DO PERCEPTIONS OF STATUTORY RAPE VARY BASED ON OFFENDER AND VICTIM PAIRINGS? TESTING THE EFFECTS OF RACE AND GENDER

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The stereotypical profile of a common sex offender (older, white, male stranger who targets a young, female victim) has been pervasive in the media portrayal of this group of offenders. In this study, we used a 2x2x2x2 factorial design vignette study to examine participants' (*n*=343) positive or negative perceptions of the offender/victim relationship, how severe the scenario was, whether or not the offender is likely to recidivate, and whether or not the minor victim had any responsibility for the statutory rape occurring. Participants read one of 16 fictional vignettes, which varied based on four characteristics of target: offender race (white vs. black), victim race (white vs. black), offender gender (male vs. female) and victim gender (male vs. female). This study examines the effects of those variable manipulations in relation to the above four dependent measures. Unexpected results showed participant sympathy toward black, male victims despite the common profile stating that white, female victims are more commonly targets. The results and policy implications are discussed.

Keywords: statutory rape, ANOVA, vignette research, stereotype research, sex offenders, factorial design

Adolescent development often involves sexual exploration and experimentation. Although this exploration can be healthy to some extent, the regulation of adolescent sexual activity can be problematic and difficult to oversee. One of the biggest issues when discussing adolescents and sexual behavior is their ability to give consent for sexual relationships with adults. Although not classified as a forcible offense, statutory rape laws prosecute any sexual behavior that "would be legal except for the age(s) of the individuals involved" (Chafflin, Chenoweth, & Letourneau, 2016, p. 27; Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2013. Statutory rape is an offense that can occur on a continuum based on how well the two parties know each other when the deviant sexual behavior occurs. Typically, there is a pre-existing relationship between the offender and the victim, but not always. In roughly 9% of

statutory rape offenses, there is no prior relationship of any kind between the offender and the victim (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005).

The sexual activity may not involve physical force between the involved parties, but due to the minor status of the younger party, consent cannot be given, which then allows for the older party to be prosecuted for a sexual offense against a minor. Although categorized as statutory rape, many states charge the adult defendant with sexual assault of a minor or explicit sexual conduct with a minor rather than calling the offense statutory rape (Norman-Eady, Reinhart, & Martino, 2003). Despite the criminalization of sexual activity between adults and minors, research suggests that "by the age of 18, between 50% and 60% of American teens have had sexual intercourse" (Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2013, p. 1918).

Researchers from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention suggest that the majority of statutory rape offenders are male (99%), with the majority of their victims being female (95%) (Troup-Leasure & Synder, 2005). In discussing the relationship between the offender and victim, 29% of statutory rape offenses occurred when the two parties were in a prior romantic relationship, and 62% of offenses occurred when the two parties were acquaintances (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). However, like most research on sexual crimes, there are longstanding concerns about the underreporting of offenses. This study examines participants' perceptions of statutory rape offenses by manipulating the offender and victim's race and gender. These conditions were chosen based on the common characteristics of registered sex offenders who engage in statutory rape offenses.

Statutory Rape, Age of Consent, and "Romeo and Juliet" Laws
Traditionally, society viewed statutory rape through the same gender-specific lens as forcible rape. Common law versions of statutory rape only allowed for an offense in which an adult male victimized a minor female (Cocca, 2004), citing concerns regarding teenage pregnancy and the vulnerability of the young girls involved in these relationships (Oberman, 1994). In addition, the discussion of statutory rape focused more on early adolescents rather than older teenagers, and earlier laws did not call for criminal prosecution of the adult party until the minor was as young as 10- or 12-years old (Chafflin et al., 2016; Cocca, 2004; Oberman, 1994). Currently, statutory rape laws have been amended, and the crime is prosecuted as a gender-neutral, strict liability offense given the minor's legal incapability to consent to sexual activity with an adult. Researchers suggest that there is "one statutory rape for every three forcible rapes involving a juvenile victim reported to law enforcement" (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005, p. 2).

Predominately, statutory rape offenses account for any type of oral, vaginal, or anal penetrative sexual act committed against a minor that does not involve any type of force, but is still illegal due to the age of the minor party. However, because many state laws do not differentiate between forcible and non-forcible sexual activity with a minor, it is difficult to identify the number of registered sex offenders who have committed statutory rape compared to forcible rape against a minor, simply based on the criminal statutes and the lack of differentiation between the two in the statutory code (Smith & Kercher, 2011).

Statutory rape offenders are typically considered low-risk offenders, but still are required to register with the state.

Many state laws focus on the age of the victim, the age of the offender, and the age gap between the two parties. Researchers suggest that a negative relationship exists between the age of female victims and male offenders; younger female victims are more likely to have sexual encounters with significantly older male offenders (Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2013). Currently, the age of consent ranges from 16 to 18 years of age, with the majority of states using 16 as the age of consent (Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2013).

