

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

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The purpose of this study is to explore gender differences in adult perceptions of sexual abuse encounters between an adult male and children of both genders and of various ages. Subjects were four hundred and fifty three students from a northwestern university. They were recruited from a lower-level human development course and from introductory courses in the arts and humanities department. One hundred and seventy-nine males and 274 females participated in the study. Participants were randomly given one of four vignettes that contained a scenario describing an "ambiguous" sexual encounter between a neighbor man and a child. The age of the child (5 or 13) and the child's gender differed between the scenarios. Results showed that female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to perceive that the encounter was serious in nature ($p = .022$) and to expect the child in the scenario to be negatively impacted by the encounter ($p = .001$). Other results indicated that female respondents perceived the encounter with the older child, regardless of the child's gender, as more serious in nature ($p = .008$) and would have more

negative outcomes ($p = .002$) than the encounter with the younger child.

Male respondents also perceived that the encounter with the older child

would have more negative outcomes for the child ($p = .003$) than the

encounter with the younger child. Gender of child in the scenario was not

predictive of perceived seriousness of the encounter nor of the negative

impact of the encounter for either male or female respondents. Conclusions

and implications are discussed.

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Gender Differences in the Perceptions of Sexual Abuse

by

Eric W. Sandras

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

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Eric W. Sandras, Author

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Finally, my parents deserve a lot of credit. They have taught me the value of education and perseverance. I hope to model the type of love and commitment they have shown me to my own children.

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DEDICATION

To my precious daughter, Dakota Jasmine,
and my wonderful son, Carter William.

Remember: Education is valuable, experience is priceless,
and wisdom is God given.

Proverbs 3:13.

Gender Differences in the Perceptions of Sexual Abuse

INTRODUCTION

Statement of purpose

This study examines differences between adult males and females in their perceptions of an ambiguous sexual encounter between an adult and a child. Its purpose is to ferret out possible factors that may influence adult judgment toward the perceived impact of sexual abuse on children. Previous research has found that factors such as the gender of the adult, whether the adult has a previous history of being sexually abused, the age of the child reporting the abuse, and numerous other factors all influence the perceived credibility of a child's allegations of abuse. With so much riding on each decision a teacher, social worker, parent, or any other adult makes around abuse situations, research like this is not only of heuristic value, it can also be life saving.

In a report to Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services, a federal advisory panel declared that abuse and neglect of children by their parents and other significant adults now constitutes a national emergency in the United States (Advisory Board of Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990). According to the report, more than 2 million children are starved and abandoned, burned and severely beaten, raped and sodomized, berated and belittled annually in the United States. Of course, even with the sharp increase in public awareness and the mobilization of

policy makers, researchers, and social workers, most know the problem itself is not new. As a country, we have been cycling through periods of awareness and suppression of the problem for nearly a century and a half (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993). In addition, most Human Development text books explain the phenomenon of child abuse as dating back to at least the Roman practice of infanticide.

In the present, research on child abuse is critical to insure that our social system reacts in the most efficient and unbiased manner possible. In most states, children services division workers have become the primary investigators into child abuse allegations. They play the key role in determining the outcome of most abuse allegations. Thus, they have to constantly balance the risks of unwarranted intervention against the dangers of leaving a child in a unsafe home. Couple this dilemma with the expectation that they remain objective in their decisions and not be swayed by too much emotion or other biases, and it becomes evident that the requirements of such a job can be overwhelming to say the least. Thus, the need exists for empirical research that examines what factors influence the decision making processes of the individuals in such crucial fields of human service.

Prevalence of child maltreatment

Nobody knows the true prevalence of child maltreatment, since it usually occurs behind closed doors, with the caregiver unwilling, and the

child unable, to acknowledge it. There are, however, four methods commonly used to estimate its prevalence: official reports, professional surveys, general surveys, and retrospective accounts (Cole, Cole, & Boies, 1993). These methods have yielded quite different results, as can be seen by comparing estimates of maltreatment in the United States derived from each method.

The simplest method is to count the number of complaints received by official agencies. In 1985, about 2 million reports were logged in the United States, which represents a reporting rate of one in every thirty children, double that of ten years before (Cole, Cole, & Boies, 1993). Tallying complaints is probably the least accurate method of estimating the incidence of maltreatment. Many instances are not reported, others are reported more than once, and of those that are reported, only about a third are substantiated, sometimes because the report was completely false, but more often because the seriousness of the offense was insufficient to warrant an official recognition (Finkelhor, 1992). Further, maltreatment reporting rates are notoriously subject to the public's awareness of the problem and to varying laws and customs regarding the designation of maltreatment and the necessity of reporting it (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993). Thus, the dramatic increase in reported cases of child maltreatment cited above may actually reflect increased reporting more than increased frequency of maltreatment. A better method of estimating maltreatment is to ask all the trained professionals: judges, probation officers, police, doctors,

nurses, teachers, day-care workers, child-welfare agents, etc. in representative communities to name every child they are sure has been maltreated, and then extrapolate the results to the nation as a whole. This approach, taken by the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, produced the following results:

Table 1

Incidence of Child Maltreatment Known to Professionals
per 100 Children: United States, 1986

Rate of Abuse (overall)	1.07
Physical	0.57
Sexual	0.25
Emotional	0.34
Rate of Neglect (overall)	1.59
Physical	0.91
Educational	0.46
Emotional	0.35
Overall Rate	2.52

Totals of sub-categories exceed the overall rate because about 10 percent of the children were known to have experienced more than one type of maltreatment. *Source:* National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect, 1988.

These results indicate that about 1 child in 40 (almost 1.5 million) was known to suffer maltreatment of some kind in 1986, with sexual abuse affecting about 1 child in 400 (NCCAN, 1988).

A third method is to ask caregivers, confidentially, about their behavior with their children. One study that used this approach conducted a telephone survey of more than 3,000 representative American families from all fifty states (Straus & Gelles, 1986). If a surveyed family had two parents or several children, only one parent was asked about his or her behavior with one child, in order to get an accurate incidence rate per caregiver and child rather than per family. The results suggested that about 1 child in 40 was abused very violently (kicked, beaten, burned, cut with a knife, and/or shot at); a much higher figure than the estimate derived from cases of physical abuse known to professionals. Even so, this figure is most likely an underestimate. Not only would some caregivers report less violence than they actually committed, but as indicated, they were not asked about their abuse of other children in the household or about abuse by other family members. In addition, parents who refused to answer questions or who were without telephones were, obviously, not part of the study. Since being without a telephone is a sign of both poverty and social isolation, the latter group especially represents an important missing segment of the population most at risk. Moreover, while this method may be fairly accurate for most forms of physical punishment, it cannot validly assess sexual abuse, which most perpetrators are ashamed of and secretive about.

Finally, a fourth method, asking adults if they have ever been abused or neglected, leads to the highest incidence statistics of all. For

example, in one study of families, 30 percent of the fathers and 17 percent of the mothers reported having been regularly hit with a belt, paddle, or other object by their parents when they were about age 12 (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1991). This rate well exceeds the 11 percent rate of hitting acknowledged by parents in the phone survey by Straus & Gelles (1986). The discrepancy between the rates of maltreatment reflected in self-reports and those from any other source is particularly apparent with regard to sexual abuse, where even the **lowest** rates of childhood abuse recalled by adults are more than twenty times the rates reported or known to professionals (Peters, Wyatt, & Finkelhor, 1986).

