

# The Reverse Double Standard in Perceptions of Student-Teacher Sexual Relationships: The Role of Gender, Initiation, and Power

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**ABSTRACT.** The present study tested the prediction that male teachers are judged more harshly than female teachers for engaging in heterosexual intercourse with a student. One-hundred and eighty-seven adults (116 women, 71 men) evaluated a hypothetical newspaper article describing an alleged student-teacher relationship as part of a 2 (Gender Dyad: Male Teacher/Female Student or Female Teacher/Male Student) × 2 (Initiator: Student or Teacher) between-subjects design. As expected, a reverse sexual double standard was revealed, in which participants judged situations involving male teachers more harshly than they judged situations involving female teachers, but only when the sexual contact was teacher-initiated. Participants also believed that male students received more social benefits from the sexual contact than did female students.

**Keywords:** attitudes, gender-role attitudes, reverse sexual double standard, sexual double standard, social perception, stereotypes

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IN A RECENT CASE IN NEW JERSEY, a 43-year-old female teacher named Pamela Diehl-Moore was convicted of having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a 13-year-old male student. Although her behavior is qualified as statutory rape in the state of New Jersey—punishable by 5 to 10 years in prison—Diehl-Moore received a sentence of only 5 years probation for her actions. In this

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case, the judge justified his ruling by stating that “I really don’t see the harm that was done here . . . and certainly society doesn’t need to be worried.” In his words, the student was simply “[satisfying] his sexual needs,” and therefore the judge failed to find anything “that show[ed] this young man [had] been psychologically damaged by [Diehl-Moore’s] actions” (Kupelian, 2006). By contrast, James Darden, a 36-year-old male teacher in New Jersey, was given 8.5 years in prison (with life-long parole) for having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a 13-year-old female student. Moreover, Darden was required to register as a sex offender, to surrender his teaching license, and had all employment in the public sector revoked (Markos, 2008). Following the pronouncement of Darden’s sentence, the presiding judge said to Darden, “You realize what you have done to this child? You made her a woman well before her time in a very inappropriate way.” Although these cases were similar in many respects (e.g., the students’ ages, the state where the incidents occurred), the vast discrepancy between the sentences received by Diehl-Moore and Darden suggests that gender may have played a role in how these cases were perceived. From the standpoints of the presiding judges, a young male student was “satisfying his sexual needs,” whereas a young female student was “violated in a very inappropriate way.” The contradictory perspectives of these two judges suggest the existence of a double standard in which a person’s behavior is interpreted differently as a function of that person’s gender.

### *The Traditional Sexual Double Standard*

The sexual double standard has been conceptualized as different standards for the sexual behavior of women and men (Reiss, 1964), and in most cases refers to a traditional sexual double standard in which men are granted greater sexual permissiveness than are women. Interestingly, empirical research on the traditional sexual double standard over the past few decades has yielded inconsistent results (see Crawford & Popp, 2003, for a review). On one hand, many studies have confirmed that men are perceived less negatively than are women for engaging in sexual activity (e.g., Sheeran, Spears, Abraham, & Abrams, 1996; Sprecher, McKinney, & Orbuch, 1987). For example, research has shown that, compared to men, women are perceived more negatively when they have sex for the first time at a young age (Sprecher et al., 1987) or have multiple sexual partners over a 1-year period (Sheeran et al., 1996). On the other hand, several studies have found no difference in people’s perceptions of men and women who engage in sexual activity (e.g., Mark & Miller, 1986; Milhausen & Herold, 1999; Sprecher, 1989). Men and women, for instance, are perceived similarly for participating in sexual acts (such as sexual intercourse or oral sex) at a variety of stages (e.g., first date) in a relationship (Sprecher, 1989) and for having different numbers of previous sexual partners (Gentry, 1998; Sprecher, Regan, McKinney, Maxwell, & Wazienski, 1997).

In an attempt to account for the conflicting empirical evidence regarding the sexual double standard, Marks and Fraley (2006) proposed that the persistent

belief in, but lack of empirical evidence for, this double standard might actually be the result of a confirmation bias. Specifically, they argue that people tend to focus on information that is consistent with the traditional sexual double standard, and thus are more likely to perceive it as affecting judgments made by others (Marks & Fraley, 2006). Consistent with this notion, when presented with an equal number of positive and negative statements about a sexually active individual, participants in their study recalled more negative information about female targets in comparison to male targets (Marks & Fraley, 2006). More recently, Marks (2008) theorized that the sexual double standard may be a bias that, like other social stereotypes (Sherman, Lee, Bessenoff, & Frost, 1998), can be suppressed when participants are allowed to devote cognitive attention to inhibiting such a belief. However, when participants are under conditions that divide their attention between two tasks, they are unable to inhibit the sexual double standard. As hypothesized, Marks (2008) found that when participants were required to rehearse an eight-digit number while evaluating an individual, they were more likely to perceive that individual in a manner consistent with the sexual double standard. By contrast, when participants were allowed to focus solely on the evaluation of another individual without additional distraction, they judged men and women similarly.

#### *Evidence for a Reverse Sexual Double Standard*

The empirical debate over the traditional sexual double standard notwithstanding, a large body of research has shown that the sexual behavior of men and women is often judged very differently (e.g., Marks & Fraley, 2006; Sheeran et al., 1996). Although most research on the sexual double standard has focused on confirming (or refuting) the notion that, relative to women, men are granted more sexual freedom (i.e., a traditional sexual double standard), there is also evidence that men are sometimes punished more for their sexual behavior than are women (e.g., Nelson & Oliver, 1998; Smith, Fromuth, & Morris, 1997). For example, Smith and colleagues (1997) found that men were more likely to judge a hypothetical adult-child sexual interaction as sexual abuse when the adult was male than when the adult was female. In addition, using a sample of people who, as children, had experienced inappropriate sexual activity with an adult, Nelson and Oliver (1998) found that men judged their sexual contact with a female perpetrator less negatively than did women who had experienced sexual contact with a male perpetrator.