One of the biggest concerns regarding statutory rape laws is the notion of teenage romance and the sudden illegality of behavior that was legal perhaps just one day prior to turning a certain age. Once a teenager turns 18 years old, his relationship with his 16-year-old girlfriend could be considered illegal, when the day before the same 17-year and 364-day old individual was legally permitted to engage in sexual behavior with his 16-year-old girlfriend. Many states have implemented age gap protections to account for these situations. These age gaps have been put in place to account for "sweetheart" exceptions (Mancini, 2013, p. 268), which are more commonly known as "Romeo and Juliet" clauses. For example, in Texas the age of consent is 17 for the older party, and the younger party can be as young as 14 years old without prosecution occurring – provided that the age gap between the two individuals does not exceed three years. Other states such as Maine and Hawaii allow for an age of consent of 16, with an age gap of no more than five years between the two parties (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2014). This suggests that a 16-year-old can have a sexual relationship with a 21-year-old without criminal ramifications.

These age gap provisions often protect young adults from a criminal conviction and from being required to register as a sex offender – a requirement that can be a lifetime provision in multiple states (Mancini, 2013). Furthermore, this type of conviction impacts employment and educational opportunities, affects relationships with family members, causes harassment from citizens, and requires offenders to abide by residency restrictions while under increased supervision from the state (Letourneau, Levenson, Bandyopadhyay, Sinha, & Armstrong, 2010; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Jennings, 2010; Tolson & Klein, 2015; Zgoba, Levenson, & McKee, 2008). Although statutory rape involves nonforcible sexual activity, minus the age prohibitions, it is often viewed as predatory in nature given the age gap that exists between the two parties. This study utilizes a large age gap of 24 years between the adult offender and minor victim in order to test the participants' views of the offense in terms of negative perceptions and the perceived severity of the offense.

Perceptions of Statutory Rape
Although sexual activity and social exploration are common features of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2006), there still are cultural expectations that minors should not be engaging in unprotected and risky sexual relationships (Cocca, 2004; Sahl & Keene, 2010). This includes having non-forcible sexual relationships with adults who are illegal due to the age of consent issue. The age of the victim and the offender, and the gender of both

individuals, are two of the most important factors when discussing statutory rape offenses. Although the offender's gender has not been shown to be an important factor in some studies (Broussard & Wagner, 1988), other research suggests that male offenders are perceived to be more harmful and inflict greater damage than female offenders (Fromouth & Holt, 2008; Fromouth, Mackey, & Wilson, 2010).

Although it is not appropriate to blame the victim for their role in being sexually assaulted, statutory rape is different in that the younger participant agrees to engage in the behavior with the older participant. However, when victim culpability is discussed, the question becomes whether the minor was responsible for initiating the sexual relationship (Font, 2013). This would infer that the minor was successful in seducing the older party, deceiving the older party about his or her age, or somehow blackmailing the older party, thus deflecting blame from the offender. Research suggests that victims are most commonly blamed in situations where there is a belief that they could have resisted the assault (Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984), or when they chose to continue the relationship after the acknowledgment of illegal relationship is made by parents, law enforcement, or school officials. Additionally, male participants viewed victims as having more culpability for their role in the offense compared to female participants (Font, 2013; Fromouth & Holt, 2008; Fromouth et al., 2010). The victim's age also plays a role in their perceived culpability; late teens are held more responsible for the offense than early adolescents who may not have the ability to resist the offender or comprehend the events that occurred (Font, 2013). We chose to test a vignette with a slightly older teenager (age 16) based on the concept that older juveniles are perceived to be more culpable than younger minors. This study examines participant perceptions as to whether they believe that the minor was at all responsible for the sexual relationship occurring.

Common Sex Offender Profile
Just as statutory rape laws vary across states, so do the laws surrounding the supervision of registrants on the sex offender registries. States vary in terms of the information presented to the public, how long sex offenders must register for, the types of offenses that are registration eligible, and how frequently they must re-register with law enforcement. Additionally, there are inconsistencies in regards to the classification of sex offenders on state registries. Some states classify offenders as either sexual offenders or predators (Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, and Wyoming), whereas other states use a three-tier system based on risk assessment ranging from low-risk (Tier I) to high-risk (Tier III) (Arizona, Texas, New York, and Virginia; Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011; Mancini, 2013). Given the variation of the sex offender registries across states, it is difficult to identify a common profile of sex offender demographic characteristics.

Currently there are more than 850,000 registered sex offenders in the United States (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2016). Ackerman and colleagues (2011) reviewed the state sex offender registries for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam and completed an offender profile based on the information provided on registered sex offenders. They found that that a national sex offender profile tends

to lean toward a white male, with a mean age of 44.3 years, who is not currently incarcerated, but who has committed an offense against a white, minor, female victim. The most commonly identified offense was classified as an "offense against a child" (55%). Based on the coding structure Ackerman and colleagues (2011) used, an offense against a child would contain two types of offenses: statutory rape or sexual assault of a minor; however, it is impossible to further analyze the statistic provided based on its presentation.