Among the reasons that this last method produces notably higher abuse rates is that it accounts for victims whose cases never came to official attention and helps compensate for the unwillingness of some parents to be candid about their maltreatment of their own children. Another important reason is that the retrospective survey usually asks about a person's entire childhood, while the other techniques usually focus on a single year. At the same time, however, the higher retrospective rates could reflect a higher actual rate of abuse in previous generations, as suggested by many studies that find maltreatment decreasing (Besharov, 1992; Gelles, 1987; Simmons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Wu, 1991). In addition, some adults may have distorted or exaggerated memories of their mistreatments in childhood.

Thus, each method of estimating maltreatment has its drawbacks. Each reflects a part of the picture, and therefore each has some validity and purpose, but none is completely accurate. Nevertheless, taken together, they make it starkly clear that child maltreatment is a common and serious problem facing today's children.

Childhood Sexual Abuse

Many view sexual abuse as among the most heinous of crimes. Children who are sexually maltreated often suffer social and emotional problems that impair their development and persist into adulthood, affecting their self-esteem and their ability to form intimate relationships (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993). As demonstrated above, no one knows how many children are sexually abused. It seems that the number of reported cases, some 45,000 annually, may represent the tip of the iceberg (Finkelhor, 1986). The state of Oregon reported 2,737 children being sexually abused in 1989 (Children's Services Division, Oregon, 1992). Clearly, child sexual abuse is an underreported problem. Although most sexually abused children are girls (Cappelleri, Eckenrode, & Powers, 1993; Knudsen, 1991) one quarter to one third are boys (Cappelleri, et. al, 1993; Finkelhor, 1990). Other researchers estimate that the prevalence of sexual abuse among boys ranges from 4 to 16 percent (Janus & Janus, 1991; Walker, Bonner, & Kaufman, 1988; Kohn, 1987). As demonstrated earlier, the breadth of these numbers is mainly a reflection of the data gathering

technique used. Whatever the actual prevalence, sexual abuse cuts across all gender, racial, ethnic, and economic boundaries (Cappelleri, et al. 1993; Walker, et al., 1988).

Sexual abuse of children may range from exhibitionism, kissing, fondling, and sexual touching to oral and anal intercourse and, in the case of girls, vaginal intercourse (Knudsen, 1991). By definition, any form of sexual contact between an adult and child is abusive, even if force or physical threat is not used, since children are deemed incapable of voluntarily consenting to sexual activity with adults (Children's Services Division, Oregon, 1992).

Children from stable, middle-class families appear to be generally at lower risk of encountering sexual abuse than children from poorer, less cohesive families (Finkelhor, 1986). In most cases, children who are sexually abused are not accosted by the proverbial stranger lurking in the school yard. In 75 to 80 percent of cases, molesters are people who are close to them: relatives, step-relatives, family friends, and neighbors (Lauman, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994; Waterman & Lusk, 1986). Estimates of the percentage of sexually molested children who are abused by family members have ranged from 10 to 50 percent of cases (Waterman & Lusk, 1986).

Typically, the child victim of sexual abuse initially trusts the abuser. Physical force is seldom needed to gain compliance, largely because of the child's helplessness, gullibility, and submission to adult authority. Whereas

most children who are sexually abused by strangers are abused only once, those who are abused by family members are more likely to suffer repeated acts of abuse (CSD, Oregon, 1992; Briere & Runtz, 1987). Genital fondling is the most common type of abuse of both boys and girls (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Knudsen, 1991). In Knudsen's (1991) retrospective study, it was found that of the total number of women who had been abused in childhood, most of the contacts involved genital fondling (38% of the cases) or exhibitionism (20% of the cases). Intercourse occurred in only 4 percent of cases.

Abused children rarely report the abuse, often because of fear of retaliation from the abuser or because they believe they will be blamed for it. Adults may suspect abuse if a child shows sudden personality changes or develops fears, problems in school, eating problems, and sleeping difficulties. As well, a pediatrician may discover physical signs of abuse during a medical exam (CSD, Oregon, 1992).

The average age at which most children are first sexually abused ranges from 6 to 12 years for girls and 7 to 10 years for boys (Knudsen, 1991). Children 3 to 17 show a much higher incidence of sexual abuse than children 0 to 2, though each age between 3 to 17 have about equal incidence (2-3 per 1000) (Cappelleri, Eckenrode, & Powers, 1993). Boys are relatively more likely to be abused in public places and by strangers and non-family members, and are more likely to be threatened and physically injured during the incident (Faller, 1989).

Research has shown that the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of child sexual maltreatment of both boys and girls are males (MacMurray, 1989). Experts estimate that men account for nearly 95 percent of the abusers of young girls and 80 percent of the abusers of young boys (Finklerhor & Russell, 1984). Contrary to the assumptions that some people hold, gay males and lesbians account for but a small percentage of abusers (Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1996).

Although the great majority of sexual abusers are male, the number of female sexual abusers may be greater than has been generally believed (Banning, 1989). Many female sexual abusers may go undetected because society allows women much more freedom in physical contact with children than it does men. A woman who fondles a child might be seen as affectionate, or at worst seductive, whereas a man would be more likely to be perceived as a child molester (Banning, 1989).

Despite the heuristic interest in women as abusers, the overwhelming number of perpetrators are men. Banning (1989) suggests that males in our culture are socialized into seeking partners who are younger and weaker than they, partners whom they can easily dominate. This pattern of socialization may take the extreme form of sexual interest in child and adolescent girls, who, because of their age and gender, are more easily dominated than adult women. Yet sexual interest in children may also be motivated by unusual patterns of sexual arousal, in which children

become the objects of sexual desire, sometimes to the exclusion of more appropriate (adult) stimuli, a condition commonly known as pedophilia.

Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The consensus among professionals today is that children's reports of sexual abuse are typically true (O'Donohue, Elliot, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1992). As well, few would argue against the potentially devastating effects of such abuse on a developing child. Child sexual abuse often inflicts great psychological, social, and physical harm on children. Children who are sexually abused may suffer from a litany of short and long-term psychological problems. Research shows these problems to include anger, depression, anxiety, eating disorders, inappropriate sexual behavior, aggressive behavior, self-destructive behavior, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, sexual dysfunction, mistrust of others, and feelings of detachment (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, DaCosta, & Akman, 1991; Finkelhor, 1990; McLaren & Brown, 1989).

Abused children commonly "act out", displaying aggressive or antisocial behavior, throwing tantrums, exhibiting nightmares, and, in older children, struggling with substance abuse (Finkelhor, 1990; McLaren & Brown, 1989). As well, regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking, fear of the dark, and fear of strangers are also common.

Research generally has found more similarities than differences between the genders with respect to the effects of sexual abuse (Jackson & Nuttall, 1994; Zellman & Bell, 1988). For example, both boys and girls tend to suffer fears and sleep disturbances. There are, however, some gender differences. The most consistent difference appears to be that boys more often externalize their problems, through physical aggression or vandalism, whereas girls tend to internalize their difficulties, through depression or withdrawal (Finkelhor, 1990; Gomez-Schwartz, Horowitz, & Cardarelli, 1990). The long-term consequences of sexual abuse in childhood tend to be greater for children who were 1) abused by their fathers or stepfathers, 2) experienced penetration, 3) were subjected to force or threat of force, and 4) suffered more prolonged and severe abuse (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, DaCosta, & Akman, 1991; Waterman & Lusk, 1986). Incest may be particularly damaging because victims are likely to feel a deep sense of betrayal by their caretaker, and perhaps by other family members for failure to protect them.

