

GENDER BIAS IN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS  
OF SEX OFFENDER SENTENCING

by

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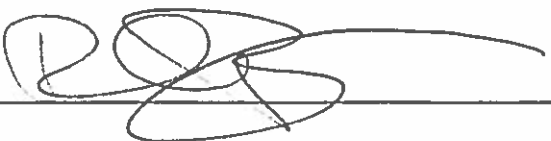
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ABSTRACT

This research project sought to uncover gender biases in public perceptions of sex offender sentencing in the context of student-teacher sexual relationships. This study was conducted by administering a survey with a short vignette describing a student-teacher sexual relationship while randomizing the gender of the teacher. Respondents were then asked a series of questions about their opinions of the encounter. The sample (N=322) showed pronounced differences between the answers of the male respondents (N=171) and female respondents (N=151), especially in the areas of sentencing, whether the teacher committed a crime, and whether the teacher should be made to register as a sex offender. Overall, female respondents were much more punitive toward both the male and female offenders than the male respondents. Meanwhile, male respondents were especially lenient toward the female offender. These results suggest that gender roles shape how we perceive deviant behavior and the sex offender role.

GENDER BIAS IN PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SEX OFFENDER SENTENCING

**Introduction**

Gender bias permeates practically every part of our society. Societal ideals about gender roles and stereotypes are so deeply ingrained in our population, even the way we view crime is often colored by the gender of the perpetrator. This is especially true in the realm of sex crimes, where female offenders are generally viewed very differently than their male counterparts. Even shows like South Park openly mock this double standard present in relation to perceptions of teacher-student sexual abuse.

This study seeks to uncover gender biases in public perceptions of sex offender sentencing in the context of student-teacher sexual relationships. The study was conducted by administering a survey with a short vignette describing a student-teacher sexual relationship while randomizing the gender of the teacher. Respondents were then asked a series of questions about their opinions of the encounter. The sample (n=322) showed pronounced differences between the answers of the male respondents (n=171) and female respondents (n=151), especially in the areas of perceptions of criminal activity, whether the teacher should be made to register as a sex offender, and possible sanctions for the teacher. Before the discussion of methods and findings, literature concerning gender bias will be discussed.

**Literature Review**

*Gender Bias in General Crime*

In order to gain a better understanding of how gender bias interacts with public perceptions of student-teacher sexual relationships, a review of how gender bias shapes

sentencing in the criminal justice system is necessary. Williams (1999) examined how defendant gender affects sentencing in general crime, even in the presence of sentencing guidelines. Williams found that women are more likely to be sentenced to probation than men, even when legal and social variables are held constant. Additionally, she showed that while women “tend to receive preferential treatment at the sentencing stage,” men and women are typically on par in the determination of guilt or innocence in general crime (Williams, 1999, p. 473). She theorizes that, in sentencing men, judges rely almost entirely on purely legal factors; however, when sentencing women, judges look not only at legal factors but extralegal factors, such as motherhood, that could act as mitigating circumstances to ultimately reduce the lengths of their sentences and help them avoid incarceration (Williams, 1999). The study ultimately confirmed that there was a “differential processing of female and male defendants in the criminal justice system” even in the presence of sentencing guidelines, which are supposed to make sentencing more uniform (Williams, 1999, p. 488).

Rodriguez, Curry, and Lee (2006) expand upon this notion by examining how gender affected criminal sentencing across violent, property, and drug offenses. In their sample (n=6,130), the researchers found that men were 2.15 times as likely as women to receive prison time as opposed to deferred adjudication. The researchers also found that men convicted of violent, property, or drug offenses were more than twice as likely as women convicted of similar offenses to receive a prison sentence rather than probation. Across every offense category, they found that women were significantly less likely to be

incarcerated; and the few females that are given prison time have substantially shorter prison sentence lengths than their male counterparts (Rodriguez et al, 2006).