Based on this offender profile, this study set out to test how participants would perceive statutory rape scenarios when the common demographic characteristics of the offender and the victim were similar to, or differed from, those presented in the Ackerman et al. (2011) profile. The current study takes the manipulated conditions of the offender and victim's race and gender into account using a between-subjects factorial design that tests the severity of the offense, the negative perceptions of the offender, the likelihood of recidivism, and the culpability of the victim in the sexual relationship that occurred.

HYPOTHESES

Based on prior literature surrounding the common demographic features of sex offenders (Ackerman et al., 2011), we developed four sets of hypotheses to test the manipulated conditions of the factorial design. We sought to predict the main effects of the manipulated offender and victim races and genders based on offenses committed 1) by white offenders, 2) by male offenders, 3) against white victims and 4) against female victims. We measured the results based on *negative perceptions*, *severity*, *likelihood of recidivism*, and the *minor's responsibility for the sexual relationship*. These are all in comparison to the manipulated conditions of black offenders, female offenders, black victims, and male victims.

These hypotheses were derived from the most common offender and victim demographics – Ackerman et al. (2011) suggest that there is a higher frequency of white, male, adult offenders victimizing white, female, minor victims during sexual offenses. This then presents an intra-racial offense dynamic, which occurs most commonly. Furthermore, research suggests that male sex offenders are more likely to reoffend than female sex offenders for future sex offenses (Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010). Despite developing hypotheses based on the common offender and victim profiles, we are interested in exploring perceptions of same-sex and inter-race pairings. Next, we sought to test the participant's knowledge levels and whether or not the manipulated conditions would have an effect on their perceived knowledge. We chose not to hypothesize for the manipulated conditions, but instead simply sought to explore the manipulation effects of the different conditions. Finally, we anticipated that there would be some interaction effect between gender and race, but did not elect to propose a specific hypothesis. Instead, we desire to explore the interaction effects between the manipulated conditions.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were 343 undergraduate students enrolled in a large university in the Southeast. Although there are documented concerns regarding the generalizability of using college students in social science research (Peterson, 2001), they were specifically chosen for this project given their proximity to the issue of statutory rape in terms of age. Undergraduate students between the ages of 18-22 are only one to three years removed from being minors who legally would be affected by statutory rape crimes. It was important to use them as a sample as they would have been the state-recognized victim only a short while ago and currently could be prosecuted as the offender.

Recruitment occurred via the department's online Sociology and Criminology Participant Pool, through which students volunteered to participate in this online survey. The survey was administered through the Qualtrics Software Suite, and precautions were taken against ballot stuffing so that participants could not complete the survey more than once. Our sample received no monetary incentive for their participation; however, they were administered one research credit that could be applied to specific classes that required a research component. The majority of the participants were female (68.5%), White (72.6%), non-Hispanic (71.7%), with a mean age of 19 years old (27.1%).

Design and Materials

The study utilized 2 (offender race: black vs white) X 2 (offender gender: male vs female) X 2 (victim race: black vs white) X 2 (victim gender: male vs. female) between-subjects factorial design. Despite the majority of statutory rapists being male (99%) and the majority of victims being female (95%), it was important to manipulate the offender and victim gender due to the previously discussed perceptions of blame assigned to male victims and female perpetrators. The traditional male offender/female victim dynamic is viewed as predatory and harmful, but research suggests that there is more leniency when the gender roles are flipped. We also chose to manipulate the offender and victim race to test perceptions of inter- and intra-racial offending. Based on our sample size, this allows for roughly 21 participants per cell after manipulation checks.

Victimization stimulus. This study utilized a series of vignettes portraying a fictionalized statutory rape scenario. The vignettes changed accordingly based on the race and gender of both the offender and the victim. The offense type and description, official charges levied against the offender, and age of the two characters remained constant across vignettes, but the names of the characters, race of the offender and victim, and the gender of the offender and victim were manipulated accordingly. We chose to use a 16-year-old victim and a 40-year-old offender purposely because 16 is the age of consent for the majority of states. We did not want to use too young of a victim in order to eliminate any implication that the scenario was depicting child molestation. The 40-year-old offender was chosen because the age was well past the statutory age gaps and was not included in the Romeo and Juliet exclusions. In addition, as per the Ackerman et al. (2011) piece, the average age of registered sex offenders is roughly 44-years-old, which places our offender in line with

that estimate. Despite the fact that states do not use the term "statutory rape" to prosecute, we chose to use the term to eliminate any confusion over the classification of the offense.

The vignettes in this study were similar to cases used in prior studies (Austin, Plumm, Terrance, & Terrell, 2013; Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976). All of the cases began with a discussion of the offender and the victim's characteristics:

> Tom (Theresa) Jackson is a 40-year-old (black/white) (male/female) who was charged with statutory rape of a minor victim, named Christina (Christopher) Shepherd; a 16-year-old (black/white) (male/female).

