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Battle of the Sexes: Similarities and Differences in Lay People's Perceptions about Male and Female Sex Offenders

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to examine public perceptions about male and female sex offenders to help address gender disparities that exist in the justice system and society. Participants ($N = 226$) completed the revised Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders Scale (ATS; Harper & Hogue, 2015) and a questionnaire concerning opinions about female sex offenders. While there were no observed differences in perceptions between gender overall, differences emerged when examining only parents. Parents perceived male sex offenders worse than female sex offenders. This study also brings awareness to gender bias regarding male and female sex offenders. The implication of this study is that it helps inform the justice system perceptions of sex offenders which could bias potential jurors.

Keywords: male sex offender, female sex offender, lay people, perceptions, gender bias

Battle of the Sexes: Similarities and Differences in Lay People's Perceptions about Male and Female Sex Offenders

We have all thought negatively about someone before and vice versa. It is common for people to meet, interact, and like or dislike someone. What happens when certain individuals are thought of so poorly it can impact crucial aspects of life like relationships and socialization? Attitudes about people can determine how we treat them and implications like awareness or effective treatment (Harper, 2012; Sanghara, 2006). There are roughly 9,000 incarcerated male sex offenders and 103 incarcerated female sex offenders at the time of this study (Comartin et al., 2021). One hypothesis that drives research concerning this study is the chivalry hypothesis which suggests criminal justice officials who are predominantly males feel the need to protect and care for women even as offenders (Shields & Cochran, 2019). The current study explores lay people's perceptions of male and female sex offenders to help add to the limited research concerning female sex offenders.

Weber et al. (2012) studied perceptions of sexual harassment by determining if there was a three-way interaction between gender, gender bias, and dress style. This research is unique and different from previous methods because it included presenting various vignettes to participants about victims' dress styles in context of sexual harassment. This experiment consisted of 172 college students completing a series of surveys measuring their probability of committing inappropriate sexual behaviors, gender bias based on careers given that most sexual harassment occurs in the work place, and perceptions of punishment. The tools and measurements used were the Likelihood to Sexually Harass Scale (LSH), Gender-Career Implicit Association Task (IAT), and Punishment Scale. While there was not a three-way interaction between the independent variables, significance was evident. More men versus women believed victims who dressed more

provocatively were at fault for sexual harassment cases; moreover, women held stronger beliefs that sexual harassers should face punishment regardless of victim dress style be it conservative or provocative. This is relevant to my study considering appearances in attire, looks, or gender can influence perceptions of sex crimes and offenders.

Anderson et al. (2020) examined the prevalence of female sexual offending by reviewing and analyzing case studies. While males commit the majority of sex crimes, female offenders account for roughly 5-10 percent of those sexual offenses according to Brown and Kloess (2019). A unique approach was utilized whereby researchers focused on multifaceted issues and different topics to explain male and female sexual offending such as gender roles and stereotypes, criminology, and developmental theories. Some studies have even compared and contrasted attitudes from different countries such as the United States and United Kingdom since they share similar and consistent views about sex offenders (Gakhal & Brown, 2011).

Findings concluded that male and female sex offenders are not treated the same such that males often receive harsher sentences than females (Anderson et al., 2020). Other reasons for male sexual offenders receiving harsher penalties include the underreporting of female sexual offenders as well as the motivations and types of sex offenses committed by female offenders (Anderson et al., 2020). It was reported female sex offenders have a variety of reasons for committing sex offenses that are not necessarily sexual such as the coercion of a male offender or the need to maintain power and control their victims (Shields & Cochran, 2019). Differences in perceptions of sex offenders also can be attributed to the specific crimes committed like lewd acts with minors, sexual assault, and sexual battery.

Additionally, male offenders who assaulted male victims were perceived more culpable than female offenders with male victims (King & Roberts, 2017). Patriarchy and chivalry

hypotheses are possible explanations for why female offenders are sentenced more leniently and less culpable (Anderson et al. 2020). The reason for this is because it establishes roles males and females are supposed to play regarding sex and what happens when these rules are violated. Ultimately this is why these two scenarios may illicit certain views and perceptions of sex offenders. Experts have also been able to create typologies and find characteristics among female abusers. For example, 88% of female sex offenders are teacher/lover types and 23% are in caregiving occupations (babysitting), aged in their 20-30s, mainly victimize young boys and minors under six years old (Anderson et al., 2020).

Shields and Cochran (2019) investigated sex offender punishment and discrepancies in sentencing. Shields and Cochran used precision matching analyses on 15 years' worth of data involving felony sex offenders. This revealed that court decision-making was influenced by extralegal factors such as gender. An example of this is when a criminal justice official such as a judge acts chivalrous toward female offenders and sentences them leniently, thus supporting the chivalry hypothesis. Further analyses revealed disparities when examining the age of the victim or type of sex offender. Examples of this are case involving child victims receiving more headlines than adult victims. This is also evident if the sex offender in question is a child rapist rather than one who rapes adults. Different personal and professional experiences of justice officials could cause similar unequal attention or treatment. Other significant findings supported that male sex offenders are more likely to be imprisoned and have longer incarcerations while female sex offenders are likely to co-offend and be Caucasian.