These more lenient attitudes toward female-perpetrated sexual acts may lead to harsher punishments for men accused of sexual crimes in comparison to women. To test this notion, Hetherington and Beardsall (1988) gave social workers and police officers vignettes that described an inappropriate sexual interaction between a child and his or her opposite-sex babysitter. They found that participants were more likely to perceive the incident as a case of sexual abuse—and

were thus more likely to call for legal action—when the babysitter was male compared to when the babysitter was female. Thus, their results suggest that men may be punished more severely than women for engaging in inappropriate sexual activity, even among groups who are trained to be objective and unbiased in their judgments.

The fact that men are punished more harshly than women for their involvement in inappropriate sexual activity is an apparent contradiction of the traditional sexual double standard. However, previous research seems to indicate that men's sexual behavior is perceived positively only in situations involving a female partner of similar status (as in the case of a casual sexual encounter with a peer; Sheeran et al., 1996), whereas men's sexual behavior is perceived negatively when a man is assumed to have implicit power over another individual (as in the case of a teacher and a student; Fromuth, Holt, & Parker, 2001). In other words, whenever there is a perceived exploitation of power between two parties involved in sexual contact, judgments of sexual situations can be described as adhering to a *reverse sexual double standard*. Specifically, we posit that a reverse sexual double standard exists such that men are judged more harshly than women when they are perceived to be using their power to gain sexual gratification from another individual, thereby exploiting that individual.

One possible reason why such a reverse sexual double standard might occur is that men, in general, are expected to desire sexual activity to a greater extent than women (Carroll, Volk, & Hyde, 1985). That is, men are expected to pursue relationships for physical reasons (e.g., sexual gratification), whereas women are expected to pursue relationships for emotional reasons (e.g., to feel needed). As a result, women in positions of power are not perceived to be exploiting male subordinates because the men are presumably receiving desired sexual gratification in the relationship. However, because women are expected to pursue relationships for emotional reasons, men in power are perceived to be exploiting female subordinates who may not be receiving the emotional aspects of the relationship that they presumably desire.

Another potential explanation for the reverse sexual double standard is that individuals may perceive a sexual relationship as more beneficial to a male subordinate than to a female subordinate. In this sense, the traditional sexual double standard may be an underlying component of the reverse sexual double standard. Because men are expected to obtain greater social benefits (e.g., peer approval) than are women for engaging in sexual acts (Sheeran et al., 1996), a young man is perceived as receiving a desired gain from the sexual contact, whereas a young woman is not. Therefore, individuals might judge a woman in power less harshly than a man in power because the male subordinate with whom she is involved is perceived to be gaining a desirable benefit from the sexual contact, whereas a female subordinate (with whom a man in power is involved) is not.

*Initiation, Power, and the Reverse Sexual Double Standard*

In studying the reverse sexual double standard, the context of student-teacher relationships is particularly timely and relevant given the increasing amount of media coverage and empirical research on the topic. In fact, studies focusing on student-teacher relationships (e.g., Dollar, Perry, Fromuth, & Holt, 2004; Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Fromuth et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1997) have shown that situations involving male teachers and female students are perceived more negatively than situations involving female teachers and male students. Importantly, although these studies have revealed several interesting findings about student-teacher relationships, they have consistently used scenarios that portray the teacher as the initiator of the sexual contact. Therefore, it is unknown how the introduction of a student initiator might affect individuals' perceptions of student-teacher relationships and whether the reverse sexual double standard will generalize to those circumstances.

Although empirical research has yet to explore the effect of initiation on perceptions of student-teacher relationships, studies have confirmed that the gender of a target individual is a key factor in determining participants' perceptions of the target's actions. Interestingly, several studies suggest that men are more likely to be perceived as sexual predators than women. For example, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson (1993) investigated the effects of gender on judgments of sexual touch and found that women perceived a hypothetical sexual touch from a man more negatively than men perceived a hypothetical sexual touch from a woman. In a similar vein, Rogers and Davies (2007) revealed that sexual assault by a man is perceived to be more severe than sexual assault by a woman. Additionally, other studies imply that, because females are not perceived as being sexually coercive, even when they engage in sexually coercive actions (Hannon, Hall, Nash, Formati, & Hopson, 2000), a female teacher may not be seen as a sexual predator to the same extent as a male teacher (e.g., Runtz & O'Donnell, 2003). For example, Runtz and O'Donnell (2003) evaluated college students' perceptions of sexual harassment scenarios and showed that individuals were more likely to define the interactions as sexual harassment when they involved a male perpetrator and a female victim, as compared to when they involved a female perpetrator and a male victim. Based on the findings of these studies (i.e., Rogers & Davies, 2007; Runtz & O'Donnell, 2003; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993), it could be argued that male teachers will be perceived more negatively than female teachers simply based on their gender and on individuals' perceptions of male and female sexual predation.