The names of the characters differed based on gender, but they remained race-neutral. Since the vignette described a statutory rape offense, the researchers wanted to make it clear that there was a consensual relationship occurring and that no force was used by the offender in the commission of the offense. The case account continues with the beginnings of the relationship:

> Tom met Christina when his wife (husband), Sarah (Sam) hired Christina to baby-sit for couple's two young sons. At first, no sexual relationship existed between these two individuals. One night, Tom and Sarah hired Christina to baby-sit while the couple went out to dinner. Mid-meal, Sarah got called into work, leaving Tom to go back to the house alone. That night, Tom struck up a conversation with Christina. Over the next few weeks, their conversations escalated and eventually the two began having sexual intercourse. For a period of roughly six months, Tom and Christina would meet to have sex whenever they had the opportunity.

We chose to keep a limited description of the sexual activity because it was deemed consensual within the vignette itself, except for the age of the victim. The offense remained consistent across the vignettes, and the importance rested in the idea that activity occurred within the context of a relationship. The vignette then ended with a discussion of how the sexual relationship was discovered and subsequently prosecuted by authorities. Participants were told of the conditions surrounding the offender's arrest, and the charges presented by law enforcement.

> Christina's mother, Elaine, found her cell phone and saw explicit messages sent between her daughter and Tom. Elaine called the police and reported the situation to law enforcement. After a thorough investigation, the local police arrested Tom and charged him with statutory rape. Tom had no prior record, was employed full time, and lived in at home with his wife and two children at the time of his arrest.

We acknowledge that the majority of statutory rape offenses involving a significantly older offender are perceived to be predatory based on the manipulation and "grooming" behaviors of the offender. This study does not test perceptions of "grooming," which is why it was not discussed within the vignette. Based on the manipulations present in the

factorial design, vignettes presented inter- and intra-racial relationships, as well as opposite and same-sex relationships. Participants were randomly assigned only one of the possible 16 conditions derived from the 2x2x2x2 between-subjects factorial design.

Manipulation checkpoints. There were four manipulation checkpoints built into the study which asked participants to correctly identify the victim and offender's age, gender, and race as those were the manipulated variables. Of the original 423 participants who took the survey, 80 participants (19% of the original total) did not pass the manipulation checkpoints, which left 343 participants in the final sample.

Dependent Measures

The current study used four dependent measures to complete ANOVAs comparing the manipulated conditions of offender and victim race and gender.

Negative perceptions of sex offender scale. Participants were asked six questions regarding their perceptions of sex offenders – whether they were positive or negative in nature. Each item was measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The participants were asked about the following items: 1) The adult in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offender; 2) The sexual activity that took place in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offense; 3) I believe that the adult in this scenario is dangerous; 4) I believe that this adult poses a threat to their own children; 5) I believe this sexual relationship will have lasting emotional/psychological damage to the minor involved in this scenario; and 6) I believe that this offense was very harmful to the minor involved in this scenario. Factor analysis showed that all six measures loaded on the same factor and reliability analyses confirmed that the reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.865$ for these six measures. These items were then combined into a summated rating scale to be used as a dependent measure. The formation of this scale can be found in the appendix of this paper.

Severity of the offense. Participants also were asked to rate the severity of the offense in relation to the amount of harm that they believed occurred. For this measure, we used a five-point Likert Scale with response options ranging from not very severe (1) to very severe (5).

Likelihood of recidivism. In addition, we included a measure about the perceived likelihood of recidivism for the offender in the scenario. This measure asked participants whether they believe that the adult in this scenario would commit this act again given the chance. This measure used a five-point Likert Scale with response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Minor's responsibility. Furthermore, we asked participants whether or not they believed the minor is just as responsible for the sexual situation as the adult is. This item was measured using a five-point Likert Scale with response options ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Testing Victim and Offender Knowledge. In our final two dependent measures, we asked participants two sets of questions addressing their knowledge regarding the most common victim and offender profiles. These profiles were generated based on the Ackerman et al. (2011) piece and used six and seven questions respectively.

For the victim profile, participants were asked to identify the most common victim gender (female); age demographic (younger than 17); race (White); ethnicity (non-Hispanic); type of relationship with their offender (pre-existing in either a romantic or acquaintance relationship); and most common type of offense (physical, non-consensual act). These six measures were dichotomized into incorrect (0) and correct (1) response options. After being dichotomized, we created a count variable with participant scores ranging from 0 (all incorrect) to 6 (all correct). Higher scores indicate more accurate knowledge regarding the most common victim profile. In looking at the count variable, 133 participants (38.8%) correctly identified five of the six victim profile questions.

For the offender profile, participants were asked to identify the most common offender gender (male); age demographic (44.4 years of age); race (White); ethnicity (non-Hispanic); type of relationship with their victim (pre-existing in either a romantic or acquaintance relationship); most common type of victim (female post-pubescent minor); and most common type of offense (physical, non-consensual act). These seven measures were treated identically to the victim measures in terms of being dichotomized and transformed into a count variable, ranging from 0 (all incorrect) to 7 (all correct) for analysis. Once again, the majority of participants (*n* = 150, 43.7%) correctly identified five of the seven offender profile measures.

