



“It must be great being a female pedophile!”: The nature of public perceptions about female teacher sex offenders

Crime Media Culture
2018, Vol. 14(1) 61–79
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1741659016674044
journals.sagepub.com/home/cmc



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Abstract

Although female sex offenders have received increased scholarly attention in recent years, and have also gained widespread media attention, minimal research has focused specifically on public perceptions of their behavior. This study explores the nature of public perceptions of a group of offenders on which the media often focus—female teachers who assault adolescent male students—by examining reader comments posted on five *Huffington Post* articles published from November 2010 to November 2013. Using a thematic coding methodology to analyze over 900 online comments, we found that most comments recognize a current double standard in the sentencing process for female teacher sex offenders compared to their male counterparts. Comments also rely on traditional sexual scripts and/or gender role expectations to either acknowledge or deny a victim’s presence. Contrary to existing research that examined public perceptions and found that more punitive attitudes were expressed toward male sex offenders, these results suggest that the public believes in equality in sentencing for all sex offenders, regardless of gender. These results also confirm prior studies that find that the public perceives adolescent male victims of rape by older women “lucky.”

Keywords

Equality with a vengeance, female sex offenders, online commenting, media framing, male victims, rape myths

Input “teacher student sex” into the *Huffington Post* search engine and a collection of stories, pictures, and videos about teacher sex offenders will appear, all located in their own subsection titled, “Teacher Sex Scandals” (see: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/teacher-sex/>). Oversized images of teacher sex offenders have descriptive headlines printed directly below each photo. Seeming interchangeable headlines such as, “Teacher: ‘I Just Can’t Help Wanting These Hot Young Boys And They Want Me’” and, “Teacher Busted for Underage Sex: ‘I Love My Job!’”

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entice readers to explore further. Of the 28 stories listed on this subsection's first page, 26 are about female offenders, most of whose photographs fit white Western beauty standards.¹ As the existence of this subsection suggests, as well as the prevalence of stories on it, stories about female teacher sex offenders frequently receive media attention.² In fact, females represent only 10 percent of perpetrators in cases of teacher-student sexual abuse (Chiotti, 2009; Clark-Flory, 2013; Terruso, 2013; Tanner, 2007) even though they represent 76 percent of public school teachers (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).³

Google search results reveal a similar trend: when searching "male teacher," the top hits refer to the need for more male teachers in education. Stories about female teacher sex offenders dominate results for "female teacher" (Clark-Flory, 2013). In addition to news articles about female teacher-student sexual relations, they show websites dedicated to ranking the "hottest female teacher sex offenders."⁴ Though Google search results may seem sociologically insignificant, they actually provide insight into public fascination with young, white, attractive female teachers who victimize young men.⁵ The media's sensationalized and romanticized portrayal of these women likely affects the public imagination and contributes to the perpetuation of myths about sex offenders in general (Broussard et al., 1991; Dollar et al., 2004; Dowler, 2006; Galeste et al., 2012; Plumm et al., 2012; Reid, 2012). Although scholars (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009) have examined media portrayals of female sex offenders as compared to those of male sex offenders, sociological research has yet to explore public perceptions by focusing on reader comments.

Answering a general call for more studies about female sex offenders (Chiotti, 2009; Denov, 2003, 2004; Frei, 2008; Gakhil and Brown, 2011; Greer, 2003; Johansson-Love and Fremouw, 2009; Landor, 2009; Plumm et al., 2012), this study investigates public perceptions about female teacher sex offenders, a largely neglected area of scholarship. Our analysis addresses reader comments on *Huffington Post* articles. Previous research has recognized such comment sections as sources of data rich with public opinions about various issues (Daniels, 2009; Dirks et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2010; Hughey, 2012; Hughey and Daniels, 2013; Steinfeldt et al., 2010).

In this article we attempt to examine how online comments reflect public perceptions about female teacher sex offenders. First, we briefly explore media representations of sex crimes. Second, we explore if and how the existence of female perpetrators and male victims confronts public views about gender, sexuality, power, and sexual assault. Following our analysis of publically accessible comments on the *Huffington Post*, we find five major themes—punishment, double standard, body, victim, and consent—that reflect a close connection between media presentations of female sex offending and the public's opinions. Despite increased public awareness of female sex offenders and male sexual abuse victims, our findings help demonstrate the persistent belief that these crimes are not as harmful as those perpetrated by male teachers against female students.

