

# Teachers' gender, sexuality, and age affect perceptions of sexual misconduct of students

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The United States has witnessed a steep rise in reports, arrests, and media coverage of teachers' sexual misconduct with students. A new study investigated the impact of perpetrators' gender, sexuality, and age on perceptions of teacher sexual misconduct. The study found that responses to teachers' misconduct varied according to certain characteristics, which can influence whether victims report the misconduct.

The study, by researchers at Prairie View A&M University and the University of Nevada, Reno, appears in *Feminist Criminology*.

"Because sexual abuse of a child or adolescent in any context has substantial psychological, emotional, and physical consequences for the victim, teachers' sexual misconduct is a serious public health concern," says Kristan N. Russell, assistant professor of justice studies at Prairie View A&M University, who led the study. "Yet very little research has been done to examine the factors that affect how these cases are perceived."

Public perceptions are important, Russell argues, because they may contribute to the stigma experienced by victims, and also affect the willingness of victims to disclose or report these types of cases. Public perceptions also inform legal decision making regarding these cases.

The study's 495 respondents were recruited through a crowdsourcing website in 2019. They were over the age of 18 (average age was 36 years

old) and predominantly White (60 percent), male (60 percent), and heterosexual (74 percent).

Respondents were asked to read one of eight randomly assigned fictional newspaper articles describing a case of a local teacher who engaged in sexual misconduct with a 17-year-old student. The articles described forms of nonsexual contact (sending nude photos and sexting) and forcible rape. Then the respondents answered questions about their perceptions of the case and their general attitudes toward cases of this type.

The articles varied by gender of the teacher (male or female), gender pairing of the teacher and student (opposite gender/heterosexual or same gender/homosexual), and age of the teacher (26 or 52 years). The pictures of the teacher, which were stock photos, varied by gender and age.

Although the study did not find evidence of significant interactions between gender, sexuality, and age, it did find that each of these factors affected respondents' perceptions. Specifically:

- When the teacher was a woman, respondents perceived the relationship to be less detrimental to the student, the student to be more mature and responsible, and the relationship to be more acceptable.
- Heterosexual pairings were perceived as more acceptable than same-sex pairings, with the student perceived as more mature and responsible in heterosexual pairings.
- When the teacher was older, respondents perceived the teacher as more responsible and the student as having psychological issues contributing to the reasons for participating in the interaction. The age of the teacher did not relate significantly to respondents' perceptions of the impact of the relationship on the student.

The findings suggest that harmful aspects of teachers' [sexual misconduct](#) may be downplayed when the [teacher](#) is a woman, leading to underreporting of this type of misconduct by victims, the authors note. In addition, [gender](#) pairing affects perceptions, with heterosexual relationships less likely to be reported than homosexual relationships. This illustrates the persistence of stereotypes that depict gay people as predatory or pedophilic, and this, too, may contribute to reduced disclosure by victims in an effort to avoid stigmatization.

"Our findings can be used to develop trainings to inform teachers and students about the factors that influence perceptions and may contribute to underreporting, and strategies for intervening and reporting," suggests Kjerstin Gruys, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Reno, coauthor of the study. "We hope that by educating people about what to be aware of in terms of laws and consent, and by allowing systematic and anonymous forms of reporting, students and staff can feel comfortable and safe reporting crimes."

**More information:** Kristan N. Russell et al, How Do Gender, Sexuality, and Age Impact Perceptions of Teacher Sexual Misconduct? An Intersectional Vignette-Based Study, *Feminist Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1557085121998748](https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085121998748)

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