RESULTS

Analytic Plan

In order to test the 2x2x2x2 between-subject factorial design, several sets of analyses of variance (ANOVA) were run testing the different conditions presented in the vignettes. Before completing the ANOVAs, the data were checked for outliers and normal distribution. There were no outliers, and the data was normally distributed for each of the conditions, allowing us to continue with this methodological plan. Four, 2x2x2x2 ANOVAs were completed examining participants 1) negative perceptions of sex offenders; 2) perceived severity of the offense; 3) likelihood of recidivism; and 4) perceived minor's responsibility.
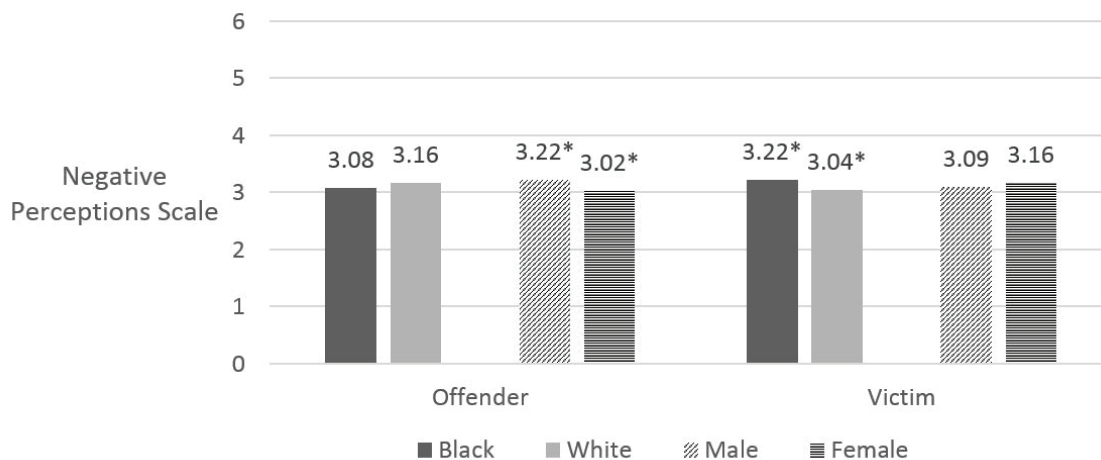
Negative Perceptions of Sex Offenders

A 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA was conducted on the participants' negative perceptions of sex offenders. Our hypotheses suggested that scenarios with white offenders, male offenders, white victims, and female victims would all be viewed more negatively than in those scenarios that had the other manipulated conditions.

In terms of victim race, participants had more negative views of the offender when presented with a black victim (*M* = 3.22; *SD* = .83) compared to a white victim (*M* =

3.03; SD = .84); (F(1, 342 = 4.038, p = .045). Additionally, those participants who were presented with a male offender (M = 3.22; SD = .85) had more negative perceptions of the offender compared to those who were presented with a female offender (M = 3.02; SD = .82); (F(1, 342 = 4.872, p = .028). The main effects of offender race and victim gender on the negative perceptions of sex offenders' scale were non-significant. These results only partially supported our hypothesis as victim race was a significant predictor, but not in the direction we anticipated. However, offender gender was also a significant predictor with male offenders viewed more negatively than female offenders.

No post-hoc tests were completed as there were only two conditions given in each ANOVA test – this is true for all other ANOVA tests in this study. There were no significant interaction effects between offender race and victim race, and the other manipulation conditions. In testing for interactions, a significant interaction took place between offender gender and victim gender in regard to the negative perceptions scale (F(1, 342) = 9.656, p = .002). Simple effects testing of the offender gender condition, when looking at the manipulated victim genders, revealed that participants viewed male offenders with male victims (M = 3.29, SD = .813) the most negatively compared to other manipulated conditions. No additional significant interactions occurred. Figure 1 shows the significant effects of the manipulated conditions on the negative perceptions of sex offenders' scale.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
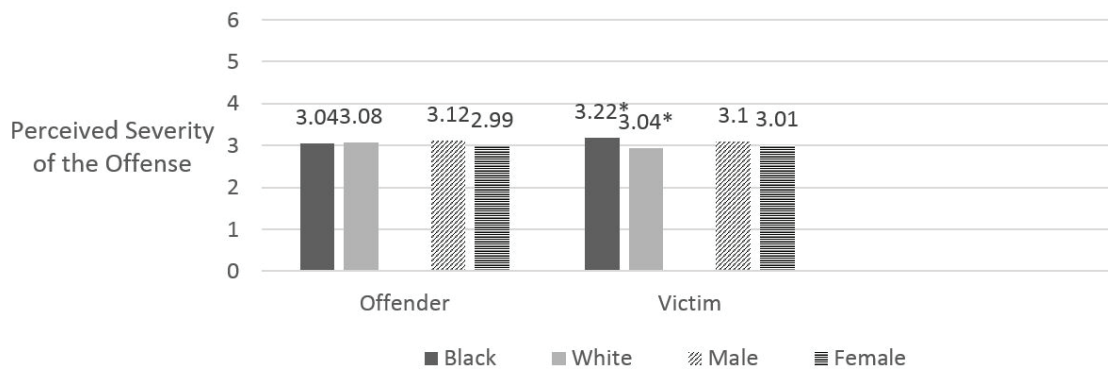*Figure 1.* Main effects of offender and victim race and gender on the negative perceptions scale.