Sex offending in the media

Sex crime stories are more prevalent in news media today than they were over 20 years ago, which is not due to an increase in the number of cases, but arguably to an increase in the number of cases that are reported (Anderson and Swainson, 2001; Coxell and King, 2002; Dowler, 2006;

Landor, 2009: 86; Soothill and Walby, 1991). However, these stories are more often “sensational” than they are “serious accounts of these crimes” (Dowler, 2006; Greer, 2003; Soothill and Walby, 1991: 3). Greer (2003: 162) attributes the lack of contextual information in the media’s sensationalized construction of sex crime cases to its desire to “incite hysteria” and, in some cases, a moral panic.⁶ It is crucial to acknowledge how the media’s sensationalization of sex offenders has influenced public concern, making sex offenders the centralizing feature of modern day moral panics and ultimately resulting in increasingly punitive social and political responses (Levenson et al., 2007).

As a number of researchers have noted, societal gender norms differentiate between characterizations of female and male criminality. Therefore, research examining the media’s approach to sex offenses cannot be applied to both genders (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002; Brennan and Vandenberg, 2009; Chesney-Lind, 1989). Gendered stereotypes underpinning female criminality and women’s low crime rates draw media attention to women’s criminal behavior. While men who rape do not typically make the news as they conform to the norm that men are violent and aggressive, sexual crimes committed by women draw public scrutiny because they breach societal norms about femininity (Jewkes, 2011: 131; Naylor, 1995).

To date, only two studies have focused on the media’s presentation of female sex offenders in comparison to their male counterparts (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009). These studies reveal a gendered rhetoric in which certain words and phrases appear only in coverage of one gender’s sex offenses. Landor (2009) revealed that the Australian media referred to the female perpetrators and their victims as being “lovers” and called their actions “sex,” ignoring circumstances such as unequal power dynamics. Both Chiotti (2009: 100) and Landor (2009: 90) found that the media often labeled male sex offenders as “pedophiles, perverts, evil, and/or predatory.” They described female sex offenders as “vulnerable, lonely, depressed, or heartbroken,” all of which seem to decrease the female offender’s culpability for her crime. Chiotti’s (2009: 107) study of US mass media found that the majority of articles involving female perpetrators characterized male victims as “wanting and willing” participants. This gendered framework likely shapes public perceptions about their behavior, though research has yet to explicitly make this connection. Because our focus is female sex offenders, we do not fully consider male sex abusers here though we acknowledge that this is an important issue that should be addressed in its own right.

Public perceptions of female sex offenders

The failure of research to address issues related to female sex offenders may silence or marginalize the experiences of male victims (Denov, 2004). Put another way, this lack of research “obscures the reality that not only can males be victims of sexual assault, but also that females can perpetrate acts of sexual violence” (Denov, 2003: 303). Research on public perceptions of sex offenders has focused on reactions to male perpetrators (Gakhal and Brown, 2011). Existing research on perceptions of female sex offenders is limited to police perceptions, professional responses, and victim experiences (Denov, 2004), and addresses male victims more than female perpetrators. Scholars must then recognize how this gap in the literature potentially skews public perceptions and reinforces the male-ness of the term “sex offender,” which may have negative consequences for offenders and victims alike (Landor, 2009).

Traditional sexual scripts

The traditional heterosexual sexual scripts that label males as aggressive perpetrators and females as passive victims perpetuate the common belief that a woman cannot force a man into sexual relations (Byers, 1996; Davies and Rogers, 2006: 372; Denov, 2004; Jackson, 1978; Sarrel and Masters, 1982). Such scripts exclude the image of males as victims of sexual coercion or assault, which has negative implications for male victims, specifically those whose rapists are female (Denov, 2004: 4; Lew, 1990). Sarrel and Masters (1982: 118) note that the lack of attention on men as rape victims has led to the acceptance of the myth that a man cannot maintain an erection when threatened or assaulted by a woman. They relate this myth to the social cognition that male victims of sexual assault by female perpetrators could not be suffering the trauma female sexual assault victims experience and the assignment of much longer prison sentences to male perpetrators than females (Smith et al., 1988: 111).⁷