Although divergent perceptions of males and females can account for the results of previous studies on student-teacher relationships (e.g., Fromuth et al., 2001), individuals' perceptions of student-teacher relationships could also be based on their perceptions of power abuse. Because student-teacher

relationships clearly involve a substantial power differential between the student and the teacher, it is possible that this power differential is a key distinguishing element between situations judged by the traditional sexual double standard and situations judged by a reverse sexual double standard. Indeed, previous research has shown that the perceived power differential between two people involved in a romantic relationship moderates people's perceptions of that relationship (e.g., Mohipp & Senn, 2008). For example, several studies have indicated that situations are judged as more representative of sexual harassment when one individual is assumed to have implicit power over another individual (Katz, Hannon, & Whitten, 1996; Mohipp & Senn, 2008). Based on this research, it seems plausible that situations involving a significant power differential between two parties may be more likely to elicit the reverse sexual double standard than situations in which there is no apparent power differential. In other words, people may judge males more negatively than females when they are perceived to be abusing their power for personal sexual gain, whereas people may judge both males and females relatively equally when they are not perceived to be abusing their power. In fact, contrapower initiation (i.e., initiation by the individual with less structural and perceived power) might eliminate the perception of a substantial power differential between the student and teacher, and may therefore eliminate the presence of a reverse sexual double standard.

Nevertheless, because teachers have generally been portrayed as the initiator of the sexual contact in studies examining student-teacher relationships (i.e., Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Fromuth et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1997), it is difficult to determine whether the results of previous research investigating student-teacher relationships are based on people's beliefs about the sexual behavior of men and women (i.e., men are more likely to be sexual predators than are women; Rogers & Davies, 2007), or whether these results are indicative of a reverse sexual double standard (i.e., in which power abuse by a man is perceived more negatively than power abuse by a woman; Mohipp & Senn, 2008). On one hand, participants may make judgments about student-teacher relationships simply based on the notion that male teachers are more likely to be sexual predators than female teachers. In this case, male teachers would be judged more negatively than female teachers, regardless of any situational factors present in the student-teacher relationship. On the other hand, participants may make their judgments about student-teacher relationships based on the notion that power abuse by men is less acceptable than power abuse by women (i.e., a reverse sexual double standard). In this case, male teachers would be judged more negatively than female teachers when there is a perceived abuse of power by the teacher (e.g., when the teacher initiates the sexual contact), but not in contrapower situations (e.g., when the student initiates the sexual contact).

### *The Present Study*

Given that there are competing explanations (i.e., teacher gender or power abuse) for the differing perceptions of male and female teachers involved in student-teacher relationships, it is important to empirically investigate which explanation more adequately accounts for the results of previous research. As such, the present study asked participants to read a fictitious newspaper article about a student-teacher relationship, which varied both the initiator of the sexual contact (i.e., student or teacher) and the gender dyad of the student-teacher relationship (i.e., male teacher with a female student or female teacher with a male student). By varying both the initiator of the sexual contact and the gender dyad of the relationship, the present study sought to determine (1) whether the results of previous research (e.g., Fromuth et al., 2001) are generalizable to student-teacher relationships initiated by the student, and (2) whether the power differential between the student and teacher is the key factor in eliciting differential judgments of male and female teachers.

### *Predictions*

In general, we hypothesized that the reverse sexual double standard would operate in participants' perceptions of student-teacher relationships. That is, consistent with previous research (e.g., Smith et al., 1997) and our notion of a reverse sexual double standard, we expected a main effect of gender dyad, such that situations involving a male teacher would be rated more negatively overall (e.g., judged to be more exploitative) than situations involving a female teacher (Fromuth et al., 2001; LaRocca & Kromery, 1999; Smith et al., 1997). Next, we expected that participants' ratings of the sexual encounter would be affected by the status of the individual who initiated the situation. Specifically, we hypothesized a main effect of initiator, such that male-initiated interactions would be rated more negatively overall when compared to female-initiated interactions (consistent with Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993). However, in line with our argument that the reverse sexual double standard occurs primarily when there is a perceived abuse of power, we predicted that these main effects would be qualified by an interaction between gender dyad and initiator. That is, when the teacher initiated the sexual contact (and therefore, when the teacher was perceived to be abusing his or her power in order to participate in a sexual interaction), a situation involving a male teacher would be judged more negatively than a situation involving a female teacher. By contrast, when the student initiated the sexual contact (and therefore, when the power differential between the student and teacher was diminished), we predicted that participants would judge situations similarly, regardless of the teacher's gender. Finally, because studies have shown that men and women often have different perceptions of sexual contact (e.g., Smith et al., 1997; Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996; Struckman-Johnson &

Struckman-Johnson, 1993), we expected that participant gender might moderate these effects.

In addition to assessing the effects of initiation and gender dyad on people's perceptions of a student-teacher relationship, the present study also sought to identify potential explanations for the existence of a reverse sexual double standard. First, because the reverse sexual double standard may originate from people's beliefs that men engage in sexual intercourse for physical reasons whereas women do so for emotional reasons (Carroll et al., 1985), the present study asked participants about both the student's and the teacher's reasons for involvement in the relationship. Consistent with previous research (Carroll et al., 1985), we expected that participants would attribute men's motives for engaging in the sexual contact to physical reasons but women's motives to emotional reasons. Furthermore, given that the perception of a more positive experience for a male student may lead to a more lenient attitude toward a situation involving a female teacher and a male student (i.e., the traditional sexual double standard may be an underlying cause of the reverse sexual double standard), the present study also asked participants to judge how positive the situation was for the student. In general, we predicted that participants would rate situations involving a female teacher and a male student as a more positive experience for the student than situations involving a male teacher and a female student (Fromuth et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1997).

## Method

### *Participants*

The present study was conducted using a sample of 187 adults (116 women, 71 men). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 67 ( $M = 33.7$ ,  $SD = 14.9$ ) and self-reported their ethnicities as White (84.7%), Hispanic-American (2.7%), African-American (2.7%), or "Other" (7.1%). All participants were recruited through the Internet using convenience sampling.