Rodriguez and colleagues (2006) discussed the chivalry thesis as a possible explanation for these sentencing disparities. They explain the chivalry thesis as the idea that “gendered stereotypes about both women and men influence sentencing outcomes according to the sex of the offender. Sometimes called paternalism, chivalry asserts that women are stereotyped as fickle and childlike, and therefore not fully responsible for their criminal behavior” (Rodriguez et al, 2006, p. 320). This perceived diminished responsibility often results in judges taking sympathy on female offenders and granting them shorter sentences than they might have handed down otherwise. Other researchers have taken a different approach to exploring this issue of paternalism in sentencing. Instead of examining court records to look for gender biases in sentencing, Daly (1989) conducted open-ended interviews with judges, prosecuting attorneys, defense attorneys, and probation officers in Springfield, Massachusetts. She found that judges and others contributing to sentencing decisions often decide to give a lighter sentence to a hypothetical female offender because of their interest in keeping families together (Daly, 1989). She explained that many of the respondents felt that women played a more integral role in the family as a caregiver for children. Therefore, as caretakers, the respondents felt that the state should have a vested interest in the children in these families (Daly, 1989). Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer (1998) analyzed data on sentencing outcomes in Pennsylvania between 1989 and 1992 and examined several factors including offender characteristics (like race, age, and gender), offense severity,

offense type, criminal history, whether the sentence was for incarceration, and sentence length. Additionally, Steffensmeier and colleagues collected qualitative data through interviews with judges. In their analysis of the interviews with the judges, they found several common themes regarding gender and sentencing including the idea that women are seen as greater costs for the correctional system to shoulder in terms of healthcare and child welfare and the idea that women are seen as being more actively involved in their communities compared to their male counterparts (Steffensmeier et al, 1998).

#### *Gender Bias in Public Perceptions of Sex Offenders*

After a review of gender bias and its effect on sentencing for general crime, the focus can be narrowed to how gender bias affects the way that the public perceives sexual offenders. Rogers and Davies (2007) conducted a study (n=337, 141 males and 184 females) that presented respondents with a short sexual abuse vignette and assessed their perceptions of the case of child sexual abuse. Based on the findings of Bottoms and Goodman (1994) and McCauley and Parker (2001), the researchers predicted that female respondents would be more supportive of the victim and more condemning of the perpetrator than the male respondents. Their findings confirmed their hypothesis, and also revealed that across all respondents, “female perpetrators were considered more favorably than male perpetrators” (Rogers and Davies, 2007, p. 579). The researchers discussed possible negative repercussions of this attitude, suggesting that because such a minority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are female, the psychological effects on male victims are often dismissed and minimized. Media and pop culture sometimes even depict the experiences as positive for male victims (Rogers and Davies, 2007).

Austin, Plumm, Terrance, and Terrell (2013) hypothesized that bias in public perceptions of sex offenders could stem from the halo effect (i.e. perceptions of sex offenders being affected by the attractiveness of the offender). College students (n=180) were given surveys containing one of six vignettes containing either a male or female teacher with either an attractive photo, an unattractive photo, or no photo. Respondents had to answer questions regarding the guilt of the teacher and the punishments for the teacher having sexual relationships with their students. The results of the study suggest that attractiveness of the offender by itself was not enough to predict an outcome; rather, attractiveness of the outcome interacted with the gender of the perpetrator and whether the mock jurors believed that the teacher's actions constituted a crime (Austin et al, 2013). The researchers found that "male participants of the study may have believed that the male victim freely chose to engage in the sexual activities" and "viewed the consequence of engaging in the sexual activities as a result of the victim's behavior," even going so far as to say that the victim desired the sexual activities (Austin et al, 2013, p. 133). Ultimately, the study concluded that the halo effect was not present in public perceptions of sexual offenders. While respondents perceived the guilt of the offender differently based on gender, respondents overall did not vary much in their sentencing opinions based on the attractiveness of the sexual offender in the hypothetical scenario they were presented (Austin et al, 2013).