Teacher-student scenarios

Although some research has recognized the occurrence of teacher-student sexual contact within elementary and high schools, few studies have looked exclusively at public perceptions of these relationships. The few studies that have looked at public perceptions typically focus on male perpetrators (Corbett et al., 1993; Graves, 1994). However, three studies address undergraduate students' perceptions of sexual relations between an adult female and an adolescent male. Broussard et al. (1991) found that undergraduate students viewed such relations as learning experiences, or "sex education." Fromuth et al. (2001) proposed that their respondents were more likely to accept female teacher-male student relationships because of traditional gendered expectations and sexual scripts that frame these experiences as status-enhancing. Similarly, Dollar et al. (2004: 98) found that students viewed relations between female teachers and male adolescent students as "cool," most likely to induce bragging amongst peers and unlikely to evoke psychological harm, dismissing the effect of the power difference between a teacher and a student. These three studies leave open the question as to whether adult respondents would display similar attitudes.

Measuring perceptions via the internet. In early iterations of websites, users simply viewed static content or downloaded material that website owners made available to them. In many ways this unidirectional flow of information mimicked traditional media. In modern iterations, however, many websites have enabled community interaction, content sharing, and collaboration. Some websites provide static content, but promote public engagement through dynamic, user-generated comments. This shift from static, owner-generated content to dynamic, user-generated content represents the social nature of Web 2.0. The digitization of news media and the inclusion of online forums allowing readers to react anonymously and to facilitate discussion provide ample data to further insight into public perceptions about female sex offenders (Dirks et al., 2015; Hughey, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). Most research that has used online spaces (i.e. blogs, forums, and comment sections) to examine public discourse has looked at its use as a platform to express racist attitudes (see Daniels, 2009; Dirks et al., 2015; Glaser et al., 2002; Harrison et al., 2010; Hughey, 2012; Melican and Dixon, 2008). Scholars argue the digital space offers the anonymity which permits such racist sentiments (Daniels, 2009; Dirks et al., 2015; Hughey, 2012; Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The current study looks at whether online settings provide similar cover for

gendered discourse in relation to comments on a crime that has been gendered in the public imagination.

Current study

This study explores the current discourse about female teacher sex offenders by examining reader comments on five *Huffington Post* articles. The study's objectives are twofold: 1) to examine the nature of public perceptions about female teacher sex offenders; and 2) to explore the effects of these perceptions. Analyzing online comments about this issue will provide insight into public perceptions about the legal treatment of female teacher sex offenders and the conceptualization of "consent" in cases involving female teachers with male students. The results will add to the literature about female sex offenders and will extend prior research on perceptions of sex offenders that has so far been limited to male perpetrators. Furthermore, this research will highlight the role of online communication, specifically the comment sections on online news outlets, in disseminating gendered attitudes about female offenders.

Methods

To explore public perceptions of female teacher sex offenders, we analyzed publically accessible comments on the *Huffington Post*, which we selected as our sole news outlet because of its vast online readership.⁸ According to Vinnedge (2013), the *Huffington Post* has been described as "an asset to the Internet dialogue that contains stories missing from mainstream news sites."⁹ The *Huffington Post* is a prominent news source for liberal commentators, and its readership likely largely identifies as liberal, which comments may reflect.¹⁰

The five articles we selected, each published between November 2010 and November 2013, described a different female teacher sex offender whose victim was a male adolescent student aged 13–17. All perpetrators had been found guilty at trial and most of the articles described their sentences. While many articles on the *Huffington Post* describe cases prior to conviction, this criterion allowed us to measure commenters' perceptions of punishments. According to the articles, all perpetrators were under 35 at the time of the crime and appeared white; their photographs met white Western standards of beauty. We selected female teachers who fit this description as we expected to find commentary focused on their appearance or in reaction to their transgression of gendered boundaries (see also Dirks, Heldman, and Zack, 2015). Each article we chose had over 150 reader comments, to allow for a broad range of viewpoints. In the end, we analyzed the entire corpus of articles, five of them, that met these criteria.

The five articles yielded a variety of comments ($n = 7988$), with each serving as a unit of analysis. The median amount of total comments was 389, with a range from 190 to 3560. However, we only chose comments from the main thread (i.e. the comments that display primarily in the comment section) plus their initial reply, which reduced the total number of comments on each article.¹¹ Excluding comments located in conversation threads served a practical purpose, and there is no theoretical basis to believe that these comments are different from those located on the main comment thread in terms of commentators' expressed attitudes.