A Clinical Response to Allegations

As mentioned earlier, most professionals today tend to believe a child's allegations of sexual abuse. However, there is no conclusive test or marker to determine whether a child has been sexually abused. Thus, a determination of the validity of accusations is usually left to the parents or a handful of social workers. Despite the absence of such a canonical marker,

the practical and urgent question of whether an allegation is accurate must be made every day. The need to decide promptly if a child has been sexually abused is critical, not only because of the potential for further victimization and the possibility of intimidation, but also, in cases of false allegations, to remove the stigma or suspicion from innocent people. Thus, it is important to investigate factors that influence adults' willingness to believe children's allegations.

Jackson and Nuttall (1994) used the data from a survey of 172 professionals (i.e., social workers, pediatricians, psychiatrists, and psychologists) to determine the extent to which specific backgrounds and personal characteristics affected their clinical judgments about sexual abuse allegations. They hypothesized that internalized and often unconscious attitudes about gender stereotypes, belief systems connected to professional training, and personal histories are all likely to influence decisions about which data clinicians find important and how that data is interpreted in judging sexual abuse allegations. Using vignettes and asking respondents to rate how confident they were that sexual abuse had occurred, they found four main factors that influence the decision making process. Their results showed that those who were most likely to believe sexual abuse allegations shared one or more of the following traits: 1) they were most likely female; 2) they had a history of sexual abuse themselves; 3) they were younger or recently trained; 4) they were more likely to work with protective services versus inpatient/mental health patients. The

authors attributed the findings that females are more likely than males to believe sexual abuse allegations to the fact that, on average, women are more often the nurturers and protectors of children (whether culturally or biologically determined) and thus may have developed a greater capacity for empathy toward children's needs than men.

Other results indicated the *victim's* gender did not influence the perceived credibility of the allegation for the respondent. This result is somewhat surprising given the much higher rate of female sexual abuse in comparison to male sexual abuse (NCCAN, 1988). This could lead one to expect a professional to more readily believe a female than a male. Results also showed that clinicians were significantly more likely to believe allegations that a younger child was sexually abused than allegations that an adolescent was sexually abused. Given the findings by the NCCAN (1988) and others (Eckenrode, Powers, Doris, Munsch, & Bolger, 1988) that nearly 47% of sexual abuse cases are adolescents, it must be assumed that the reluctance to believe the allegations of adolescents is likely to be related to bias on the part of the adult. Interestingly the authors fail to address these discrepancies in their discussion. However, Powers and Eckenrode (1987) suggest that younger children may be taken more seriously by professionals and parents because they are seen as more vulnerable.

The Use of Vignettes in Research

Like the study above, numerous studies have used vignettes to ferret out attitudes and various factors that may influence the decision making process used by adults in assessing the validity of children's allegations of sexual abuse or other sexual crimes (Craft & Bettin, 1991; Craft & Clarkson, 1985; Margolin, Miller & Moran, 1989; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993; Attias & Goodwin, 1985; Mac Murray, 1989). However, few have addressed the issue of whether or not vignettes themselves are an accurate reflection of what would occur in "real life". Parkinson and Manstead (1993) argue that most of the interpretational difficulties of vignette research relate to substituting a "linguistic text" for a real-time event between a person and his or her environment. They assert that the vignette methodology forces the participant to be a more or less detached observer of the events, whereas in real life such circumstances force a person to be an interactive participant in body, emotion, and cognition. They propose, at least in relation to emotion research, that it is best to study emotions in their real life social context. This may be ideal, and even possible, for emotion research, but in regards to adult reactions to child abuse allegations the proposition seems hardly reasonable.

This raises the question of whether a vignette can provide an accurate reflection of what would happen in a real life experience. Margolin, Moran, and Miller (1989) raised a similar question in regards to the use of vignettes to assess subjects adherence to rape myths. They

responded by asserting that rape exists on the end of the continuum of male sexual violence, and that “..the difference between rape and other kinds of heterosexual violence is quantitative, not qualitative, in nature.” (pg. 48). Though it is possible to logically carry this argument over to vignettes research assessing child sexual abuse, it still, by itself provides a shaky foundation on which to stand. Coupling Margolin, et al.’s argument with Parkinson and Manstead’s (1993) belief that vignettes may still be a relevant tool for research as long as the results are not overgeneralized may add to the credibility of this type of research. Clearly, a vignette is applicable to the scenario that its text paints, but we should cautiously apply those results outside of that “text environment.” As Hyde (1994) suggests in her guidelines to sex difference research, replication and careful application of findings are two important issues. Thus, any generalizations made from vignette research should be replicated and applied cautiously to real time events.

One of the greatest strengths of vignette research is its experimental design. As cited above, vignette research is a widely accepted method in assessing the validity of child abuse allegations (Ceci, Toglia, & Ross, 1987). It allows researchers to separate and examine a host of potential influences in the perceived credibility of a child’s allegations. Obviously, it would not be ethical to randomly assign *actual* children to a variety of abusive events. As well, it is not practical to use naturally occurring abuse situations to assess an individual’s perceptions of the child and situation

while they are in the midst of the intervention. The use of vignettes in experimental designs have become the preferred method to isolate independent variables that may be critical in our understanding of child abuse assessment and intervention. Still, it would be important to establish some validity of the vignettes themselves. A scenario that is unrealistic or biased in some fashion is less likely to be generalizable to real time events than a vignette that paints an accurate or realistic picture of what someone may encounter in his or her real time experiences.

O'Donohue, Elliot, Nickerson, and Valentine (1992) used vignette research to investigate whether sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, acceptance of interpersonal violence, sex of the subject, characteristics of the child, and characteristics of the perpetrator affect judgments of the credibility of children's reports that they have been abused. In their study they gave 235 college students a short vignette describing a situation where a child alleged he/she had been abused and the adult denied the charges. Their findings indicated that female subjects were more likely than male subjects to believe the child regardless of the characteristics of the child. No other factors were found to be statistically significant and the authors provided no information regarding the validity of the vignettes they used.

Attias and Goodwin (1985) found significant differences in reporting behavior of male and female clinicians. They found that 79% of female professionals indicated that they would report incest even when the child

recanted the accusation, compared to 62% of male professionals. In their study, they presented clinicians with a case history vignette in which an 11 year old girl vividly described to her school counselor 2 years of ongoing sexual activity between herself and her father. The clinicians were then asked to imagine that the case was referred to them for further evaluation and that during the evaluation the girl retracted her previous statements about the sexual abuse. The clinicians were then asked whether they would report this case to protective services. Interestingly, Attias and Goodwin found that clinician gender differences were not confined to reporting behavior. They reported that the respondent's gender was a more important predictor of taking action than was either their professional discipline or the clinical experience of the respondent. Men in their sample were more likely than women to underestimate the seriousness and prevalence of incest, and to overestimate the occurrence of false accusations by children. Once again, however, there are no reported results pertaining to the validity of the vignette itself.