#### *Gender Bias in Public Perceptions of Teacher-Student Sexual Abuse*

Now that literature regarding gender bias in public perception of sexual offenders has been explored, the focus can again be narrowed further to gender bias in public



perceptions of teacher-student sexual relationships. Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, and Holt (2004) asked undergraduate students (n=240, 120 male and 120 female) about their opinions on high school teacher-student sexual relationships. Respondents were given 4 different combinations of teacher-student genders and asked about their normalcy and acceptability. Additionally, they were also asked to assign imprisonment time and assign a label to the experience. The study found that there was significant interaction between the gender of the respondent and their answers. The researchers reported that respondents across gender lines agreed that a sexual relationship between a female teacher and male student was the most normal among any of the combinations. Additionally, respondents were significantly less likely to say that a female teacher sleeping with a male student should lose her teaching license compared to other gender combinations (Dollar et al, 2004). The researchers also noted that “male respondents indicated that a female teacher should receive fewer years of imprisonment than a male teacher” while female respondents did not make such a distinction (Dollar et al, 2004, p. 98).

Geddes, Tyson, and McGreal (2013) performed a similar study (n=130, 33.8% men and 66.2% women) and confirmed many of the same notions established in Dollar and colleagues 2004 study. Each of the participants was given one of 2 vignettes about a teacher sleeping with a student; in one, a male teacher with a female student, and in the other a female teacher with a male student. The researchers found that “sentences handed down to female teachers who engage in sexual acts with students tend to be more lenient than those handed down to their male counterparts” (Geddes et al, 2013, p. 609). The researchers also found that “participants expressed greater anger and desired harsher

consequences for a male teacher engaged in a sexual relationship with a female student than a female having a sexual relationship with a male student” (Geddes et al, 2013, p. 615).

### *Current Study*

The current study seeks to examine how public perceptions of guilt and sentencing vary in a teacher-student sexual abuse scenario based upon the gender of the teacher and the gender of the respondent. This study focuses solely on perceptions of the teacher rather than exploring perceptions of the victims. Based on literature surrounding this topic, the researcher predicted that there would be significant differences between male and female respondents’ attitudes toward the female teacher. Additionally, the researcher believed that there would be significant differences between male respondents’ responses to the male teacher versus the female teacher.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

A survey was posted to Amazon mTurk, a platform through which respondents can find surveys to complete for compensation, in February of 2018. Respondents were awarded 30 cents upon completion of the survey. An attention check question was included in the survey in order to flag respondents that were clicking through the survey without reading. The question asked respondents to select the following that best described them: Dog, Horse, Human, or Robot. A total of 354 responses were received, 327 of which passed the attention check question. Of the respondents who passed the attention check, 159 identified as male, 163 identified as female, 4 identified as other, and

1 preferred not to answer. For the purposes of analysis, the 4 respondents who identified as “other” and the 1 respondent who preferred not to answer were excluded from the final sample. This makes the final sample 322. The ages of the respondents ranged from 20 to 73 years ( $M=36.50$ ,  $SD=10.77$ ). Of the respondents, 59.63% were college graduates and 17.70% held a completed graduate degree.

### *Survey Design*

The survey begins with a consent form approved by Texas Christian University’s Institutional Review Board and an attention question to filter through participants that are simply navigating through the survey to receive their payment without reading the questions. The survey then instructed each respondent to read a vignette, of which there were 2 iterations. The vignette read as follows:

“[Robert or Rachel] Williams, a 30-year-old high school teacher, was found to be having sexual relations with a 16-year-old student. When both parties were asked about the encounter, both claimed to be in a romantic/sexual relationship with each other.”

Participants were then instructed to answer questions about their opinions of proper consequences for the teacher in the vignette—including legal and professional sanctions. Finally, participants were asked several demographic questions.