Perceived Severity of the Offense

A 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA was conducted on the participants' perceived severity of the sex offense. Our hypotheses suggested that scenarios with white offenders, male offenders, white victims, and female victims would be perceived as more severe than those scenarios with the opposite manipulated conditions. In terms of victim race, participants perceived the sex offense to be more severe in when presented with a black victim (M = 3.19; SD = 1.04) compared

to a white victim (M = 2.94; SD = 1.07); (F(1, 342 = 4.800, p = .029). The main effects of offender race, offender gender and victim gender on the perceived severity of the sex offense were non-significant. The hypothesis for perceived severity was not supported as victim race was the only significant condition. But the relationship was not significant in the predicted direction as offenses committed against black victims were perceived to be more severe than offenses committed against white victims.

In testing for interactions, a significant interaction took place between offender race and victim race in regard to the perceived severity of the offense (F(1, 342) = 5.078, p = .025). Simple effects testing of offender race on the manipulated victim race revealed that participants believed that scenarios with white offenders and black victims were the most severe (M = 1.928; SD = .061). No additional significant interactions occurred. Figure 2 shows the results for the ANOVAs conducted testing the effects of offender gender, victim gender, offender race, and victim on severity of the offense.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001
Figure 2. Main effect of offender and victim gender and race on perceived severity.

Likelihood of Recidivism
A 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA was conducted on the participants' perception that the offender was likely to re-cidivate. Our hypotheses suggested that scenarios with white offenders, male offenders, white victims, and female victims would all be viewed as having a higher likelihood of of-fender recidivism than those scenarios that had the other manipulated conditions. Overall, there were no significant differences based on the manipulated conditions in terms of the participants' perceptions regarding the likelihood of recidivism. Therefore, this hypothesis was not supported at all.

However, in testing for interactions, a significant interaction took place between offender race, victim race, and offender gender in regard to the likelihood of recidivism measure (F(1, 342) = 4.665, p = .031). An examination of the simple effects of offender race, when looking at the manipulated victim race and offender gender, revealed that par-ticipants believed that white male offenders with black victims (M = 4.04; SD = .759) were

perceived at the most likely to recidivate compared to other manipulated conditions. No additional significant interactions occurred.

Minor Responsibility

A 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA- was conducted on the participants' perception that the minor (victim) was responsible for their role in the victimization. Our hypotheses suggested that participants who received scenarios with white offenders, male offenders, white victims, and female victims would place more blame on the minors in those scenarios than had the other manipulated conditions. There were no significant differences based on the manipulated conditions in terms of the participants' perceptions regarding the minor's responsibility. Therefore, the hypothesis for this outcome of interest was not supported. Furthermore, there were no significant interactions for this outcome measure.

Testing Victim Knowledge

A 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA was conducted on the participants' knowledge regarding the most common victim characteristics as per the Ackerman et al. (2011) profile. There were no hypotheses for this outcome of interest as we chose to explore the effects of the manipulated conditions on testing victim knowledge. In examining the effects of victim race, participants identified a more accurate victim profile when presented with a white victim ($M = 4.71$; $SD = 1.06$) compared to a black victim ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 1.15$); ($F(1, 342 = 6.845, p = .009$). The main effects of offender race, offender gender, and victim gender on the participants' knowledge regarding the most common victim profile were non-significant. Furthermore, there were no significant interactions for this outcome measure.

Testing Offender Knowledge

Finally, one last 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (offender race) x 2 (victim race) ANOVA- was conducted on the participants' knowledge regarding the most common offender characteristics as presented in the Ackerman et al. (2011) profile. Like victim knowledge, there were no hypotheses for this outcome of interest as we chose to explore the effects of the manipulated conditions on testing offender knowledge. There were no significant differences based on the manipulated conditions in terms of the participants' knowledge regarding the most common offender profile. Furthermore, there were no significant interactions for this outcome measure.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the effects of race and gender of both the offender and the victim as presented in manipulated vignettes depicting a statutory rape scenario involving a 40-year-old offender and a 16-year-old victim. The study focused on six dependent measures: negative perceptions toward sex offenders, perceived severity of the statutory rape, likelihood of recidivism, the minor's responsibility for their role in the sexual activity, the participants' knowledge about the victim, and their knowledge about the offender.

