believability, and "repressibility" of the event.

Results: Significant interactions emerged on each dimension. For example, sexual abuse (whether mild or severe) was rated as being more traumatic and severe if perpetrated by a parent, but relationship type did not affect perceptions of physical abuse. In addition, significant perpetrator gender by victim gender interactions indicated that homosexual abuse was perceived as more traumatic and repressible than heterosexual abuse, but as less likely to occur; and male participants tended to be more affected by the gender of the perpetrator and abuse type than female participants.

Conclusion: The results suggest that people have stereotypes about the circumstances and consequences of child abuse. These stereotypes are often, though not always, consistent with existing empirical findings.

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Introduction

The rates of child maltreatment vary based on how child maltreatment is defined, ranging from 11.9 per 1000 to 49.1 per 1000 children in the United States (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2006). Researchers also have reported that perceptions of child sexual abuse (CSA) vary according to characteristics of the case (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991; Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, & Holt, 2004). For example, Broussard et al., in a study examining college students' perceptions of out-of-court cases of sexual abuse, asked participants to evaluate sexual abuse vignettes, which varied by perpetrator gender, victim gender, and victim response (encouraging, passive, or resisting), in terms of the extent to which they represented CSA. Participants viewed abuse of a male by a female as less indicative of abuse and less harmful to the victim than other gender combinations. Dollar et al. obtained similar findings in the context of students' perceptions of a teacher-student sexual experience.

Both studies found that homosexual abuse was perceived as more serious than heterosexual abuse, especially when the victim was male. Although a number of studies have measured perceptions of sexual abuse, those including other forms of maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse) are less prevalent. In contrast to the relatively consistent gender findings in sexual abuse research, research on perceptions of physical abuse has found no evidence that participants' ratings were influenced by victim or perpetrator gender (Dukes & Kean, 1989).

Such lay perceptions regarding the nature of abuse, particularly sexual abuse, can matter in a number of respects, in that they are likely to influence victims' interactions with legal and mental health professionals, as well as peers and ordinary "others." Legal authorities might find an allegation of abuse more or less credible depending on the allegation's particular characteristics. For example, Hetherington and Beardsall (1988) found that child protection professionals (social workers and police) were more likely to recommend case registration and imprisonment for the offender when the sexual abuse was perpetrated by a male than by a female, suggesting that they perceived the former type of abuse as more serious.

Further down the legal road, case characteristics can influence a case's disposition at trial. Mock jurors' judgments in abuse cases are influenced by the victim and/or perpetrator's gender, often in interaction with other variables (Bornstein & Muller, 2001; Clark & Nightingale, 1997; ForsterLee, Horowitz, Ho, ForsterLee, & McGovern, 1999). For example, Bornstein and Muller, in a mock jury study, found that an alleged sexual abuse victim's testimony of repressed/recovered memory was less credible and was associated with lower perceptions of the defendant's culpability than a condition in which the victim had remembered the abuse all along, but only in instances of heterosexual abuse; the victim's testimony exerted no effect in instances of homosexual abuse. If homosexual abuse is indeed perceived as more harmful to the victim (e.g., Dollar et al., 2004; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997), then it follows that mock jurors would view such events as more "repressible." For physical abuse, although gender did not appear to have a substantial impact in the Dukes and Kean (1989) study, the authors found that physical abuse was perceived as being the most abusive (in comparison to psychological abuse and neglect), yet was rated as less likely to be reported than neglect. Thus, as with sexual abuse, influences due to others' perception of the incident—such as whether to report—may have lasting influences on child victims and their short- and long-term trajectory.

Within a therapeutic context, therapists' expectations can exert a powerful influence on their diagnosis and handling of individual cases (Elstein, 1988). Thus, therapists' stereotypes about abuse could affect their clinical disposition of such cases, in the same manner that expectations influence professionals'

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