### *Design and Procedure*

Participants were contacted via email and invited to participate in an online study about student-teacher relationships. Specifically, individuals were contacted directly by researchers and were encouraged to forward the recruitment email to other individuals they thought might be interested in participating. In the recruitment email, participants were briefly informed about the study and were asked to click an Internet link in the email, which directed them to the study's consent form. After reading the synopsis of the study and accepting the conditions of the consent form, participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information (e.g., gender, ethnicity, political orientation). Then, as part of a 2

(Gender Dyad: Male Teacher/Female Student or Female Teacher/Male Student)  $\times$  2 (Initiator: Student or Teacher) between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four fictitious newspaper articles about a sexual encounter between a high school student and his or her teacher (see Appendix). The newspaper article described either teacher-initiated or student-initiated sexual contact that occurred between either a male teacher and a female student or a female teacher and a male student. Following the article was a series of questions (described below) designed to assess participants' perceptions of the sexual encounter. The online study was accessible to participants for a 3-week period, after which time the link to the study was closed, the data were analyzed, and the participants were debriefed and provided with a summary of the results via email.

Several precautions were taken when constructing the fictitious newspaper article to make it realistic and impactful, but also to disguise the independent variables. First, in order to be as representative as possible, our newspaper article was modeled after a wide sample of media reports of student-teacher sexual relationships from both print and online media. In addition, although it has been demonstrated that individuals perceive student-teacher relationships involving 9- and 12-year-old students to be significantly worse than those involving 15-year-old students (Fromuth & Holt, 2008), a pilot study conducted for the present study confirmed that varying the age of the student did not have an effect on individuals' perceptions of the relationship, as long as the student was described as being in high school. As such, we felt comfortable in our newspaper article describing a high school student without specifying the student's age. Importantly, we were able to confirm the salience of our independent variable manipulations, as participants in the pilot study were consistently able to recall the gender of both parties involved in the sexual contact as well as the initiator of the contact. Finally, when probed for suspicion in post-study interviews, participants in the pilot study were unable to identify the experimental variables, suggesting that demand characteristics did not pose a threat to the present study.

### *Measures*

Participants rated their perceptions of the student-teacher relationship using five primary dependent variables (i.e., exploitation, inappropriateness, anticipated social consequences for the student, punishment, and student/teacher reasons for being involved in the relationship). Unless otherwise specified, all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). First, a 2-item index ( $\alpha = .86$ ) assessed the degree to which participants believed that the teacher exploited the student ("The student is being exploited by the teacher," "The teacher took advantage of the student"). Next, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived the situation as inappropriate ("What happened between the student

and teacher was inappropriate”). Participants then judged the student’s likely social consequences using three items ( $\alpha = .75$ ): “The student’s friends will think this experience was cool,” “The student will probably brag to his [her] friends about the situation,” and “The student sees nothing wrong with the situation.” Next, participants indicated the degree to which they believed the teacher should receive formal punishment using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*No Punishment*) to 7 (*Severe Punishment*). Three final questions asked participants to report their perceptions of the student’s and teacher’s motives for involvement in the situation. In addition to making their ratings on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely Physical Needs*) to 7 (*Definitely Emotional Needs*)<sup>1</sup>, participants were asked in an open-ended format, “If you had to guess, what do you think were the student’s [teacher’s] reasons for being involved with the teacher [student]?”

## Results

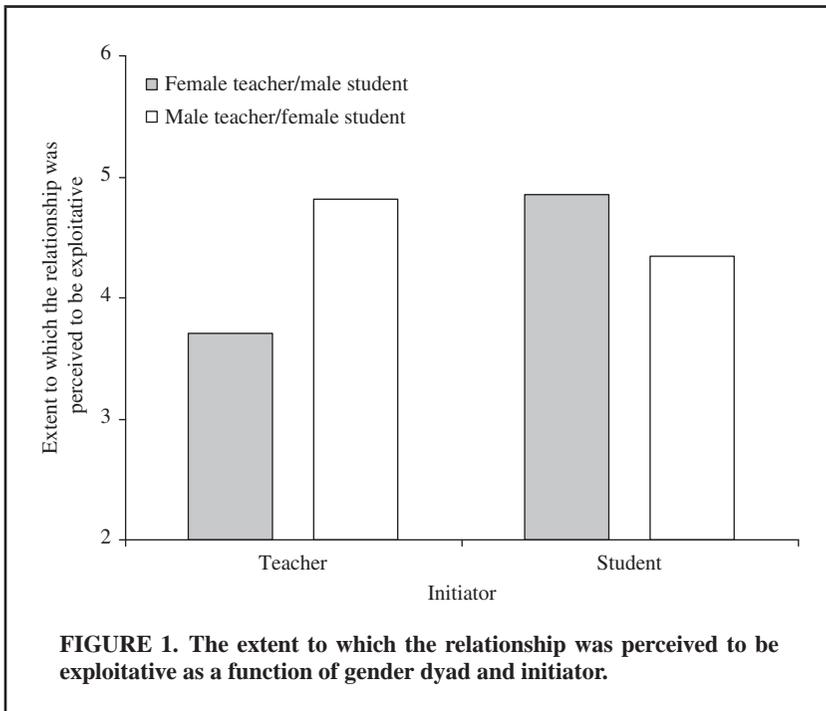
A series of 2 (Gender Dyad: Male Teacher/Female Student or Female Teacher/Male Student)  $\times$  2 (Initiator: Teacher or Student)  $\times$  2 (Participant Gender: Female or Male) between-subjects Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) was used to explore the effects of gender dyad and initiator on participants’ perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Other than participant gender, none of the demographic measures consistently moderated any of the dependent variables in the present study, and thus they are not discussed further.

