

Undergraduate perceptions on child sexual abuse versus adult sexual abuse

Maegan Harrison, Charles Kraemer, Stephanie M. S. Thomas
Department of Psychological Science, LaGrange College



Abstract

This hypothetical study was designed to explore undergraduate perceptions of child sexual abuse (CSA) versus adult sexual abuse (ASA). Four vignettes would be developed and distributed along with a questionnaire for each. Independent variables would include victim age, and victim response. Dependent variables would include respondent identification of sexual abuse or not, blame attribution, and degree of abuse. This research is exploratory given that no prior research exists comparing the two.

Introduction

- Sexual abuse has been a major topic in the scientific community for quite some time. However, I am currently unaware of any research comparing the two types of sexual abuse.
- The GA Constitution (n.d.) defines CSA as “any act committed by the defendant against the plaintiff which occurred when the plaintiff was under 18 years of age...”
- The CDC (2017) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act committed against someone without freely given consent”
- Reynolds and Birkimer (2002) performed a study using vignettes and found no significant difference in blame attribution and expected trauma of the victim between male and female participants
- The proposed vignettes in this study were adapted from research by Maynard and Weiderman (1997) who found no significant difference between male and female respondents for blame attribution
- Hestick and Perrino (2009) and Davies, Rogers, and Hood (2009) found evidence to support a significant difference between genders in response to blame attribution
- Maynard and Weiderman (1997) findings showed a strong need for further education regarding CSA scenarios
- Findings show scenarios of older victims who exhibit encouraging behavior are significantly less labeled as CSA than passive and resisting (Reynolds & Brikimer, 2002)
- Younger male and female victims were typically not rated responsible for abuse; older victims were typically rated more responsible (Hestick & Perrino, 2009)
- Male respondents are more likely to blame victims who exhibit encouraging behavior without consent (Davies & Rogers, 2009)
- In ASA, males attribute less blame to perpetrators than females while also attributing more blame to rape victims (Gerber, Cronin, and Steigman, 2006)
- Students blamed their performance during the study on a lack of sexual abuse education (Hackman et al., 2017)

Materials & Methods

Participants

Approximately 200 undergraduate students at LaGrange College; 50 students from each class standing. Various demographics such as class standing, program of study/interest, student involvement, and religious affiliation would be measured.

Materials

Materials would include four vignettes. Each vignette would contain five questions on a five-point Likert scale to be answered based on the scenario presented. There would also be a demographic portion of five questions to be completed after all vignettes are done. The vignettes would vary victim age and victim response.

Vignette A. Victim age – 13. Victim response – passive
Vignette B. Victim age – 21. Victim response – passive.
Vignette C. Victim age – 13. Victim response – resistant.
Vignette D. Victim age – 21. Victim response – resistant.

Methods

- I would randomly select students for participation based on the college database. Students would then receive an email asking for their participation in the study and be requested to attend one of many study sessions in a computer lab.
- I would give background for the questionnaire's development and assert that participation is voluntary.
- I would read the study instructions aloud to the participants to explain the process of filling out the informed consent and retrieving the set of surveys to be completed.
- After signing, each student would return the informed consent to me before being handed a set of surveys to be completed in that order.
- Each survey set would have the vignettes in counterbalanced orders.
- Upon completing each vignette's questionnaire and the demographic questions, surveys would be brought back, paper-clipped together, and placed in the manila envelope by the participant to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.
- I would finally debrief the students and release them from the session.

Results

Hypothetical CSA findings

- No significant difference between male and female respondents for correctly identifying CSA

Hypothetical ASA findings

- Male respondents would place significantly more blame on passive victims than resistant victims
- Male respondents would place significantly less blame on perpetrators than female respondents

Comparison between CSA and ASA

- Respondents would view younger victims as significantly less responsible

References

- Davies, M., & Rogers, P. (2009). Perceptions of blame and credibility toward victims of childhood sexual abuse: Differences across victim age, victim-perpetrator relationship, and respondent gender in a depicted case. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 18*(1), 78–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1053871.0802584668>
- Ga. Const. O.C.G.A. § 9-3-33.1
- Gerber, G., Cronin, J., & Steigman, H. (2006). Attributions of blame in sexual assault to perpetrators and victims of both genders. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 34*(10), 2149–2165. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2004.tb02694.x>
- Hackman, C. L., Pember, S. E., Wilkerson, A. H., Burton, W., & Usdan, S. L. (2017). Slut-shaming and victim-blaming: A qualitative investigation of undergraduate students' perceptions of sexual violence. *Sex Education, 17*(6), 697–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1362332>
- Hestick, H., & Perrino, C. S. (2009). African-American undergraduates' perceptions and attributions of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 18*(1), 61–77.
- Maynard, C., & Wiederman, M. (1997). Undergraduate students' perceptions of child sexual abuse: Effects of age, sex, and gender-role attitudes. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 21*(9), 833–844.
- Reynolds, L. L., & Birkimer, J. C. (2002). Perceptions of child sexual abuse: Victim and perpetrator characteristics, treatment efficacy, and lay vs. legal opinions of abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 11*(1), 53.
- U.S. Department of Justice. *Facts and Statistics: Raising Awareness about Sexual Abuse*. Retrieved from <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/education/factsstatistics/>

Conclusion

The existing literature shows a desperate need for further research and education in both types of sexual abuse. It is important to further research in this area because:

- Contradicting data supports no significant difference in blame attribution between males and females while other data supports the opposite
- There is a lack of education that leads to the development and permanence of sexual abuse myths in society
- Protection of children through legal age of consent makes identifying CSA more black and white than identifying ASA
- It is unable to be determined how the two types of sexual abuse may interact and effect one another because no one has studied it
- People's reactions to these occurrences can be just as detrimental as the abuse if fueled by ignorance
- Determining if there is a difference between CSA and ASA could shape the way people are educated about abuse, even to the point of gender breakdown
- Extensive study of the sexual abuse problem is necessary to find a solution

Future Directions

- Focus solely on CSA or ASA rather than both
- Include vignettes with active participation from the victim
- Change the gender of the perpetrator.
- Assess the previous knowledge of CSA and/or ASA, whether accurate or inaccurate, to measure the differences.
- An educational study could also be developed in which students are taught facts of CSA and ASA, then later required to fill out the questionnaire to see what information needs to be focused on.