### *Dependent Variables*

The questions that immediately followed the vignette asked the participants to indicate whether they believed the teacher in the vignette committed a crime (0=Definitely not, 1=Probably not, 2=Might or might not, 3=Probably yes, 4=Definitely

yes). If the participants indicated that they believed a crime had been committed, they were asked to select one or more of the following choices as an appropriate punishment for the offender: firing from teaching position (0=not selected, 1=selected), revocation of teaching license (0=Not selected, 1=Selected), probation (0=Not selected, 1=Selected), or incarceration (0=Not selected, 1=Selected). If the participant selected probation, they were given the opportunity to assign a probation sentence (0=Less than 1 year, 1=1 year, 2=2 to 5 years, 3=6-10 years). If the participant selected incarceration, they were given the opportunity to assign an incarceration sentence (0=1 Year or less, 1=2 to 10 years, 2=11 to 20 years, 3=More than 20 years). Finally, the participant was asked whether they believed the teacher in the vignette should have to register as a sex offender (0=No, 1=Yes).

#### *Independent Variable*

The independent variable in this survey was the perpetrator gender. Participants were randomly assigned to either a male or female teacher in the vignette—changing the name of the teacher to either “Rachel” or “Robert.”

#### *Demographic Variables*

After these questions, participants were asked about demographic information that would give the researchers a clearer picture of their background. The survey asked participants about their occupational area (0=Management, professional, and related, 1=Service, 2=Sales and office, 3=Farming, fishing, and forestry, 4=Construction, extraction, and maintenance, 5=Production, transportation, and material moving, 6=Government, 7=Retired, 8=Unemployed, 9=Other), whether they were related to

anyone in the field of education (0=No, 1=Yes), and their gender identity (0=Female, 1=Male, 2=Other, 3=Prefer not to answer). Additionally, participants answered questions about their highest level of education (0=Some high school, 1=Completed high school, 2=Some college, 3=Completed bachelor's degree, 4=Completed graduate degree), their age, their political alignment (Likert scale from 1 to 7 with 1=Very conservative and 7=Very liberal), political party (0=Republican, 1=Democrat, 2=Independent, 3=Other), and their religiosity (Likert scale from 1 to 7 with 1=Not at all religious and 7=Very religious).

### *Analytical Procedure*

In analyzing the data collected in this study, the first step is to separate the sample into 2 groups: respondents who received the scenario with a male teacher and those who received a scenario with a female teacher. Within these two groups, the researcher will examine the demographic variables using appropriate statistical tests to ensure that there are no significant differences between the two groups.

After ensuring that there are no significant differences between the two samples, the researcher will compare the responses to the dependent variables, using chi-square tests. Once differences in responses by gender of the teacher are analyzed, the influence of respondent gender will be assessed. The researcher will use chi-square tests to examine how these perceptions differ between male and female respondents (Gujarati & Porter, 2009).

## **Results**

### *Demographics*

Demographic information is available in Table 1. 163 (50.62%) of the respondents were female and 159 (49.38%) were male. Of the sample, 41.93% completed a bachelor's degree and 17.7% completed a graduate degree. 27.64% of the sample identified as Republicans, 37.27% as Democrats, and 31.37% as Independents. Additionally, 38.82% of the sample had a family member that works in education. The mean age of the respondents was 36.50 years with a standard deviation of 10.77 years. Respondents were asked to describe their political leaning on a 7-point Likert scale, with the mean response being 4.43 with a standard deviation of 1.81, indicating that this sample was slightly more liberal than conservative. Respondents were asked to rate their religiosity on a 7-point Likert scale. The mean response was 3.83 with a standard deviation of 2.24, indicating a wide representation of religiosity.

In this study, the gender of the teacher in the vignette was randomized. 171 respondents received a vignette with a male teacher and 151 respondents received a vignette with a female teacher. For each of the nominal level demographic control variables, chi-square tests were performed to determine the existence of significant differences between the two experimental groups. Additionally, for each remaining demographic control variable, a t-test was performed for the same purpose. Each significance test showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the sample that received a vignette with a male teacher and the sample that received a vignette with a female teacher. This implies that there were no inherent differences between the samples; therefore, any differences in their answers are likely attributable to the gender of the teacher in the vignette they received.