### *Exploitation*

The extent to which participants believed that the teacher was exploiting the student was dependent on whether or not the student initiated the situation interaction. As Figure 1 shows, an interaction between gender dyad and initiator revealed that when the teacher initiated the situation, participants believed that situations involving male teachers ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) were more exploitative than situations involving female teachers ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $t(96) = -3.57$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $F(1, 179) = 8.55$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . However, when the student initiated the situation, participants believed that situations involving male ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 1.76$ ) and female teachers ( $M = 4.82$ ;  $SD = 1.65$ ) were equally exploitative,  $t(87) = 1.35$ , *ns*.

### *Inappropriateness*

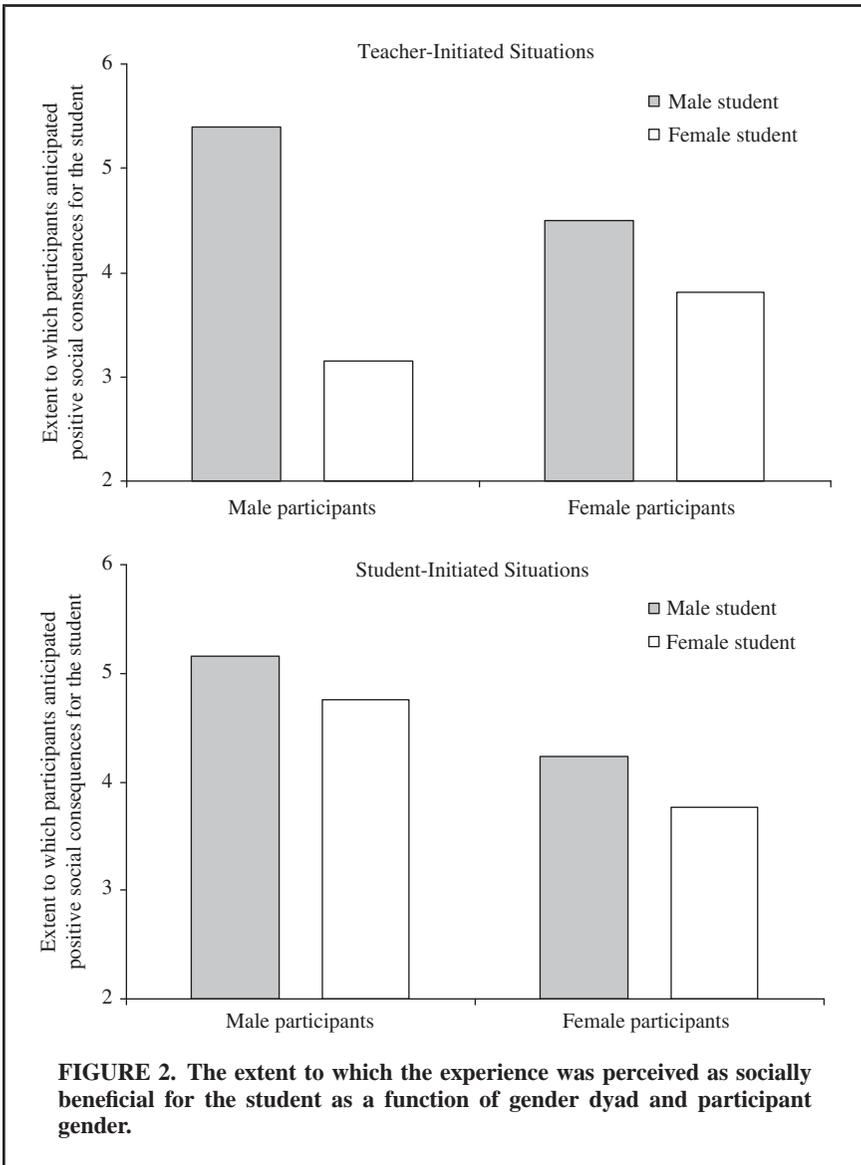
Consistent with predictions, there was a significant interaction between gender dyad and participant gender on the extent to which participants perceived the relationship as inappropriate,  $F(1, 177) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Although



the results revealed an interesting tendency for participants to consider situations involving teachers of their own gender to be more inappropriate than situations involving teachers of the opposite gender, simple main effects tests failed to reach significance ( $p$ 's = .09, .08, one-tailed); as such, these trends (which might be capitalizing on chance) are not discussed further.

#### *Anticipated Social Consequences for the Student*

As expected, participants believed that a male student ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) would be more likely to brag and to think the situation was “cool” than a female student ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ),  $F(1, 176) = 35.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .22$ . However, this main effect was qualified by a significant 3-way interaction among participant gender, gender dyad, and initiator,  $F(1, 176) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$ . As Figure 2 shows, in teacher-initiated situations, a two-way interaction between participant gender and gender dyad,  $F(1, 92) = 26.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .24$ , indicated that male participants believed male students ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) would be much more likely than female students ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) to brag and think the situation was “cool”,  $t(35) = 5.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas female participants



believed that male students ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) would be only somewhat more likely than female students ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ) to do so,  $t(57) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .06$ . In student-initiated situations, there was no such interaction between participant gender and gender dyad,  $fs < 1$ ,  $ns$ .