We sampled up to 200 comments on each article, as we expected to reach a saturation point at 200 comments based on previous research employing a similar methodology (Dirks, Heldman,

and Zack, 2015). Using the site's "most faved" tool, we sorted the comments by their popularity to best reflect public discourse about each story. According to the site's "Comment Policy," users may use the "Fan and Favorite (F&F)" tool to bring the "best" content to the top of the comment section.¹² After comments coded as "irrelevant" were removed, the final dataset included 678 comments.¹³ We treat these comments as if they represent distinct commenters, although it is possible that some represent multiple comments by a single commenter; excluding conversation threads lowers the likelihood of this.

Using thematic coding (Lofland and Lofland, 1995), we conducted a preliminary analysis of the comments to develop initial themes. To develop the coding schema, we drew from existing literature identifying common themes found in the media's representation of female sex offenders (see Chiotti, 2009; Frei, 2008; Landor, 2009), in addition to the initial reading of the comments. We coded each comment for the presence of the variables discussed below.¹⁴

Punishment

This variable refers to the offender's punishment, identifying it as either "just" or "unjust" or suggesting an alternate punishment (e.g. "and she got a year in jail? No prison time? F that sentence").

Double standard

This variable involves mentions of an existing double standard within the judicial process, whereby courts are more lenient with female offenders than their male counterparts (e.g. "the day needs to come when women teachers get the same penalties as male teachers get for sleeping with students").

Body/physical appearance

This variable measures mentions of the teacher's physical appearance, perceived attractiveness, and/or sexual desirability (e.g. "where were these hot teachers when I was in school?").¹⁵

Victim

This variable identifies mentions of the victim. In many instances, the comment describes the victim's feelings (e.g. "he got what he wanted") or emphasizes the victim's age, to either excuse or to blame the victim and/or the offender (e.g. "come on ... 16 year old boys would do a boulder or a cardboard box").

Consent

This variable measures mentions of consent, either describing the teacher-student sexual relations as consensual or non-consensual (e.g. "300 times is not rape ... that's consensual" and "the sick minded woman took advantage of them").

Sex offender

The final variable involves mentions of a “sex offender” label, which researchers such as Landor (2009) and Chiotti (2009) have identified as being mainly attributed to male sex offenders. Such labels include predator, pedophile, monster, and sex offender (e.g. “it’s obvious she is mentally ill and is a predator ...”).

In addition to thematic variables, we included measures of neutralization/exacerbation and tone:

Neutralization/exacerbation

To further understand the discourse surrounding female teacher sex offenders, we coded comments using Brennan and Vandenberg’s (2009) method for examining newspaper stories about female offenders, which used Sykes and Matza’s (1957) framework for “techniques of neutralization.”¹⁶ Similar to Brennan and Vandenberg’s (2009) methodology, we coded comments that lessened or trivialized the offender’s actions or responsibility as “neutralization” (e.g. “11 days in jail! It must be great being a female pedophile!”) and comments that emphasized the responsibility or guilt of the offender as “exacerbation” (e.g. “unbelievable, there is no equality, women can do anything and get away with it”).

Tone

We coded each comment for positive, negative, or neutral/mixed tone. Comments that de-criminalized the offender’s behavior or offered defense (e.g. “I see no crime committed”), or noted the offender’s attractiveness and/or sexual desirability (e.g. “where were these hot horny teachers when I was 17??”) were coded as positive. Comments that unfavorably discussed the offender’s criminal behavior, offered a harsher punishment, or recognized a double standard within the justice system were coded as negative (e.g. “I am SICK that she is SICK and only given a 4 year sentence after wrecking 5 boys lives”). Comments that included both positive and negative content (e.g. “why is it always the hot ones that are messed up hahahaha”) were coded in the neutral/mixed category.

Results

Narrative analysis

In this section we present a qualitative analysis of our findings using specific comments (i.e. narratives) to highlight the primary themes (see Table 1). These results are organized in accordance with the variables discussed in the Methods section, producing five major themes: punishment, double standard, body, victim, and consent. Within these, we present sub-sections describing the common attitudes expressed within the larger theme. Additionally, we include measures of tone and techniques of neutralization to further examine the expression of primary themes within the comments. All comments are written exactly as they were found online, without the use of “[sic]” to denote grammatical or spelling errors.