Table 1. Demographics				
		Total (N=322)	Male Offender (N=171)	Female Offender (N=151)
Political Alignment [f, (%)]	Republican	89 (27.64%)	46 (26.90%)	43 (28.48%)
	Democrat	120 (37.27%)	67 (39.18%)	53 (35.10%)
	Independent	101 (31.37%)	51 (29.82%)	52 (34.44%)
	Other	9 (2.80%)	7 (4.09%)	3 (1.99%)
Level of Education [f, (%)]	Some High School	8 (2.48%)	1 (0.58%)	5 (3.31%)
	Completed High School	22 (6.83%)	12 (7.02%)	10 (6.62%)
	Some College	100 (31.06%)	56 (32.75%)	44 (29.14%)
	Completed Bachelors Degree	135 (41.93%)	69 (40.35%)	68 (45.03%)
	Completed Graduate Degree	57 (17.70%)	33 (19.30%)	24 (15.89%)
Gender [f, (%)]	Male	159 (49.38%)	84 (49.12%)	75 (49.67%)
	Female	163 (50.62%)	87 (50.88%)	76 (50.33%)
Family in Education [f, (%)]	Yes	125 (38.82%)	65 (38.01%)	60 (39.74%)
	No	194 (60.25%)	104 (60.82%)	90 (59.60%)
Age ( $\bar{X}$ , s)		36.50 (10.77)	36.44 (10.601)	36.56 (11.00)
Political Affiliation ( $\bar{X}$ , s)		4.43 (1.81)	4.38 (1.82)	4.48 (1.81)
Religiosity ( $\bar{X}$ , s)		3.83 (2.24)	3.73 (2.25)	3.95 (2.23)

*Gender Differences in Sanctions*

*Findings for Female Teachers*

Table 2 reports the results of the chi-square test examining the differences in the responses of male and female participants who received the vignette with the female teacher. The first significant finding came from the survey question “Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario committed a crime?” The question was presented as a Likert scale, with the answer choices of: Definitely Not, Probably Not, Might or Might Not, Probably Yes, and Definitely Yes. For the purposes of analysis, the answer choices of Definitely Not, Probably Not, and Might or Might Not were all labeled as “No.” The answer choices of Probably Yes and Definitely Yes were both labeled as “Yes.” With the responses collapsed in this manner, a chi-square test was conducted between the responses of the male and female respondents who received the scenario with a female teacher. The chi-square test showed that the difference between the responses of the male and female respondents was significant ( $p = .001$ ; see Table 2). Female respondents were significantly more likely to believe the female teacher had committed a crime when compared to male respondents.

The next area of analysis focused on the survey question “Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should have to register as a sex offender?” A chi-square test was performed to assess the difference in the responses of male and female participants who received the scenario with the female teacher. The test revealed a significant difference in the responses of the male and female participants ( $p = .001$ ; see Table 2). Male respondents were significantly less likely to believe the female teacher should have to register as a sex offender when compared to female respondents.



Another area of analysis centered on the question of “Should the teacher be punished in some capacity?” A chi-square test was conducted to examine the difference between the responses of male and female participants who received the scenario with the female teacher. The test revealed that the difference between the answers of the male and female participants regarding the female teacher was significant ( $p = .008$ ; see Table 2). Female respondents were significantly more likely to believe that the female teacher should be punished in some capacity when compared to male respondents.

		Male	Female	Significance Test
Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario committed a crime?	No	22	6	$\chi^2 = 11.4863$ $p = .001$
	Yes	53	70	
Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should have to register as a sex offender?	No	34	15	$\chi^2 = 11.2828$ $p = .001$
	Yes	41	61	
Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should be punished in some capacity?	No	13	3	$\chi^2 = 7.1400$ $p = .008$
	Yes	62	73	

#### *Findings for Male Teachers*

Table 3 reports the results of the chi-square test examining the differences in the responses of male and female participants who received a vignette with a male teacher. The first item on the table examines the difference between male and female respondents in their responses to the question “Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario

committed a crime?" The chi-square test showed that the differences between the responses of the male and female participants were significant ( $p = .014$ ; see Table 3). Female respondents were also significantly more likely to believe that the male teacher had committed a crime when compared to male respondents.