### *Punishment*

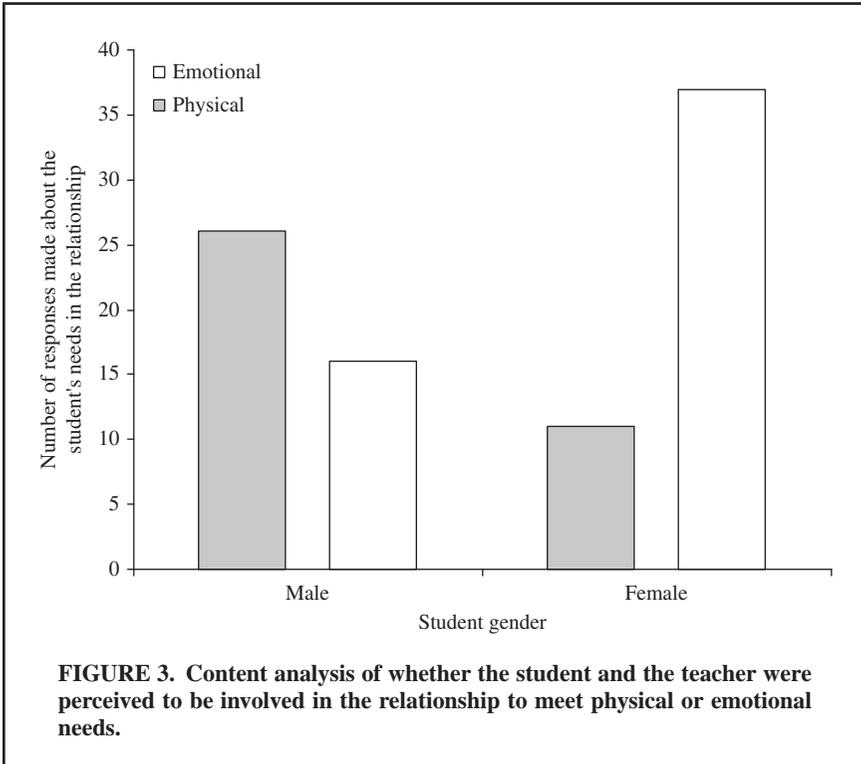
Although the interaction between gender dyad and initiator on participants' desired punishment for the teacher was significant and in the predicted direction,  $F(1, 174) = 4.19, p = .04, \eta^2 = .04$ , the simple main effects tests failed to reach significance ( $ps = .12$  and  $.14$ ); because such trends could be capitalizing on chance, they are not be discussed further.

### *Reasons for Being in the Relationship*

Participants' beliefs about the student's and teacher's motivation for being involved in the relationship were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely Physical Needs*) to 7 (*Definitely Emotional Needs*), as well as in open-ended items. As expected, there was a main effect of gender dyad on perceptions of the student's reasons for involvement in the relationship, such that participants believed that male students ( $M = 2.89, SD = 1.31$ ) were involved in the relationship to fulfill physical needs to a greater extent than were female students ( $M = 4.56, SD = 1.46$ ),  $F(1, 171) = 55.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$ . One sample t-tests confirmed that male students were believed to be involved in the relationship for primarily physical needs ( $M = 2.89$  vs. 4.00, the midpoint of the scale),  $t(93) = -8.21, p < .001$ , whereas female students were believed to be involved in the relationship for primarily emotional needs ( $M = 4.56$  vs. 4.00, the midpoint of the scale),  $t(84) = 3.57, p = .001$ .

There was a similar main effect of gender dyad on perceptions of the teacher's reasons for being involved in the relationship, such that participants believed that male teachers ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.45$ ) were involved in the relationship to fulfill physical needs more than were female teachers ( $M = 3.49, SD = 1.48$ ),  $F(1, 172) = 8.08, p = .01, \eta^2 = .10$ . However, one sample t-tests revealed that both male and female teachers were perceived to be involved in the relationship for primarily physical needs ( $Ms = 2.89$  and  $3.49$  vs. 4.00),  $t(84) = -7.77, p < .001$ ;  $t(94) = -3.33, p = .001$ .

As can be seen in Figure 3, a content analysis of the open-ended items assessing why the student and teacher participated in the relationship corroborated the findings found for the bipolar scale. Specifically, chi-square analyses revealed that male students ( $n = 26$ ) were believed to be involved in the relationship for physical needs (e.g., "for sexual maturity," "teenage hormones") more so than female students ( $n = 11$ ), whereas female students ( $n = 37$ ) were believed to be in the relationship for emotional needs (e.g., "emotional insecurity," "attention") to a greater extent than male students ( $n = 16$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 13.95, p < .01$ . Similarly, male teachers ( $n = 33$ ) were believed to be involved in the relationship more for physical needs (e.g., "purely for sex" and "physical attraction") than were female teachers ( $n = 23$ ), whereas female teachers ( $n = 49$ ) were believed to be involved in the relationship to meet emotional needs (e.g.,