Table 1. Primary themes found in comments that discuss female teacher sex offenders.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Punishment	300	44.2
Double Standard	213	31.4
Body	87	12.8
Victim	269	39.7
Sex Offender	54	8.0
Consent		
Yes	100	14.7
No	70	10.3
Tone		
Positive	242	35.7
Negative	400	59.0
Neutral	36	5.3
Techniques of Neutralization		
Neutralization	247	36.4
Exacerbation	403	59.4
Neutral	28	4.1

n = 678.

Punishment

Retribution. Comments in this category discussed the offender's punishment (*n* = 300; 44.2%), often stating the need for a harsher punishment. Of these comments, 79 percent (*n* = 237) were coded as expressing a negative tone, and 80 percent (*n* = 240) were coded for exacerbation. Accordingly, many comments suggested much longer sentences for the offender. For example, "29 months? That's it? Wow, talk about a crooked justice system ... this monster should have gotten 25 to life." Another example recommended the offender's execution in saying, "Try 300 years, once for each conviction of rape seems about right ... and the first 2 years of it in the electric chair." Comments such as these expressed the need for increased punishment, both through incarceration and through violence, e.g.:

hmmm, we can make that punishment fit the crime better. Give her the 29 months but make her serve it in a men's prison. I am sure that she will have had her fill of sex by the time she gets out of that.

Such commenters called for retribution—rape of the rapist.

Incapacitation

Comments concerning incapacitation not only suggested retribution as a form of punishment, but also incapacitation, giving long-term sentences to all sex offenders, regardless of gender, to prevent re-offending. Some comments mentioned harm caused by the offender, saying that sex offenders should be incarcerated to protect children. As one comment reads: "But this

double standard for these sick women is doing nothing but making our children less safe and enabling child predators. She needs to do much more time for the HARM that she's caused." Because female teacher sexual offenders typically receive lighter sentences than their male counterparts (Reid, 2012; Simmon, 2012; Terruso, 2013), many commenters recognize a double standard in sentencing and believe that these women should receive longer sentences to protect society.

Double standard

"If she were a man ...". Over 30 percent ($n = 213$; 31.4%) of all comments referenced an existing double standard in sentencing between male and female sex offenders. Typical comments of this variety included, "If a man had done this, he'd get a lot more than 29 months in jail" and, "the day needs to come when women teachers get the same penalties as men teachers get for sleeping with students." The majority of these comments exacerbated her crime ($n = 197$; 92.5%), declaring the presence of a victim and the need for an increased sentence.

Other comments within this category blamed feminists for this double standard, stating that if a male sex offender were to receive a "light sentence," women's rights groups would be outraged. For example:

Feminists are all giving each other pats on the back and laughing, telling each other we get special treatment and favors in the justice system. Feminism has been exposed. If a man received 29 months for raping a 13 year old girl, every feminist and women's rights advocate would hold press conferences stating how justice was not served.

According to such comments, feminists and women's rights groups protect female offenders as zealously as they protect female victims. Another comment reads: "What DOUBLE STANDARD. Men are not treated equal to women. Will women's rights advocates hold a press conference to demand this woman receive the same jail sentence as men?" These comments blame all women—not just the perpetrators—for this double standard and want equal treatment under the law for men and women.

Gender stereotypes. Many comments mentioning a double standard in the judicial process identified gender norms and traditional sexual scripts as drivers of unequal sentencing for female sexual predators. For example, "Notice that the woman again doesn't go to jail because you folks think it's ok for boys to be abused and you call it learning and a chance to score." And:

We treat female sex predators lightly because our society doesn't believe women are sexual creatures. And I'm sure there are some idiots who would bend over backwards to claim that the woman was the victim of the boy in this case (Because women are always the victim of men, never the predator).

These comments reveal an awareness of gender stereotypes, and more specifically the traditional sexual scripts, that not only impact societal perceptions of female sexual predators, but also treat women "lightly" in judicial processes. As one comment claims, "Jurors and judges are loathe to

prosecute females because they think the boy wanted it." Comments such as this further suggest an understanding of how gendered perceptions influence lenient sentencing patterns.