The next area of analysis centered on the question that asked respondents to select what they would believe to be appropriate punishments for the teacher in the scenario that they received. A chi-square test showed that the difference between the male and female participants' responses regarding the firing of the male teacher was approaching significance with a  $p$  value of .058 (see Table 3). While this chi-square does not meet the significance standard of  $\alpha=.05$ , with a larger sample this test might suggest a significant difference worth noting.

		Male	Female	Significance Test
Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario committed a crime?	No	15	5	$\chi^2 = 6.07$ $p = .014$
	Yes	69	82	
Teacher should be fired from teaching position	No	44	33	$\chi^2 = 3.61$ $p = .058$
	Yes	40	54	

#### *Findings for Male Respondents*

Table 4 reports the results of the chi-square test examining the differences in the responses of male participants across both genders of the teacher. The test showed that the difference between the responses of the male participants who received the male

teacher and the responses of the male participants who received the female teacher was approaching significance, with a  $p$  value of .087. This could suggest that males are more likely to believe the male teacher committed a crime than the female teacher. While this chi-square test does not meet the significance standard of  $\alpha=.05$ , with a larger sample significance could possibly be established.

Table 4. Chi-square tests for male respondents				
		Male Teacher	Female Teacher	Significance Test
Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario committed the crime?	No	15	22	$\chi^2 = 2.9226$ $p = .087$
	Yes	69	53	

### Discussion

To sum, the research question this study attempted to answer is: Does a gender bias exist in perceptions of teacher-student sexual relationships? When respondents were asked if they believed the teacher in the scenario had committed a crime, female respondents were significantly more likely to believe that the female teacher had committed a crime than male respondents. Female respondents were also significantly more likely to believe that the male teacher had committed a crime than male respondents. Finally, there was a notable difference in the attitudes of the male respondents between the male and female teachers with respect to criminality. While this final finding approached significance, it is still worthy of mention and discussion.

Respondents were also asked whether they believed that the teacher in the scenario should have to register as a sex offender. When presented with the scenario

including the female teacher, female respondents were significantly more likely to say yes than male respondents. Additionally, respondents were asked whether they believed that the teacher in the scenario should be punished in some capacity; a significant difference emerged in analysis of respondents who received the scenario with the female teacher. In this scenario, females were significantly more likely to say yes than male respondents.

Finally, respondents were asked to ascribe punishments to the teacher in the scenario if the respondent believed the teacher should be punished. A difference approaching significance cropped up in respondents who received the scenario with the male teacher. Female respondents seemed more likely to fire the male teacher than the male respondents.

The overall trends in the findings seem to suggest that female respondents were harsher on the female teacher than the male respondents. And to some extent, this harshness did not only apply to the female teacher, but the male teachers as well. Additionally, throughout each dependent variable, female respondents' answers did not differ significantly based on the gender of the teacher in the scenario. However, this difference was approaching significance for male respondents.

The results from this study show that some significant differences exist in the attitudes of respondents based on the gender of the teacher in the scenario; specifically when the responses were broken down by the gender of the participant. One possible reason for the disparity could be a difference in culturally conditioned attitudes regarding children. This explanation of stronger response on the part of female participants is

strongly supported by the findings of Geddes, Tyson and McGreal (2013), who reported “stronger beliefs, attitudes, and emotional responses to child sexual abuse” in females than males (pg. 610). The female participants in this study might have felt more empathy for the victim in the vignette and therefore had a harsher, more punitive response toward the perpetrator than male participants.

Another possible explanation for this disparity could be males responding based on societally constructed views of women. Because women are typically viewed as caregivers and not dangerous, males might minimize the harms caused by a female teacher sleeping with a student. Additionally, if the respondents were assuming that the gender neutral student was a male in the scenario with the female teacher, male respondents could minimize the role of the student as a victim and instead assume that the victim desired the sexual encounter with the teacher.