From those dependent variables, we tested one master hypothesis focusing on the manipulated conditions of the 2 (offender race: black x white) x 2 (victim race: black x white) x 2 (offender gender: male x female) x 2 (victim gender: male x female) factorial design.

Our hypothesis was largely unsupported as offender race was non-significant for all dependent variables; victim race was significant for negative perceptions, severity of the offense, and victim knowledge; offender gender was only significant for negative perceptions; and victim gender was non-significant for all dependent variables. Victim race was the most commonly, significant, manipulated condition, but for negative perceptions and severity of the offense, it was significant in the opposite direction compared to what was hypothesized.

In some instances, the results were expected based on prior literature. As shown in their review of the literature, Ackerman and colleagues (2011) produced a sex offender profile in which white, male, adult offenders with white, female, minor victims are most frequently on the registry for sexual offenses committed against minors. But as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, participants viewed scenarios with black victims as being more negative and more severe than those scenarios with white victims. These findings contradict what we anticipated to occur based on the most common offenses committed. Furthermore, there was one significant interaction occurring for the dependent measure of perceived severity – offender race x victim race. Looking at the effects of the interactions, this suggests that white offenders who committed offenses against black victims were perceived to be the most severe. Based on this review of the sex offender registry and of the stereotypes surrounding sex offenders, we did not anticipate that the results would suggest that participants were more cognizant of inter-racial offenses compared to intra-racial ones.

These findings are especially interesting as the majority of our participants are young, white women; statistically, they are the most likely to be victimized. Yet, they are not identifying with scenarios that present victims of their own gender or race. Instead, they are suggesting that the scenarios with victims of a different race and a different gender are more severe in nature than those with white, female victims. This may be because these offenses do not fit the stereotype of what commonly occurs, thus startling the participants into recognition of the severity of the crime. Because it violates the statistical norm, it is shocking to the participant and that individual is more cognizant of the harm that occurs.

Due to these findings, we explored whether or not an interaction between participant race and the condition of victim race had occurred. However, there was no significant interaction occurring between the two. Furthermore, we presented both heterosexual and homosexual relationships in the vignettes, but there was limited significance in terms of gender effects for the different ANOVAs we examined. This suggests that the sexuality of the parties in the vignettes – being heterosexual or homosexual – did not matter in terms of the severity of the offense to participants. This unanticipated finding needs more exploration in order to determine why these results are occurring.

Limitations

In our study, participants were randomly assigned to one vignette that discussed a sexual relationship between an adult offender and a minor victim; legally this meets the qualifications for statutory rape. Although the relationship was non-forcible in nature, the offender was charged with statutory rape due to the minor's legal inability to provide consent. However, we did not imply that the offender was ever found guilty of a sex crime; simply that he or she was charged with statutory rape. One limitation rests in the description of the offense and the crime for which the individual was charged. We purposely chose not to manipulate the offense type, or to discuss the details of the sexual activity beyond stating that the two engaged in sexual intercourse. Statutory rape does not have the same strong connotation that forcible rape has. We wanted participants to be aware that illegal, but voluntary, sexual intercourse occurred without creating potential bias by including too detailed a description of the offense since the focus was meant to be on the manipulated conditions. However, future research would benefit from a manipulation of the offense category to include non-contact and contact offenses, which vary in the amount of force used against the victim. Additionally, the age of the victim and the age of the offender also could be manipulated to determine perceptions related to the age-gap between the two individuals.

Our second limitation rests with the sample that was used. Although we purposely used undergraduate students, the sample ended up being majority white, female, young adults. This gender and racial demographic group is the most likely to be the victim of a sexual offense (Ackerman et al., 2011). Furthermore, with a mean age of nearly 20 years old, they are only four years removed from being age-eligible for this type of offense occurring in certain states. Having a homogeneous sample like this one presents problems in terms of perception. Therefore, heterogeneous samples of participants who are not college students may provide different results.

Conclusions

The results of this study showed some similarities to prior research but also differed in some significant areas. Overall, there was no perceived victim culpability or responsibility for the fictional minors presented in this study. This finding may be due to the large age gap presented between the offender and the victim. Participants may have felt as though the offender is the only one responsible for the sexual activity given that he/she was 24-years older than the 16-year-old victim and exhibited behaviors consistent with "grooming." Therefore, safeguards like the "Romeo and Juliet" clauses would not apply in this case. Male offenders were perceived more negatively than female offenders – this was consistent with prior literature that suggests similar findings. Furthermore, this indicates that participants were cognizant of the most common gender profile for registered sex offenders. This was further supported given the high accuracy displayed by the two knowledge index variables, which tested the participants' knowledge of the common victim and offender profiles developed from the Ackerman et al. (2001) piece. This may also be due to the notion that participants perceive all statutory rape scenarios in a negative and severe light, rather than viewing female victims as being harmed more than male victims or vice versa.