In a similar study, Finlayson and Koocher (1991) presented 269 doctoral-level pediatric psychologists four clinical vignettes in which child and family variables were held constant but the symptoms presented were varied. They found that the more specific the symptoms were, the more likely a respondent was to report the abuse. Despite comparable levels of sexual abuse training and experience, female respondents were more likely than male respondents to suspect abuse. Gender differences

became less apparent when the presentation of sexual abuse was most specific. Finlayson and Koocher attribute this to a possible ceiling effect where, regardless of gender, there came a point where virtually all respondents had enough details to allow for substantial clinical suspicion. Women, however, were more confident than men that abuse had occurred, regardless of the specificity of symptoms presented.

In summary, the preponderance of research has indicated that the *gender of the respondent* is one of the most salient factors in predicting whether one suspects abuse has occurred (Finlayson & Koocher, 1991). As well, Powers and Eckenrode (1987) suggest that, because young children are seen as more vulnerable and trustworthy, a younger child's accusations of abuse may be taken more seriously than an adolescent's accusations. Interestingly, studies have failed to show the *gender of the victim* to be a significant factor in predicting how seriously an adult takes a child's claim of sexual abuse (O'Donohue, Elliot, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1992; Attias & Goodwin, 1985). What these studies have failed to examine, or at least report, has been: 1) the validity of the vignettes they have employed, and 2) whether these same variables apply to the perceived negative outcomes associated with sexual abuse.

Why Study Gender Differences?

In our culture the stereotypical female is attributed such traits as gentleness, dependency, kindness, helpfulness, patience, and

submissiveness. The masculine gender stereotype is one of toughness, gentlemanliness, and protectiveness. Females are generally seen as warm and emotional; males as independent, assertive, and competitive (Cartwright, 1983).

Popular media such as books, magazines, radio, film, and especially television, convey strong gender stereotypes. The media by and large portray men and women in traditional roles (Signorielli, 1990). Men more often play doctors, attorneys, or police officers; women more often play nurses, secretaries, paralegals, and teachers. Even when women portray attorneys or police officers, they are more likely than men to handle family disputes. Working women are also more likely than men to be portrayed as undergoing role conflict (i.e., being pulled in opposite directions by job and family). A 1990 article by Adelson reported that, despite current awareness of sexism in the media, "Women are often still depicted on television as half-clad and half-witted, and needing to be rescued by quick-thinking, fully clothed men" (pp. 18).

Gender differences are also highlighted by the news media as "headline topics." The public generally doesn't read academic journals and thus gets its "accurate" information from sources such as Newsweek, Time, and the newspaper. Within the past decade Time (20 January 1992), Newsweek (28 May 1990), US News and World Report (8 August 1988) and the Seattle Post Intelligencer (22 November 1995) have all run cover or headline stories focusing on gender differences.

The news and entertainment media is not alone. There has also been a plethora of research focusing on gender differences and similarities within the last decade. Studies have examined gender differences in cognitive abilities (Begley, 1995), emotional responses (Gur, Mozley, & Mozley, 1995); personal interactions (Deaux, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1985), pre-natal development (Berenbaum & Hines, 1992), and play patterns (Beal, 1994; Maccoby, 1990).

An increase in feminist research has fueled the engine of sex difference research over the past two decades. One motivation has been to look objectively at discriminatory practices against women that have been based on the alleged differences between men and women. The feeling has been that if such alleged differences could be found to be inaccurate, women would have more ammunition to combat those false assumptions. Kitzinger (1994) explains that most of the research examining gender differences falls into one of two groups. The first group, typically called "minimizers," seek to establish the similarity between women and men in order to argue for equality between the sexes. The second group, often referred to as "maximizers," seek to highlight the differences between the sexes in order to recognize women's unique contributions and ways of knowing.

Regardless of motives, there is much debate in the scientific arena as to whether research on sex differences has reinforced or helped dispel many gender stereotypes. In fact, the debate can be broken into two main

camps: those who feel it is time for a change of focus and those who support further research in gender differences.

Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1994) point out numerous reasons why further studies of sex differences should be halted in order to begin to ask more pertinent questions. They argue that in both the past and present, men have served as the unspoken reference group, and as such, men have become the standard for comparison and the canon by which women or children are compared. This reflects a bias that men are superior and whenever empirical differences are found between the sexes, women come up short or "deficient". They point out that most research, whether seeking to highlight similarities or maximize differences, comes from an essentialist perspective. Bohan (1993) explains this perspective as one where gender is construed as internal and consistent, separate from ongoing experience and unable to change. Thus, difference research tends to collapse gender into "static and exaggerated dualisms", which, in Hare-Mustin and Marecek's view, is inappropriate due to gender's more fluid position within the ebb and flow of social relations.

Several dangers exist when researchers emphasize an essentialist perspective of gender. First, because male and female differences do not have a single, fixed meaning differences that are found are constantly subjected to a variety of cultural meanings and political agendas. Second, the conclusions drawn in this type of research often serve to reinforce a woman's lower place in the social hierarchy. Third, research on sex

differences becomes descriptive in nature, similar to research on race or age differences. The problem lies in the fact that, although the research is descriptive in nature, society (even academia) often give the results *prescriptive* power. Finally, as Kitinger (1994) points out, the more important question may be, "What is it about the social and political context that renders salient questions about similarities and differences between men and women?" (pg. 502). In other words, some current researchers feel it is time to move beyond the more simplistic question of how men and women are different and similar towards a more philosophical one that examines why our society feels the need to ask such questions in the first place.

Though the above arguments are indeed noteworthy, this current research project tends to side more with the philosophy that sex/gender differences should still be researched, despite some inherent dangers in *interpretation* and cultural attitudes. The fact is, stereotypes are not created as a result of quality empirical studies. Regardless of whether such studies reveal differences or similarities, it is the interpretation of the results and the cultural milieu surrounding them that often seems to be the culprit. Halpren (1994) sights several reasons why we should continue studying sex differences. In her opinion, the main hindrance in this field is the unstated assumption that women have less. In other words, if we study sex differences then the results will indeed reveal female deficiencies. This assumption is not borne out in the literature, however. Though there is a

great body of evidence showing that sex differences do exist, there is nothing in these studies to suggest that either females or males have the overall advantage. We must move beyond the belief that *differences are deficiencies* towards a more objective view of research findings.

Halpern contends that knowledge is power. Using results from the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT-m) as an example, Halpern argues that were it not for sex difference research, we would never know that the SAT-m is biased toward males. The fact is, males consistently score an average of 47 to 50 points higher than females. However, other mathematics tests fail to show such large differences. Thus, we can assume that the SAT-m may be biased toward males. Considering how important SAT scores are for college entrance, especially in the scientific fields, we would be doing women a disservice not exploring further the reasons behind such a discrepancy in scores. Without sex difference research, science would be leaving society to assume that females are just biologically less proficient at higher level math.

More pertinent to this current study are findings of sex differences in the responses of adults to the sexual abuse allegations of children. Today, as social workers (and others in child fields) carry the major responsibility for verifying or refuting reports of child abuse allegations, the potential dangers of subjectivity and the critical need for objectivity can not be overemphasized. The potential for bias in believing or refuting allegations

of sexual abuse is a critical concern. For example, Jackson and Nuttall (1994) found that female social workers were more likely to believe allegations of sexual abuse than were male social workers. Historically, social work education has emphasized the biases introduced by race, SES, and ethnicity. But if gender, age of the victim, and personal history of abuse can influence clinical perceptions (as Jackson and Nuttall found) then further research needs to be done in this important area.