The idea that males were likely to adjust their answers based on the gender of the teacher was consistent with findings by Dollar and colleagues (2004), who suggest that, “male respondents’ answers were much more attuned to gender combinations than the answers of female respondents” (pg. 99). This study specified the gender of the student and included different combination of teacher-student gender, making the difference in the answers of the male respondents much more pronounced than in this study. Nevertheless, this idea that male responses are more sensitive to gender than female responses is consistent across both studies. This sentiment was also confirmed by Rogers and Davies (2007), who suggested that male perpetrators were viewed less favorably than female perpetrators. Geddes, Tyson, and McGreal (2013) specifically examined the

female response to teacher-student sexual relationships and claimed that, “female participants expressed significantly greater anger toward the teacher irrespective of the teacher’s gender.” The central findings of this study were all consistent with prior research in this area.

### *Limitations*

One of the biggest limitations encountered in this study was a lack of detail on the victim. In both scenarios, the gender of the student was not specified; the only information given regarding the student is the age of the student. To include the gender of the student in the scenario, 4 iterations of the survey would have been necessary with each iteration representing a different combination of teacher and student gender. This would be necessary in order to measure any possible bias due to perceptions of homosexual relationships. However, due to limitations with budget that ultimately limited the number of surveys that could be collected, a sufficient sample would have been impossible to gather. In the future, more specificity regarding the victim would provide a more comprehensive overview of perceptions of student-teacher sexual relationships. Additionally, it would also be interesting to explore perceptions of victims in teacher-student scenarios.

Another limitation encountered in this study emerged when interpreting survey results. One of the questions in the survey asks the respondent to “Please select one or more of the options below that you believe would appropriately punish the teacher in the scenario.” The question was presented with the options having checkboxes next to them, meaning that participants could select multiple responses. However, when looking at

survey results, quite a few respondents selected options that seemed confusing. For example, a respondent would select that a teacher should be incarcerated, but would not indicate that the teacher should be fired or have their teaching license revoked. This could possibly be attributed to unclear language in the survey question that failed to communicate that respondents should select *all* sanction options that they felt were appropriate. This could potentially affect the findings in this study, as many of the respondents who actually believed the teacher should have been fired might not have specified as such; therefore, differences, or lack thereof, could be attributed to confusion about the survey question.

Despite the limitations that appeared over the course of this study, the findings gleaned from this study are still significant and worthy of attention. While information about the victims and the respondents' perceptions of the victims are lacking, interesting trends regarding opinions of the teacher in the scenario still appeared. And even if the findings approaching significance can be called into question, several valuable findings still arose from the data collected in this study.

### **Conclusion**

The results garnered from this study are not only interesting, but also valuable in assessing current societal attitudes regarding perceptions of student-teacher sexual relationships. One of the most practical ways to use the data from this study would be in jury construction for cases of teacher-student sexual abuse. Additionally, the findings of this study could potentially assist in predicting trial outcomes in teacher-student sexual abuse cases based on the composition of the jury.

In future research, expanding the focus to victims would be beneficial in gaining a more complete understanding of issues surrounding perceptions of teacher-student sexual relationships. Previous research (Dollar et al., 2004; Geddes et al., 2013; Rogers & Davies 2007) all examined the interactions between teacher and student gender and found significant differences in the way that each of these combinations were perceived. All theorized about why respondents held these varying attitudes; however, none attempted to examine perceptions of the teacher-student sexual abuse through the eyes of the victims. It would be interesting to explore victims' own beliefs about their victimization. Do male victims of female offenders in teacher-student sexual perceive themselves as victims? Conversely, do female students who are in sexual relationships with male teachers believe that they are victims? This idea would be worthy of exploration and would add significantly to the current body of literature about teacher-student sexual relationships.



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Appendix A: Survey



**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**Title of Research: Public Perceptions of Sex Offender Sentencing**

**Funding Agency/Sponsor: None**

**Study Investigators: Dr. Brie Diamond and Hannah Parry**

**What is the purpose of the research?**

The main purpose of this research is to explore public perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender sentencing.

**How many people will participate in this study?**

300 – 350 subjects.

**What is my involvement for participating in this study?**

Your involvement includes completing one brief survey. There is no follow up to this study.