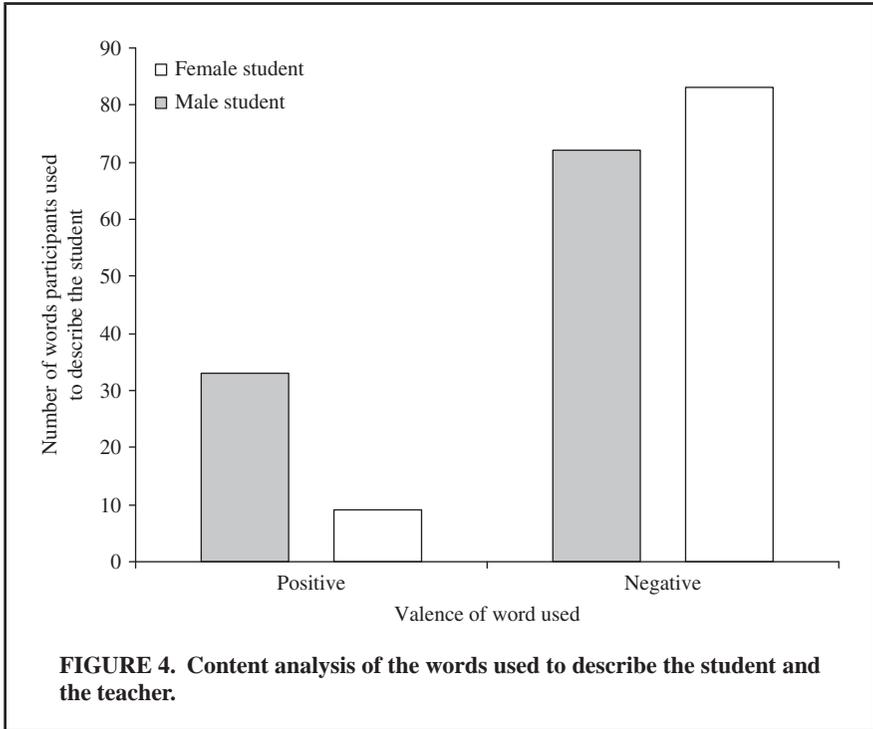


“a personal connection” and an “emotional relationship”) more so than were male teachers ( $n = 28$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 133) = 6.81, p < .01$ .

#### *Open-Ended Descriptions of the Student and Teacher*

A chi-square analysis revealed a significant relationship between gender dyad and the valence of words used to describe the student (i.e., positive or negative). As Figure 4 shows, although male ( $n = 72$ ) and female ( $n = 83$ ) students were described using an equal number of negative words (e.g., *stupid*, *promiscuous*), male students ( $n = 33$ ) were described with a greater number of positive words (e.g., *lucky*, *brave*) than were female students ( $n = 9$ ),  $\chi^2(1, N = 197) = 8.60, p < .01$ .

Interestingly, there was no relationship between gender dyad and valence of words used to describe the teacher, such that an equal number of positive and negative words were used to describe male and female teachers,  $\chi^2(1, N = 235) = 0.57, ns$ .



## Discussion

The results of the present study challenge the notion that men in power are always perceived more negatively than women in power for engaging in a sexual relationship with a subordinate. On one hand, consistent with previous research on student-teacher relationships (e.g., Fromuth et al., 2001), our results showed that if the situation was teacher-initiated, participants indeed perceived male teachers more harshly than female teachers. On the other hand, if the situation was student-initiated (which has not been investigated previously), individuals perceived the relationship more ambiguously, giving similar ratings to situations involving either male or female teachers. In other words, although previous research has indicated that situations involving male teachers and female students are judged more harshly than situations involving female teachers and male students (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2001; Hetherington & Beardsall, 1988; Smith et al., 1997), the present study offers a different perspective, namely that the perception of such relationships is contingent on the perceived power differential between the two parties.

In showing that the status of the initiator (i.e., teacher or student) of the sexual contact does, in fact, affect people's perceptions of student-teacher relationships, the present study substantiates our notion of the reverse sexual double standard. That is, only when the teacher is perceived to be abusing his or her power to gain sexual gratification are situations judged by a reverse sexual double standard (in which men are punished more than women). By contrast, when the teacher is not perceived to be abusing his or her power to gain sexual gratification (i.e., when the student initiates the situation), situations involving male teachers are judged no more harshly than situations involving female teachers.

In addition to providing an understanding of how initiation and power moderate the reverse sexual double standard, the present study also offers two explanations as to why such a reverse sexual double standard may exist. First, as expected, our results revealed a traditional sexual double standard in participants' perceptions of the student's social consequences, such that male students were perceived to benefit from a student-teacher sexual relationship to a greater extent than female students. In fact, participants used words such as *lucky*, *cool*, and *confident* to describe male students, whereas they described female students as *insecure*, *needy*, and as having *low self-esteem*. Thus, because of the benefits that male (but not female) students are presumed to receive, a relationship involving a female student (and a male teacher) may be perceived more negatively (e.g., as more exploitative) than a relationship involving a male student (and a female teacher). As such, the present study suggests that the traditional sexual double standard in people's perceptions of the student's experience may be an underlying factor of the reverse sexual double standard in student-teacher relationships. Future research should examine whether there exists a similar traditional sexual double standard in how people perceive the subordinate individual's experience in other situations that have been shown to elicit a reverse sexual double standard (e.g., child-abuse, sexual harassment). For example, it may be the case that people perceive a young female as having a more negative experience than a young male in similar sexual encounters with an adult, which may lead people to punish adult men more than adult women in cases of heterosexual child abuse.

A second potential explanation for the reverse sexual double standard is the belief that men are involved in relationships for physical reasons, whereas women are involved in relationships for emotional reasons (Carroll et al., 1985). Interestingly, our results confirmed that participants endorsed this idea in both closed- and open-ended responses. Consequently, situations involving male teachers and female students may have been perceived negatively because participants judged the male teacher as exploiting the female student to meet his sexual needs. By contrast, situations involving female teachers and male students may have been perceived in a more positive manner because participants believed that the male student had his physical needs met. Thus, it is plausible that an individual's beliefs surrounding men's and women's involvement in sexual relationships leads to the presence of a reverse sexual double standard.

Although the present study sheds light on our understanding of the reverse sexual double standard and its foundations in the context of student-teacher relationships, it is necessary to recognize some potential limitations. First, the manipulation of initiation in the newspaper article may have been less salient to participants than was intended. That is, because the initiator was described as text messaging the other individual, the situation implies that the other individual gave his or her phone number to the initiator, making the initiation more ambiguous. Moreover, because text messaging might seem, as one participant stated, like a “back and forth” interaction, participants may have judged the initiation to be at least partly consensual, thus masking the effect of initiation in our results. In fact, a stronger manipulation of initiation (i.e., a behavior that could not be perceived as consensual) would presumably serve to strengthen the results of the present study. It follows that future studies should provide a more thorough description of the interaction between the student and the teacher, including additional information about who initiated the sexual contact, in order to make the act of initiation more conspicuous to participants.