Hayes and Baker (2014) found the media is a critical influence on how criminals are portrayed and depicted. Further findings revealed traditional gender roles and stereotypes are themes that indicate if females are seen as lesser or equally harmful. The typical gender role of

women is to be kind, nurturing, passive, and nonviolent. On the other hand, men are supposed to be macho, dominant, power-assertive, and aggressive (Hayes & Baker, 2014). Additional themes that establish a female sex offender's portrayal include demonization which causes female offenders to be perceived as pariahs; however, sensationalism, minimization, romanticized views, and the nurturing personality influence perceptions by stereotyping females so they are depicted as vulnerable and weak (Hayes & Baker, 2014).

Zack et al. (2018) addressed female sex offenders as teachers and the public perceptions of them including their relationships with male students. Zack et al. (2018) analyzed and thematically coded 900 online comments from *Huffington Post* about cases involving female offenders. In addition, a combination of positive and negative comments indicated traditional gender roles and norms form people's perceptions and opinions of sex offenders. These commenters also wanted equal punishment for all sex offenders regardless of gender. Other themes that should be considered are physiological aspects such as attraction and appearances when determining how female offenders are perceived to explain why female sex offenders are viewed as lesser compared to male sex offenders. (Zack et al., 2018).

Gakhal and Brown (2011) examined attitudes concerning female sex offenders among professionals, students, and the general public. Gakhal and Brown used the Attitudes Toward Female Sex Offenders Scale (ATFS) in a quasi-experimental design. Results suggested that professionals have more favorable attitudes toward female sex offenders than students or the general public because of their work experience with sex offenders as well as having a higher socioeconomic status and advanced studies in psychology. Additional findings also revealed mental health professionals and correctional officers have the best attitudes about sexual abusers due to their job in rehabilitating these types of offenders. In contrast, the general public's views

were negative and not as hopeful. Although many sex offenders incite fear, pedophiles and incest offenders are the most feared types due to the media sensationalizing sex crimes and sometimes fabricating the realities and truths about these offenders (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018).

A common occurrence for programs preventing sexual violence is educating women on safety precautions and awareness of sexual assault but many rarely focus on men in relation to this subject (Cassel, 2012). Cassel (2012) analyzed whether or not a false feedback approach through personalization would positively change male attitudes and behaviors regarding sexual assault. Men from Colgate University experienced the false feedback by completing the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) and reading narratives about scenarios involving sexual abuse. An example of one situation is an inebriated girl being driven home by a potential rapist. While it was unknown if false feedback caused any behavioral changes, participants did indicate changes in beliefs and perceptions about sexual assault. Ultimately this study gave those men better insight into the seriousness of sexual assault. This study's findings support implications such as programs that incorporate individual responsibility in education with male participants as a way to reduce sexual violence altogether.

William and Bierie (2015) found that most similarities in male and female sex offenders are abuse, mental illness, and modus operandi. For instance, both genders usually have histories of physical and sexual abuse and suffer from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression (Wijkman et al., 2010). Similar methods of operation also include molestation as both genders usually engage in fondling and other forms of inappropriate touching (William & Bierie, 2015). Furthermore, male and female sex offenders typically offend in the homes of their victims and mostly target acquaintances. In contrast, differences between the genders involve females co-offending with males while male offenders are more likely to act

alone. Men are also more likely to have a broader range of victims with varying ages while women tend to abuse their biological children and younger victims (William & Bierie, 2015).

The current study sought to add to the existing literature concerning perceptions of female sex offenders in comparison to male sex offenders. Similar to previous studies, the goal was to identify how the general public views sex offenders; moreover, we furthered previous research with the comparison of attitudes between male and female sex offenders. The importance of this study is based on educating individuals about the harmful effects of gender bias regarding sexual abuse and other crimes. We predicated that participants would perceive female sex offenders as less threatening based on gender bias in the criminal justice system.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 226$; 67% female) included community members recruited from various social media outlets. Participants' ages ranged from 18- to 65-years-old ($M = 28.69$, $SD = 11.69$). The majority of participants identified as non-Hispanic/White (68%), with smaller numbers of participants identifying as Black (12.5%), Latino (2.7%), Asian (8.9%), Middle Eastern (2.2%), Native American/Alaskan Native (1.3%), Pacific Islander (0.4%), and those that identified as other (3.6%).

Measures

The Community Attitudes toward Sex Offenders scale (Harper & Hogue, 2015) is broken down into three subscales: (1) sentencing and management ($\alpha = .87$) with statements such as "People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights"; (2) stereotype endorsement ($\alpha = .79$) with statements such as "Sex offenders prefer to stay home alone rather than be around lots of people"; and (3) risk perception ($\alpha = .65$) with statements such as "Some sex offenders

should be allowed to work in schools”. After reverse coding when necessary, a total sum of scores was created as were total sums for each subscale. Participants were also asked to rate their opinions on female sex offenders using various statements such as “Most female sex offenders are teachers.”