Halpern (1994) also emphasized that it is the researcher's and the media's responsibility not to apply statistics to individual cases when they are derived from data that typically consists of a great deal of variability. Thus, we should only make group-level statements about "on the average" differences. In sex-difference research it is important to note whether within-group differences were greater than between-group differences. As well, questions about sex-differences should never be "either-or" in perspective; instead Halpern asserts that we should seek answers that allow for multiple determinants, without denying that sex differences may indeed be one of the pieces.

In order to make sex difference research a better science, and to use the results on behalf of women instead of against them, Hyde (1994) suggests six guidelines. It is the goal of this research project to work within these parameters.

1. Avoid publication bias: One criticism Hyde has against the current system is the tendency only to publish statistically

significant findings and ignore those with null results. This error tends to reinforce the idea that there are a multitude of differences between the sexes and negates the numerous studies that have found no differences. Though this current study can not guarantee publication, it can treat the results, regardless of statistical significance, as important and insightful.

2. Unreplicated findings of gender differences: Usually the original study that finds differences between the sexes gets all the attention. The problem lies in the fact that often the results are not replicated by other researchers. Once again, though the attention this study gets is beyond this researcher's control, it is important to recognize whether the results substantiate previous work in the sexual abuse field.
3. Failure to report effect sizes: Hyde asserts that even tiny differences, though statistically significant, are often given more merit than they deserve. O'Donohue, Elliott, Nickerson, & Valentine (1992) seem to dance around this trap when they report their findings regarding the perceived credibility of a child's sexual abuse allegations by an adult. In their study, subjects were given short vignette in which a child accused a man of sexual abuse. Subjects then rated the degree to which they believed the child and the alleged perpetrator, using a 6-point Likert scale. The authors reported an analysis of variance

indicating a significant main effect for gender, with males being less likely to believe the child than females. However, in their discussion they state only that males tended to believe children, although they did so to a significantly lesser degree than females. This leaves the reader to interpret whether this difference is substantively significant or not.

4. Findings are interpreted as female deficits: A classic example of this danger is in the interpretation of self-confidence scores among teenagers. Typically, the difference in scores is seen as a female lack of self-confidence instead of the males being overly confident. In regard to sexual abuse research, one must be careful not to interpret sex differences in such a biased light.
5. Findings of gender differences must be applied and reported carefully: Jackson and Nuttall (1994) gave vignettes to various clinical professionals in child related fields (social workers, pediatricians, etc.) and asked respondents to rate how confident they were sexual abuse had occurred. In all disciplines, females were statistically significantly more likely to believe that sexual abuse had occurred. The authors reason that the generality of the findings can be explained by the fact that on average women are nurturers and protectors of children (whether culturally or biologically determined) and thus, may have developed a greater capacity for empathy for children. If not applied and reported

carefully, these results could do damage to both sexes in the child development field. For some it may be justification to only have men involved in sexual abuse evaluations, in order to eliminate subjective interpretations that females may carry with them. On the other hand, some may argue that men simply are not sensitive to children's cues and needs and thus may inadvertently send them back into a dangerous situation.

Jackson and Nuttall suggest that evaluations be done in teams of both men and women in order to provide the best perspective.

6. Gender differences are often interpreted as being due to biological factors: This point is similar to Hare-Mustin and Marecek's (1994) argument against sex difference research. However, instead of using it as a reason to forgo all sex difference research, Hyde asserts that researchers must be aware of the potential dangers of interpreting a difference as being caused by biological factors. In reality, much of the research that alludes to biological differences between male and females do not contain any biological data, only inferences or correlations. Researchers must be clearly state that it is often difficult to know whether the differences are biologically or culturally based or a combination of the two.

In sum, it is the belief of this researcher that we should recognize the potential dangers of sex difference research within both the research

process and our culture. This concern, however, should not halt research that still brings valuable insight and knowledge to the field of human development. There are many factors, both personal and professional, that have been identified as influencing the clinical judgments of sexual abuse evaluators.

The research of Zellman and Bell (1989) has shown that older practitioners are less likely to report abuse than are their younger colleagues and that women are more likely than men to suspect and report sexual abuse. And as described earlier, other researchers have found that 1) women judge manifestations of victimization more severely than do men (Attias & Goodwin, 1985; Finlayson & Koocher, 1991); 2) that women perceive incest to be more prevalent than do men (Wellman, 1993); and 3) more men than women are likely to overestimate the role of fantasy in children's allegations of sexual abuse (Jackson & Nuttall, 1994). Had difference research, whether age, sex, or race related, been considered taboo during the 1980's the valuable insights garnered through researcher projects like these may have been lost. Likewise, if we are unwilling to replicate, study further, and do more generalizable research in this field we may end up making assumptions that may not be accurate or even misleading. Thus, this study endeavors to work within the ethical parameters set forth by Hyde (1994) and still be able to make a valuable contribution to the field.

Gender Differences in Decision Making

Though it is not in the scope of the research paper to study exhaustively the differences in how men and women make decisions, it is important to know whether those differences do indeed exist. Kramer and Melchoir's 1990 study provides an excellent example of the differences that may exist in cognition. In their study they administered a battery of questionnaires, including a vocabulary test, a role conflict questionnaire, a role articulation questionnaire, and a questionnaire designed to ascertain one's social cognition based on three categories (absolute, relativistic, and dialectical). The respondents were 121 high school freshmen, college freshmen, and college seniors.

Kramer and Melchoir hypothesized that since females tend to report greater role conflict than males throughout adolescence and young adulthood, they would develop different cognitive decision making skills. They categorized these different cognitive levels as:

1. **Absolute:** Absolute thinking and decision making lends itself to categorizing people into traits and types which are seen as inherently fixed or static. Absolute thinkers tend to see the world in terms of absolute principles and tend to try to reduce complex behaviors of others into antecedent environmental causes.
2. **Relativistic:** Relativistic thinkers look at the world as constantly changing and unpredictable. Consequently all knowledge is seen as subjective and dependent upon the fluctuating contexts. These beliefs

at their extreme form render a person at a loss in decision making and commitments.

3. **Dialectical:** Dialectical thinking develops from an attempt to integrate absolute and relativistic concepts, in order to find continuity within change and to make commitments within fluctuating choices. Dialectical thinkers see conflict and contradiction as opportunities for growth. Whereas a relativistic thinker sees contradiction as real, a dialectical thinker sees contradiction as perceived, thus, providing the impetus to change and adapt.

The authors proposed that the greater role conflict experienced by women fosters the development of relativistic and dialectical perspectives.

Because women tend to place greater emphasis on the importance of others (e.g. the needs of their children, their husband's career and personal needs, etc.) in their decision making, they foster the development of relativistic and dialectical thinking more than their male counterparts who tend to find their identity in career and personal growth.

As predicted, females scored higher than males in dialectical and relativistic thinking. Results indicated that females were more aware, and at an earlier age, of the impending juggling of responsibilities for and conflicts between work and family. Some women expected an integrated solution, others expected a tradeoff, while others expected to redefine their expected roles in the family in order to make the home more egalitarian. Significantly fewer men expected such conflicts, and consequently few had

considered plans for resolving them. Males were not only not as likely to see the complexity of the problem, but frequently reported making the decision without consulting others or considering the needs of others.