Another potential limitation of the present study is that several potential moderators of the reverse sexual double standard remain unaddressed. For example, the present study did not measure participants’ perceptions of the teacher’s subjective experience. Including a measure of the perceived positive or negative aspects of the teacher’s experience might help to clarify why participants judge situations involving male teachers more harshly than situations involving female teachers. Another potential moderator, participants’ own experiences with student-teacher relationships, was also not assessed in the current study. Although this experience is certainly a potentially interesting and important moderating variable, we chose not to address it in the present study area to avoid priming participants to think about their own specific situations or people they knew rather than student-teacher relationships more generally. Nevertheless, it would be important for future studies to evaluate these and other potential moderators in greater detail.

Despite these limitations, the present study suggests practical implications for the educational, employment, and legal systems. It has been documented across many studies (e.g., Hetherington & Beardsall, 1988; Nelson & Oliver, 1998) that, in any situation involving sexual contact between an individual in power and a subordinate, encounters involving a female in power and a male subordinate are viewed as less serious and as less harmful to the subordinate than encounters involving a male in power and a female subordinate. However, the subordinate’s subjective experience of the situation might not be congruent with such a bias (e.g., contrary to popular belief, a male subordinate can be psychologically harmed by a sexual encounter with a female in power). As a result, there is an increased need for school officials, social workers, employers, and members of the legal system (e.g., lawyers, judges, and juries) to be educated about these potential biases in their judgments of authority-subordinate interactions.

Beyond offering practical implications, the present study offers several promising avenues for future research. First, given research showing that the language used to describe someone convicted of sexual assault affects participants' allocation of punishment (Lamb & Keon, 1995), it is important to understand how the language used in media coverage of student-teacher relationships affects individuals' perceptions of those situations. Future research, for example, could investigate whether the use of terms such as "victim" and "perpetrator," which magnify the perceived power differential between the teacher and student, bias people's perceptions of student-teacher relationships.

Along with language use, social influence is another factor that might influence individuals' judgments of student-teacher relationships. Gilbert, Krull, and Pelham (1988) found that, when evaluating another individual, people who self-regulated their own behavior (because of the presence of others) were unable to adjust their initial perceptions of that individual. Thus, people who are required to evaluate student-teacher relationships in groups (e.g., jurors) may be prone to making stereotypical judgments in line with the reverse sexual double standard, regardless of the specific situational factors present in the relationship. Future research designed to investigate the role of social influence on the reverse sexual double standard would be useful in determining whether juries as a group are more likely than an individual juror to make judgments consistent with the reverse sexual double standard.

Another potential situational factor that might influence the reverse sexual double standard is divided attention. Previous research indicates that cognitively busy participants are, like people attempting to evaluate an individual in a group setting, often unable to correct their initial perceptions of others (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988). Thus, cognitive busyness can lead to such participants eliciting stereotypical judgments such as the sexual double standard (Marks, 2008). It is plausible, then, that people are more likely to endorse the reverse sexual double standard when in a condition of divided attention. Furthermore, because people who are required to evaluate student-teacher relationships in the real world (e.g., judges, jurors, school officials) are likely participating in multiple tasks when evaluating a report of a student-teacher sexual relationship, the context of divided attention may be more generalizable to real-world situations.

In conclusion, the present study provides a unique understanding of the traditional sexual double standard and the reverse sexual double standard as they relate to student-teacher relationships. However, it is important not only to understand these biases within the context of student-teacher relationships but also to expand such research to other contexts in which the reverse sexual double standard might occur (e.g., employer-employee sexual contact, child-abuse cases, patient-therapist relationships) and to evaluate other potential moderators (e.g., social influence, cognitive busyness). We hope that the current research will stimulate further investigation into the important area of divergent norms for the sexual behavior of men and women.

## NOTE

1. Rather than assessing physical and emotional needs as separate dimensions, a bipolar scale (*Definitely Physical Needs to Definitely Emotional Needs*) was used for this question to highlight the contrasting motivations that individuals perceive men and women to have in romantic relationships (Carroll et al., 1985). Nonetheless, the open-ended questions that followed (which were coded for mentions of physical and/or emotional needs for both the student and the teacher) allowed for these motives to be assessed as separate, orthogonal variables.

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## APPENDIX

February 21, 2008 – Pasco, Texas

Tim [Tina] Smith, a Biology teacher at Jefferson High School, has taken a paid leave of absence after school officials received word that he [she] and a female [male] student at the school had sex. Smith, 31, has been teaching in the Pasco school district for 7 years. Smith could not be reached for comment and the student's identity has not been released.

Smith was arrested on November 4th, posted bail, and was released. He [She] is accused of having an improper relationship with a student, a second-degree felony in the state of Texas. The case is awaiting trial.

According to an arrest warrant affidavit, a friend of the student reported to school officials that the two were having an improper relationship outside of school. The report stated that Smith [the student] sent the student [Smith] several flirtatious text messages and then invited the student [Smith] to meet him [her] at a local motel, where the two engaged in sexual intercourse.

“When we received the report, we knew that something was really wrong, and we just couldn't ignore it,” said a school administrator from Jefferson High School.

After the initial report was filed, an internal investigation at the school began, at which point Mr. [Ms.] Smith took a paid leave of absence. A formal police investigation is scheduled to take place within the next few weeks.

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