Procedures

Data were collected through the online survey platform, Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to answer the Perceptions of Sex Offenders Scale for either female or male sex offenders and then answered questions concerning their opinions of female sex offenders. Once participants completed the study, they were thanked for their time and debriefed.

Results

An independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there were mean differences between perceptions of male and female sex offenders. Results indicated that male and female sex offenders were seen similarly, $t(176) = 1.67, p < .05$. However, given that there were parents in the current sample, we wanted to examine whether perceptions of males and females differed for those parents. When specifically focusing on participants who were parents, a significant difference occurred as parents had less favorable attitudes about male sex offenders ($M = 66.10, SD = 11.03$) compared to female sex offenders ($M = 58.08, SD = 11.02$), $t(48) = 2.59, p = 0.01$.

We also included open-ended questions and the qualitative data, in some respects, predicted accurate and surprising results. For example, participants were asked whether they knew about any high-profile cases of female sex offenders, and the majority of participants responded with Mary Kay Letourneau. This is important because these responses allow us to assess the public’s knowledge of similar cases and female offending. Additional findings

included participants indicating that male offenders being the first to come to mind, news being the main source of information about sex offenders, and knowledge about sexual crimes and offenders. The most unexpected results were the political responses and comments from the questionnaire. Examples of comments were those acknowledging an accurate prevalence of female sex offenders (they make up roughly 5 percent of cases internationally; Wijkman et al., 2010).

Discussion

The current study assessed the general public's perceptions of male and female sex offenders using the ATS and female sex offender questionnaire (Harper & Hogue, 2015). This was done to examine potential differences in perceptions of male and female sex offenders. It was revealed that male and female sex offenders are both viewed as unfavorable, but parents think male offenders are worse than female offenders. This differed from Buckley's (2020) study which found that people do not even acknowledge female sex offenders. This also differed from the hypothesis that female offenders would be perceived as lesser than male offenders.

These findings also suggest that parents are more likely to think males will recidivate, harm worse than female abusers, and other thoughts alike. These perceptions can then cause social phenomenon such as moral panics, consensuses about a group that threatens social norms and changes the public's perceptions of sex offenders (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018). Because of these beliefs, it is important to know and be aware that females can sexually offend as well. When people are educated about female sexual offenders it can reduce the chances of abuse more than if people did not know about them at all. In some aspects, the results of this study compares and contrasts to earlier research studies and findings.

It is possible the participants who are parents have younger children and given that younger children are common victims in sexual abuse this likely affected their judgement. Another explanation for male offenders being perceived worse than female offenders is their larger prevalence and frequent depiction in the media (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018). Furthermore, high profile sex offender cases where men are the offenders such as Jeffrey Epstein, Jared Fogle, and R. Kelly could have influenced the gender bias in parents. While sensationalizing these cases can have real and negative effects, this could be avoided if researchers and professionals engaged with the media more such as on television, newspapers, and film industry (Willis et al., 2010). The implications of this study and others alike have the ability to make, contribute to, and strengthen social changes and bring awareness as evidenced with occurrences like the Me Too movement.

Other implications of sex offender research can impact education and social behaviors regarding sexual abusers (Harper, 2012). An example of such behavior is policy makers legislating sex offender laws based on a punishment paradigm versus a treatment paradigm (Meloy et al., 2013). This means that criminal justice officials such as judges, lawyers, or law enforcement will treat sex offenders more punitively instead of incorporating better correctional actions. In addition, perceptions of sex offenders can influence the way mental health professionals perceive them and jeopardize the relationship between the clinician and offender. Therefore, delivery of treatment can be ineffective if professionals do not have rapport with sex offenders similar to other clients (Sanghara and Wilson, 2006). Lastly, other behaviors are present in people with an openness to experience and agreeableness personalities. These individuals have more favorable attitudes towards sex offenders because they are more compassionate and optimistic (Olver and Barlow, 2010).

The result in which people held the same views about male and female sex offenders supports the “evil woman” hypothesis. This idea states that women who deviate from normal societal standards can be just as malicious as male offenders (Jewkes & Linnemann, 2018). Comparable studies have also looked at gender and crime from a patriarchal perspective and how male college students perceived rape and sex offenders (Lev-Wiesel, 2004). What differed from previous studies is that parents viewed male sexual offenders as worse than female sexual offenders. These comparisons allow us to see the way opinions vary among people and assess how people think of sex offenders.

The majority of sex offender research is conducted on males (Perrotta, 2020) or examining perceptions of male offenders individually. Given the current study also included perceptions of female sex offenders, we can start understanding the major differences in those perceptions. Overall, more work with and on perceived gender differences among sex offenders needs to be conducted for further implications and themes with a larger sample size. Research has shown that miscommunication and ignorance about sexual abuse may occur or certain types of offenders could be underestimated. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of male and female sex offenders among lay people and the hypothesis was not supported as male and female sexual abusers are viewed similarly. What was realized is that less favorable opinions about male sex offenders were held by parents compared to female sex offenders. Attitudes and judgements are powerful traits, and they could make or break a situation involving sex offenders especially depending on the offender’s gender.

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