The most surprising finding from this research was the empathy toward black victims over white victims, given that most sex offenses in general – and statutory rape more specifically – involves a white victim. Given our largely white sample, it was even more unexpected that the participants were not identifying with victims of their own racial group. However, the racial findings may be due in part to the current social and political climate surrounding crimes involving white offenders and black victims. Further research is needed to investigate this inter-racial result.

The results of this study help us to further understand the participants' perceptions toward statutory rape and the perceived severity of these offenses. While it is culturally acceptable that young people will be sexually experimenting at some point during their development into young adults, there is still societal rejection of inappropriate and illegal sexual relationships taking place between minors and adults. These findings reiterate that there is some leeway allowed when the two parties are closer in age, but there is no sympathy when a larger age gap exists. Although the scenario described the sexual relationship as being non-forcible, participants still felt as though the older individual was victimizing the younger party and should be prosecuted for his or her crimes.

These results suggest that statutory rape is still a highly stigmatized event – especially when there is a considerable age gap between the participants. Given the age gap in this study, the offender would be ineligible for the age gap protections present in many states. These results suggest that participants are not viewing all sex offenders the same and therefore should not be prosecuted the same way given the circumstances surrounding the otherwise consensual relationship. We conclude in stating that the sex offender registry is reflective of a common offender profile, but even within that profile there is still room for interpretation and nuance among offender categories. Similarly, criminal policies surrounding the sex offender registry should be reflective of this nuance as well, instead of introducing net-widening reforms that categorize all sex offenders as the same individual.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Correlation Matrix for All Dependent Variables

The following table shows the bivariate correlations of all the dependent variables used in the ANOVAs for the study. All but two of the dependent variables, knowledge of victim profile and knowledge of offender profile, were not correlated. By having un-correlated dependent variables, this suggests that the use of ANOVAs are appropriate. If the majority of the dependent variables had been significantly correlated, then the use of MANOVAs would have been more appropriate for this dataset.

Table 1. *Correlation Matrix of all Dependent Variables Used in ANOVAs*

			1	2	3	4	5	6
Negative Perceptions (1)	M = 3.12 SD = .84	Correlation	1					
		Sig. 2-tailed						
		N	343					
Severity of Offense (2)	M = 3.06 SD = 1.06	Correlation	.014	1				
		Sig. 2-tailed	.773					
		N	343	343				
Likely Recidivism (3)	M = 3.62 SD = .80	Correlation	.018	.037	1			
		Sig. 2-tailed	.704	.444				
		N	343	343	343			
Minor Responsibility (4)	M = 3.44 SD = 1.12	Correlation	-.032	-.020	-.060	1		
		Sig. 2-tailed	.512	.681	.458			
		N	343	343	343	343		
Knowledge Victim (5)	M = 4.56 SD = 1.11	Correlation	-.075	-.031	-.001	.024	1	
		Sig. 2-tailed	.117	.522	.977	.667		
		N	343	343	343	343	343	
Knowledge Offender (6)	M = 4.79 SD = .95	Correlation	.007	.016	-.008	.025	.424**	1
		Sig. 2-tailed	.886	.742	.870	.607	.000	
		N	343	343	343	343	343	343

Note: *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Appendix B. Creation of Negative Perceptions of Sex Offenders Scale

One of the dependent variables – negative perceptions of sex offenders – was utilized through the creation of a new scale, unique to this data set. Participants were asked six questions regarding their perceptions of sex offenders – whether they were positive or negative in nature. Each item was measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Higher scores indicate more negative perceptions of sex offenders for that measure.

The participants were asked the following items: 1) The adult in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offender; 2) The sexual activity that took place in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offense; 3) I believe that the adult in this scenario is dangerous; 4) I believe that this adult poses a threat to their own children; 5) I believe this sexual relationship will have lasting emotional/psychological damage to the minor involved in this scenario; and 6) I believe that this offense was very harmful to the minor involved in this scenario.

A factor analysis was conducted and all measures loaded onto the same component with a factor loading of .705 or higher. Table 2 shows the component matrix derived from the factor analysis and the corresponding factor loadings for the six measures.

Table 2. *Factor Analysis for Negative Perceptions of Sex Offenders Scale*

Measures	Factor Loadings
The adult in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offender.	.797
The sexual activity that took place in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offense.	.796
I believe that the adult in this scenario is dangerous.	.787
I believe that this adult poses a threat to their own children.	.705
I believe this sexual relationship will have lasting emotional/psychological damage to the minor involved in this scenario.	.732
I believe that this offense was very harmful to the minor involved in this scenario.	.837

Based on the confirmation of the measures through the factor analysis, the above six items were then scaled. This occurred through the creation of a new measure; the response options of the sex measures were added together, and the totals were then divided by six. Reliability analysis of the newly formed scale was $\alpha = 0.865$ for these six measures, confirming that the scale is reliable and suitable to use in the remaining analyses of the paper.