**How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?**

Less than 5 minutes is required to participate in this study.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized?**

The risks of participation are minimal but might include slight discomfort in answering questions related to sex offender sentencing. This risk is minimized by your ability not to answer any and all questions that you wish not to answer.

**What are the benefits for participating in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study outside of compensation.

**Will I be compensated for participating in this study?**

Yes, you will be compensated 30 cents for completing this study.

**What is an alternate procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?**

There is no alternative procedure.

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**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

All surveys are anonymous. Your survey data will be compiled and placed in a password-protected file on the investigator's computer.

**Is my participation voluntary?**

Yes, your participation is completely voluntary and you are free not to complete the survey.

**Can I stop taking part in this research?**

You may stop completing the survey at any time.

**What are the procedures for withdrawal?**

Exit out of the window in which you are completing the survey, or hit cancel.

**Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep?**

Copies are available upon request.

**Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?**

Dr. Brie Diamond, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice

**Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?**

Dr. Cathy Cox, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, Phone 817-257-6418.

Dr. Bonnie Melhart, TCU Research Integrity Office, Telephone 817-257-7104.

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Do you consent to participating in this survey?

Yes

No

*Skip To: End of Survey If Do you consent to participating in this survey? = No*

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Please select the following that best describes you.

Dog

Horse

Human

Robot

End of Block: Block 4

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Start of Block: Block 3

Please read the following scenario and answer the following questions.

End of Block: Block 3

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Start of Block: Block 2

Robert Williams, a 30-year-old high school teacher, was found to be having sexual relations with a 16-year-old student. When both parties were asked about the encounter, both claimed to be in a romantic/sexual relationship with each other.

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Rachel Williams, a 30-year-old high school teacher, was found to be having sexual relations with a 16-year-old student. When both parties were asked about the encounter, both claimed to be in a romantic/sexual relationship with each other.

End of Block: Block 2

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Start of Block: Survey Questions

Do you believe that the teacher in the above scenario committed a crime?

- Definitely yes
  - Probably yes
  - Might or might not
  - Probably not
  - Definitely not
-

Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should be punished in some capacity?

Yes

No

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*Display This Question:*

*If Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should be punished in some capacity? = Yes*

Please select one or more of the options below that you believe would appropriately punish the teacher in the scenario

Fired from teaching position

Revocation of teaching license

Probation

Incarceration

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*Display This Question:*

*If Please select one or more of the options below that you believe would appropriately punish the te... = Probation*

How many years of probation do you believe the teacher should receive?

- Less than 1 year
  - 1 year
  - 2 to 5 years
  - 6 to 10 years
- 

*Display This Question:*

*If Please select one or more of the options below that you believe would appropriately punish the te... = Incarceration*

How many years do you believe the teacher should be incarcerated?

- 1 year or less
  - 2 to 10 years
  - 11 to 20 years
  - More than 20 years
- 

Do you believe that the teacher in the scenario should have to register as a sex offender?

- Yes
- No

**End of Block: Survey Questions**

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**Start of Block: Demographics**

Please answer the following questions about yourself.

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Please indicate your occupation:

- Management, professional, and related
- Service
- Sales and office
- Farming, fishing, and forestry
- Construction, extraction, and maintenance
- Production, transportation, and material moving
- Government
- Retired
- Unemployed
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

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Does anyone in your family work in education?

- Yes
  - No
-



Please select your gender identity.

- Male
  - Female
  - Other
  - Prefer Not to Answer
- 

Please indicate your highest level of education

- Some High School
  - Completed High School
  - Some College
  - Completed Bachelors Degree
  - Completed Graduate Degree
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What is your age? (In years)

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Generally speaking, do you describe yourself as more liberal or conservative?

- Strongly Conservative 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5
  - 6
  - Strongly Liberal 7
- 

Please indicate the political party with which you most align.

- Democrat
  - Republican
  - Independent
  - Other
-

Generally speaking, do you describe yourself as religious?

- Not at all Religious 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- Very Religious 7

**End of Block: Demographics**

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