Similar to the Kramer and Melchoir (1990) study, other studies have found that men and women think and make decisions differently. Darley and Smith (1995) found gender differences in information processing. Female respondents were more comprehensive in their search for information in advertisements. They tended to pick up on the subtle cues more than their male counterparts and responded equally to both subjective and objective advertising claims.

It is clear that there are differences in how males and females make decisions and process information, at least in regards to advertising and role conflict decisions. It seems logical that these results could be generalized to more critical decisions. The importance of the decision that surrounds allegations of sexual abuse by children has already been stated. This study attempts to discover not only if there is a difference between how men and women perceive such an encounter, but also, if such a difference exists how would it effect their ultimate response to a child.

Summary of Literature Review

Regardless of the method of data collection studies show, child maltreatment is a problem of great social concern in our culture. As discussed above, no one knows exactly how many children are sexual

abused annually in our country, but it is clearly an under-reported problem. On the front lines of identifying and helping child victims of sexual abuse are their parents, teachers, and social service workers, who must not only recognize the symptoms of sexual abuse, but also critically evaluate a child's allegations of it. Research has shown that an adult's gender can influence his/her understanding of sexual abuse and willingness to believe a child has been sexually abused (Jackson & Nuttall, 1994).

Gender difference research has caused much controversy in the social sciences arena. Many have argued that a continued emphasis on the differences between men and women only reinforces the power differentiation between the two in our culture. However, the valuable insight that would be lost by avoiding such controversy is hard to justify when it comes to sexual abuse. By working within the Hyde's (1994) framework, it is this researcher's goal to make a valuable contribution to the field without reinforcing cultural myths and stereotypes.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses in this research project were separated into two groupings. The first grouping examined respondent's perceptions regarding the seriousness of the encounter. The second grouping of hypotheses examined the respondent's expectations of potential negative outcomes as a result of the encounter. Analyses were conducted separately for male

and female respondents for all hypotheses except for hypotheses 1 and 4 which were analyzed with male and female respondents together.

Group #1 (perceived seriousness)

1. Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to believe that the encounter between the child and the adult was serious in nature.
2. For female respondents, but not for male respondents, the encounter with the younger child will be perceived as more serious than the encounter with the older child.
3. Gender of the child will not be related to the perceived seriousness of the encounter for either female or male respondents.

Group #2 (perceived outcomes)

4. Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to believe that the encounter with the child will have negative outcomes.
5. For female respondents, but not for male respondents, the encounter with the younger child will be perceived as having greater negative outcomes than the encounter with the older child.
6. The gender of the child will not be related to the expected negative outcomes of the encounter for either female or male respondents.

METHODS

Procedure

The following verbal consent was communicated to each group of subjects participating in the research:

- First, know that participation in this research project is purely voluntary. In no way what-so-ever will your participation in this survey influence your grade.
- Secondly, all the results will be strictly confidential and anonymous. Since neither your name nor student I.D. number will be on the form, your answers will be completely anonymous.
- This survey simply looks at people's attitudes towards encounters between adults and children, but if at any time you decide not to complete the survey just stop and put your survey in the survey return box.
- It shouldn't take any longer than 20 minutes to complete and if you have any questions or concerns during or after you're done, you can talk to me or leave a message on my office phone and I'll get back to you.
- Thanks.

After explaining the participation conditions, the researcher or an assistant distributed the vignette surveys to the subjects. The vignettes were randomly mixed into piles without any markings that would allow the distributor to know who was getting which version of the vignette.

Vignette

The vignette contained a scenario in which a neighborhood child (male/female), either 5 or 13 years old, was doing yardwork with a male middle-aged neighbor. It presents an ambiguous situation which could be construed as a "minor" sexual advance by the adult.

The actual vignette and questions follows:

Howard, a middle-aged man, invited 5 year old Stephen, a neighbor boy, over to help him rake leaves in his back yard. They worked hard for most of the afternoon, and the project was a success. Howard says to Stephen, "How 'bout I congratulate you on a job well done with this 5 dollar bill. And you congratulate me with a nice hug?" Reluctantly, Stephen agrees. He takes the 5 dollars and Howard pulls him close. Howard says, "You feel so good its hard to let you go, but I suppose I should. You run along now."

Please respond to the following statements according to whether you:

Strongly Agree -- Agree -- Undecided -- Disagree --Strongly Disagree
--

- 1) Upon getting home, Stephen should immediately tell his parents about the hug Howard gave him.

SA A UN D SD

- 2) Stephen felt uncomfortable receiving the hug from Howard.

SA A UN D SD

- 3) Stephen will probably be too embarrassed to tell his parents about the hug and comment from Howard.

SA A UN D SD

- 4) If it doesn't happen again, Stephen is likely to forget about it in a week or so.

SA A UN D SD

- 5) Stephen should be very cautious around Howard from now on.

SA A UN D SD

- 6) It would be a good idea for Stephen not to be anywhere alone with Howard again.

SA A UN D SD

- 7) Assuming that Stephen tells his parents about the 5 dollars and the hug-

- a) The parents should immediately suspect Howard is a child molester.

SA A UN D SD

- b) The parents should act like that it is normal to give hugs so as not to "blow it out of proportion"

SA A UN D SD

- c) The parents should wait to see if anything further occurs before jumping to conclusions.

SA A UN D SD

- 8) Howard probably did not mean anything harmful by his actions.

SA A UN D SD

- 9) It is safe to assume that Howard is sexually attracted to young boys.

SA A UN D SD

- 10) It is very possible that the "hug" from Howard could emotionally scar Stephen.

SA A UN D SD

- 11) It would be unusual for this situation to cause Stephen to have bad dreams at night.

SA A UN D SD

- 12) Because there was no "harmful" touch involved, Stephen would probably not have any adverse problems as a result.

SA A UN D SD

- 13) In this story, Stephen was sexually abused.

SA A UN D SD

Analysis

Initially, descriptive statistics were used to characterize the dependent and independent variables. Factor analysis lead to two primary factors. Hypotheses were then examined in a series of multiple regression models.

Hypothesis #1:

Dependent Variable: Perception of the seriousness of the encounter.

Independent Variable: gender of respondent

Hypothesis #2:

Dependent Variable: Perception of the seriousness of the encounter.

Independent Variables: age of child.

Hypothesis #3:

Dependent Variable: Perception of the seriousness of the encounter.

Independent Variables: gender of child.

Hypothesis #4:

Dependent Variable: Expectation of negative outcomes.

Independent Variable: gender of respondent

Hypothesis #5:

Dependent Variable: Expectation of negative outcomes.

Independent Variables: age of child.

Hypothesis #6:

Dependent Variable: Expectation of negative outcomes.

Independent Variables: gender of child.