Comments also expressed the opposite: describing the existence of a double standard that should excuse female sexual predators from punishment. For example, "jail time? Seriously? I am a woman and even I know this would be considered the greatest fantasy for a teenage boy, let alone every man on earth. Let her go" and, "this woman should not be prosecuted for this, totally ridiculous ... she affected those boys lives for the better, she should be praised!" These comments also repeated traditional gender roles and sexual scripts.

Body

Comments about the body ($n = 87$; 12.8%) discussed the offender's attractiveness and/or sexual desirability. Such comments included, "[Offender name] must be epic she looks hot to me I hope they post the vids on the net" or "why are all these female perverts so good looking?" These comments neutralized the offender's actions, trivializing the students' sexual victimization.

Other comments that mentioned the body used the offender's attractiveness to excuse her sex offender status. For example, "Outside of her being a teacher ... who cares. He's 17 and she's 27 and hot ... but there's no real victim here (except maybe the husband) its not like he's in danger of being traumatized by the event." And, "I don't feel bad the kid polled the hot teacher."

Because of the offender's perceived attractiveness, some commenters did not view her sexual relations with students as negative or as non-consensual. Rather, these comments neutralized the blameworthiness of the offender and commended the student for having sexual relations with his "hot teacher." Other commenters expressed their own attraction to the offender by claiming that they would have engaged in sexual relations with her when they were the victim's age. Common examples include, "where were these hot horny teachers when I was 17?" and, "I would have done her when I was 16." Such comments describe these teachers as "hot" and "horny," using their appearance, sexuality, and sexual desirability to negate their sex offender status. One commenter recognized this trend in the comments, stating that: "Because of the way Americans think, it's not abuse if she's pretty ... but as a pretty woman it is viewed as no harm, because the victim is a guy."

Consent

"He is not a child!". Of the comments that mentioned the victim ($n = 269$; 39.7%), many claimed being male and adolescent precluded victimhood. Such comments cited victims' ability to make their own decisions about their sexual behavior (e.g. "a 17 year old in college is probably mature enough to decide if he wants to have sex or not"). Comments also used the victim's age to argue that harm was minimal. As one comment reads, "I find it ridiculous that a sexually mature 17 year old male was harmed by having sex with this woman. He is not a child!" Others suggested the rape had been a gift, e.g. one commenter who called the relations between a male student and his female teacher "consensual" and claimed it would result in "valuable sexual experience his future GF or wife will appreciate."

"Can't rape the willing". In comments that discussed the sexual relations between the teacher and her student(s), 14.7 percent ($n = 100$) described their relationship(s) as being "consensual."

These comments did not validate the student's victimhood; rather, they described him as a willing participant (e.g. "as much as I don't agree with what she did, you can't rape the willing"). Many comments of this sort assumed the victim enjoyed the sexual relations, justifying their opinion with gender norms and traditional sexual scripts. Examples include: "17 year old men ... yes men ... and they cried over having sex with a teacher? Omg ... I would have cheered ... something is very, very wrong here," "BS, he was willing and old enough ... I am sure she did not rape him," and "the guys LOVED it, I am sure. They are men, they loved gettin some from the older woman." Because the victims are male, commenters believe they could not, and should not, be hurt by having sexual relations with their older, female teachers.

Other comments suggested that a female could not perpetrate rape because of male biological functions. Some comments stated that the crime is different when a woman is the perpetrator (e.g. "the crime isn't the same as a man raping a girl by forcible compulsion. You will not find a case where the boy was not willing"). Other comments specifically mentioned the male reproductive organ to explain why the female teachers did not rape their male students. Examples include: "Unless she drugged him with Viagra there was no rape involved ... 300 times? The male reproductive organ doesn't work even once if it is afraid." And:

If it was that traumatic, the kid couldn't have maintained an erection. No such thing as rape (I'm talking vaginal intercourse here) of a male by a female ... everyone in their heart of hearts knows this is true (at least all the male readers do).

Such comments reveal the myths commenters hold about female/male biological features and the common gendered tropes that frame rape as an act that can only involve female victims.