RESULTS

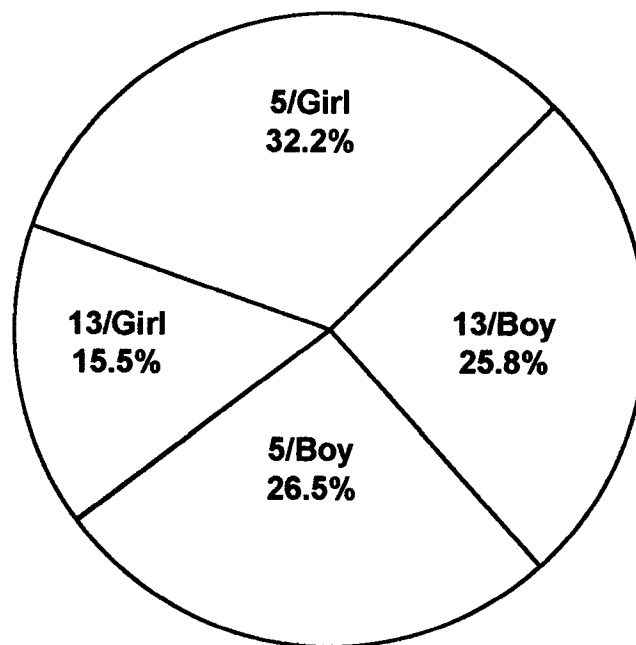
The results of this study are presented in four parts. First, the demographic characteristics of the sample are described. Second, the factor analysis results that yielded the two variables used in the analysis are reported. Next, the data pertaining to the hypotheses that addressed the respondent's perception of the seriousness of the encounter is reported (Hypothesis Group #1). Finally, the results of the regressions pertaining to the respondent's expectations of negative outcomes is reported (Hypothesis Group #2).

Subjects:

Subjects were four hundred and fifty three students from a northwestern university. They were recruited from an lower-level human development course and from an introductory course in the arts and humanities department. One hundred and seventy-nine males and 274 females participated in the study. Subjects ranged in age from 17 - 53 years, with the mean age 20.2, $SD=3.5$. 82% of the subjects were between the ages of 17-21 and the remaining 18% were between the ages of 24-53. As well, 90% ($N= 409$) were single, while 8% were married or engaged and 2% were divorced/separated. 97% ($N=439$) of the subjects reported having no children, leaving only 3% with 1 or more children. 36% of the subjects reported being freshmen, 28% were sophomore, 17% juniors, 18% seniors,

and 1% classified themselves as graduate students. Participants received only one of four possible vignettes via random distribution. The following figure shows the percent of students that received each vignette.

Percent of total sample receiving each scenario



Following the demographic analysis, a factor analysis was performed on the 15 scenario questions. Six questions were dropped from the analysis, because they were not related to the two factors (seriousness of encounter and expectation of negative outcomes) being used in the regression analysis or because they correlated too strongly with both components. Table 2 shows the rotated component matrix for the nine scenario questions that were included in the final analysis. The alpha

reliability for factor 1 (perceived seriousness of the encounter) was .79, and for factor 2 (expected negative outcomes) the alpha reliability was .75.

Table 2

Summary of Factorial Analysis

Scenario question	Component	
	1	2
Child should tell parents	.683	.008
Child won't soon forget	.150	.614
Child should be cautious	.836	.114
Child should not be alone	.825	.120
Parents should not blow it out of proportion.	.561	.372
Adult had innocent motives	.653	.247
Child will be scarred	.203	.740
Child will have bad dreams	.104	.764
Child will have later problems	.151	.804

Extraction Method: Principal

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Regression Results

Group #1 (perceived seriousness)

1. Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to believe that the encounter between the child and the adult was serious in nature. The data presented in Table 3 show the results pertaining to this hypothesis. As predicted, females reported a greater tendency than males to believe the encounter between the adult and child was serious in nature ($B=.107$, $p<.05$, while explaining 1.2% of the variance).
2. For female respondents, but not for male respondents, the encounter with the younger child will be perceived as more serious than the encounter with the older child. Contrary to what was expected, results shown in Table 4 indicate that female respondents are significantly more likely to feel the encounter between the older child was more serious in nature than the encounter between the adult and younger child ($B=.159$, $p<.05$). R-squared change indicates that 2.5% of the variance was explained by including the child's age as a variable. For male respondents, the age of the child was not related to the perceived seriousness of the encounter.
3. The gender of the child will not be related to the perceived seriousness of the encounter for either female or male respondents. Consistent with the hypothesis, gender of the child was not significantly related to perceived seriousness of the encounter for males or females.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Gender Differences in Perceived Seriousness of the Encounter and Expected Negative Outcomes

	X	Beta	t	R ²	Sig.
Hypothesis #1	3.86	.107	69.26	.012	.022*
Hypothesis #4	2.89	.160	47.63	.026	.001*

* $p < .05$

Table 4

Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Perceived Seriousness of the Encounter and Expected Negative Outcomes

Female Respondents

Male Respondents

Hypothesis	Beta	X	t	R ²	Sig.	Beta	X	t	R ²	Sig.
H #2	.159	3.92	68.45	.025	.008*	-.023	3.76	52.11	.001	NS
H #3	-.072	3.92	65.23	.005	.233	-.100	3.77	51.36	.010	NS
H #5	.190	2.99	45.09	.036	.002*	.221	2.74	39.42	.049	.003*
H #6	-.114	3.00	44.55	.013	.060	-.135	2.74	40.50	.018	.071

* $p < .05$.

Group #2 (expected negative outcomes)

4. Female respondents will be more likely than male respondents to believe that the encounter between the child and adult will have negative outcomes. As shown in Table 3, there is a significant difference between males in females in how severe they expect the negative outcomes to be. Just being female appears to explain 2.6% of the variance in reported expected outcomes ($B=.160$, $p<.05$).
5. For female respondents, but not for male respondents, the encounter with the younger child will be perceived as having greater negative outcomes than the encounter with the older child. Similar to the results of hypothesis #2, the results indicate that the influence is in the opposite direction than originally hypothesized; with female respondents expecting greater negative outcomes for the 13 year old child than compared to the 5 year old child ($B= .159$, $p<.05$). Being female explained 2.5% of the variance.

Like female respondents, males respondents are more likely to expect negative outcomes for the older child than for the younger child ($B=.221$, $p<.05$). The R^2 explains 4.9% of the variance, the largest of any of the models.

6. The gender of the child will not be related to the expected negative outcomes of the encounter for either male or female respondents. Consistent with the hypothesis both male and female respondents are

not significantly impacted by the child's gender when considering the negative outcomes of this situation.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATIONS

Gender as a Factor

This study found a statistically significant differences between males and females in their perceptions of an encounter between an adult and child. Female respondents were not only more likely than males to feel that the encounter between the adult and child was serious in nature ($p = .022$), but they were also more likely to expect negative outcomes based on that encounter ($p = .001$) than male respondents. This is consistent with findings in prior studies that examined a respondent's willingness to believe sexual abuse allegations by a child (Wellman, 1993; Jackson & Nuttall, 1993). Granted, it may make intuitive sense to assume that if a person feels that the encounter is serious they would be also more likely to predict negative outcomes.

These general findings perhaps can be explained by the fact that, on average, women as nurturers and protectors of children (whether culturally or biologically determined) may have developed a greater capacity for empathy for children than have men. Consequently, women may be more likely to see the given situation as serious in nature. Furthermore, the pervasive discrimination against women and children in our culture may enable women to be more sensitive to the victimization and potential negative results in others. This may be because women are generally taught to be more sensitive to the emotional needs of others than

are men. This increased sensitivity to the emotional needs of others may be useful in detecting the potential or probable victimization of others. In other words, because women tend to be more in tune with the needs of others, they may have clearer perceptions or broader expectations of when abuse may be occurring.

The relatively lower social status of women than men in American society may also help to explain these findings. Women are socialized to accept an inferior role, often accompanied by victimization such as sexual abuse, rape, and domestic violence (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994; Howe, Herzberger, & Tennen, 1988). Because being a victim is most often associated with a feminine role in American culture, female respondents may feel more personally familiar with the emotional and physical aspects of victimization than male respondents. This in turn may enhance the female respondent's sensitivity to indicators of sexual abuse (real or perceived), as was the case in the current study.

This line of reasoning, however, comes dangerously close to overstepping one of Hyde's (1994) suggestions that we not interpret differences between the sexes as female deficits. Indeed, it may not necessarily be that female respondents are overly sensitive to sexual abuse indicators, but instead that male respondent's are particularly poor detectors of victimization. Perhaps male respondents in this study have more denial related to sexual abuse symptoms. It is conceivable that such denial could help men cope with feelings of guilt, shame or responsibility

for their gender identification with a potential male aggressor. It is also possible that male respondents more often believe that sexual abuse is a relatively rare or innocuous phenomenon and therefore are less attentive to indicators that may point to abuse. This is consistent with Attias and Goodwin's (1985) findings that male professionals tend to underestimate the prevalence of sexual abuse and also tend to underestimate the effects of sexual victimization.

Child's Age as a Factor

Contrary to what was hypothesized, results showed that female respondents regarded the encounter with the older child as more serious and as having greater negative outcomes than for the younger child (See Table 2). This is different than the findings of Powers & Eckenrode (1987) who suggest that, because young children are seen as more vulnerable and trustworthy, a younger child's accusations of abuse may be taken more seriously than an adolescent's accusations. The results of the current study could be explained perhaps by the similarity in ages between the respondents and the older child in scenario. With a median age of 19.00 and a mean of only 20.21, most of the respondents are just coming out of adolescence and may be showing greater empathy to the 13 year old child just entering adolescence. Other studies have failed to find any significant differences between adult perceptions and the age of the child (O'Donohue, Elliot, Nickerson, & Valentine, 1992). Additional studies are

needed to determine whether differences in methodology across studies are producing these different findings (e.g. studies use slightly different ages for the children; or differences between the age of the respondent and the age of the child).

For male respondents, the age of the child was only influential in regard to the expected negative outcomes ($p = .003$). Consistent with their female counterparts and contrary to the proposed hypothesis, males expected greater negative outcomes for the older child. Once again, this may be due to the closeness of age between the child in the scenario and the age of the respondent. What is perhaps most interesting is the fact that age was not significant in regards to the perceived seriousness of the encounter. Why would a male respondent not be willing to say that the encounter was serious in nature, but still feel that there may be negative outcomes associated with it? Perhaps, it can be explained in the display of affection and the potential embarrassment that resulted. It may be that males, though not perceiving anything “serious” about the event, would be more willing to believe that an adolescent would leave feeling “funny” or “embarrassed” by such a public display of affection. Perhaps, enough so that it could show itself in later in dreams or an inability to soon forget the encounter.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The findings of this study demonstrate that the perceptions of sexual abuse can be a highly subjective process. Since a social worker's, clinician's, or other adult's initial perceptions of a situation can affect the entire course and outcome, results such as these need to be seriously considered. Adults in these fields have to constantly balance the risks of unwarranted intervention with the dangers of leaving a child in a unsafe environment. If something as basic (and as consistent) as a person's gender influences this process, it should be further explored.

Achieving total objectivity in sexual abuse cases is difficult, if not impossible. Attitudes and beliefs about sexuality, and the emotionally laden character of child and adolescent sexual abuse potentially cloud even the most determined objectivity. Instead of working against such a strong opponent as gender, what may be more effective is to work with it. Teams (consisting of at least one male and one female) could be used when investigating sexual abuse allegations. Or in the very least, teams should be used to evaluate each individual's assessment, before a decision is made.

Vignettes like the one used in this current study could also be used as a training tool. Those involved on the front lines of sexual abuse allegations may do well to participate in this type of a study and then have

a group or team discussion that explores why individuals may have rated the various questions the way they did. Simply by recognizing what potential biases an individual brings into a decision (in this case gender) may go a long way in promoting understanding and better decision making skills. As well, team members may glean insight into the differing cue detection skills that others use.

Recommendations for Future Research and Limitations

Guidelines and training manuals to assist child maltreatment investigators have been around for years. Little attention, however, has been paid to the personal attributes of investigators and how these attributes shape their decision. Thus, the need for guidelines to control the influence of individual biases still exists. This study provides important information in order to improve guidelines toward evaluations of sexual abuse allegations.

Historically, social work education has emphasized the biases introduced by race, culture, and ethnicity (Wellman, 1993). The need exists to educate students of human development and social work about an additional factor that may influence their perceptions of the seriousness of an encounter between an adult and child, that of their own gender. The findings of this study suggest that further research is needed. Research designed to measure what aspects of gender render themselves salient in the decision making process, specifically in relation to sexual abuse

allegations made by children. As was discussed earlier, gender is not simply a static state. Thus, knowing whether a respondent is male or female is perhaps less important as discovering what aspects of that “maleness” or “femaleness” is lending itself to the differences in response. As Hyde (1994) warns, we must be careful not to attribute gender differences to biology without the corresponding biological evidence. Future studies could examine differences in cue detection between males and females, or possibly further explore the conceptual idea of nurture.

This study was limited in generalizability by two key factors. First, the sample was homogenous in regard to race, age, education, and social economic status. Social workers and clinicians may or may not come from such a narrow background. Factors such as past sexual abuse history, experience in the social services field, and understanding of sexual abuse issues were not controlled for. Thus, future studies should seek to broaden the sample in order to include such characteristics. Secondly, vignettes are truly only applicable to the scenario they describe. Thus, caution should be used when seeking to apply these finding to situations that occur in “real time” and space.

The goal of this research project was to explore gender differences in the perceptions of sexual abuse. With so much riding on each decision that the initial abuse investigator makes, further understanding of the process is critical. Overworked and undertrained case workers are the rule, rather than the exception in most communities. None-the-less those on the

frontlines of these decisions should continually upgrade their skills and sensitivity to the decision making process. It is a job where the flames of emotion are often fanned and yet professional objectivity is always expected. Hopefully, future research will continue to shed light on the complex intricacies of such important decisions.

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Appendix

APPENDIX Face Validity Issues

The first phase of this study involved soliciting evaluations of the vignette from 17 professionals who work in the social services field (including counselors, shelter workers, case managers, etc.). They averaged 9 years of experience in the social services field, though the range was from 3 years to 19 years. Of the evaluators, twelve were female and five were male. The evaluators were asked to rank each statement used in each of the vignettes (and an overall score) as being either Very Plausible (3), Somewhat Plausible (2), or Not Plausible (1). Results indicated that all the vignettes, except one, were somewhat plausible to very plausible (mean of 2.6) in their overall score. The vignette that included a 13 year old male had an overall plausibility score of only 1.8. Some respondent's commented in the margins that it was, "not very likely that a 13 year old boy would want a hug", or that, "without a close relationship prior to this it would probably not happen." Thus, with the possible exception of the vignette containing the 13 year old male, the vignettes seems to have an acceptable level of face validity. With a mean score of 1.8, the vignette with the 13 year old boy was still considered by the professionals to be closer to "somewhat plausible" than it was "not plausible". However, any results should be considered in light of this weakened face validity.