Victim blaming. Some comments actually accused the victim of ruining the teacher's life, claiming that the victim should receive blame for being aware of, and consenting to, the sexual activity. For example, "Have you no conscience or shame? This woman did nothing to you that you didn't ask for ... you boys just ruined this woman's life and sent her to jail for four years. How can you sleep at night?" Comments such as this placed the victim at fault for "asking for it." Some comments asserted that the victim took advantage of his teacher. As one comment suggests, "... which leads to the possibility that they took advantage of her as she did of them." Other comments accused the victims of seeking money by going to trial (e.g. "the kids got what they wanted. Claiming depression is just scamming for money. Its all adult consensual"), and still others denied the victim's status as a "victim," saying that he is no more a victim than the teacher, e.g.:

man I hate it when they say the 'victim' – this kid is 16 years old and horny as a dog and he gets an opportunity to have sex with a decent looking woman and you call him a victim? PLEASE ... he is not more a victim than she is!

All of these examples reveal commenters' inability to view the male student as a "victim"; rather, he is lucky for "getting what he wanted" by engaging in sexual relations with his attractive teacher.

No consent

Abuse of power. Only 10.3 percent ($n = 70$) of all comments described the teacher-student sexual relations as “non-consensual.” Of that 10 percent, virtually all ($n = 69$; 98.6 percent) applied blame to the perpetrator and not the victim. Most of these mentioned the teacher’s position of authority and, consequently, her abuse of power (e.g. “These boys are young, emotionally and mentally and there is no excuse for an adult to put them in that position, especially an adult with a position of authority ... such as a teacher”). Many comments discussing the rapist’s position of authority described her actions as a destruction of trust—regardless of the “hot teacher” male fantasy—that has damaging consequences for the victim. Examples include:

What is wrong though is any person who has direct authority/responsibility over another having sex with that person. You can’t reasonably separate the control/consent issues. Teacher/student. Boss/employee, officer/enlisted. She shouldn’t feel bad about having sex with the guy, she should regret violating her responsibility as an educator.

And:

Becoming sexually involved with an authority figure can be extremely traumatizing. Even if they could legally have sex, that doesn’t mean that the boys truly had a choice in the matter. What if they felt coerced? What if only one of them felt coerced? That’s still tragic.

These comments portray an opposing perception of female teacher sex offenders to those discussed above: because they are teachers and hold an authoritative position over their victims, they should not be engaging in sexual relations with their students. Further, *because* they occupy this position of authority and trust, teacher-student sexual relations can never be consensual (e.g. “what if they felt coerced?”).

“Predator, monster, pedophile”. Only eight percent ($n = 54$) of comments used described the offender with a sex offender label such as predator, pedophile, or monster. Such comments included: “she is a pedophile plain and simple and will re-offend. Just because she is a woman doesn’t mean the same rules should apply” and “she is a predator as much as any of these guys out there doing the same thing to girls.” Prior research has shown that mass media typically reserve these labels for male sex offenders (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009). Yet these comments show a small number people considering sex offending as genderless.

Discussion

The majority of all comments condemn offenders’ behavior, with most describing the offender in a negative tone and recommending punishment equal to that of men. Of the almost half (44.2%) who focused on the offender’s punishment, most either expressed disapproval of a sentence the commenter considered too light or specifically called for a heavier sentence. A substantial minority of comments overall (31.4%) identified a double standard in the sentencing process that treats female offenders more leniently than their male counterparts. This finding demonstrates public

recognition of the gender role stereotypes that fuel gender inequalities within the judicial process. Commenters who identified the double standard (31.4%) were also likely to identify traditional sexual scripts and gender norms as drivers of the double standard. These findings challenge prior studies that suggest the public largely favor inequality in sentencing in which male sex offenders receive a more punitive punishment than their female counterparts (Levenson et al., 2007; Smith et al., 1988) and that people do not recognize that courts treat female sexual offending differently from male offending (Denov, 2004). At the same time, most commenters (92%) did not apply sexual offender labels to the perpetrator, which aligns with other research about the gendered use of these terms in the media (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009).

The calls for punishments of female sex offenders to be on a par with those of male sex offenders demonstrate a concept called "equality with a vengeance" (Lahey, 1985). Smart (2003: 162) sums up this position thus: "If women want equality they must have it in full, and so some feminists want women to be sent in their droves to dirty, violent and overcrowded prisons for long periods of time." Equal treatment, however, may not be fair treatment, as women experience different social, political, and economic circumstances to their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Covington and Bloom, 2003; Heidensohn, 1986). These comments discuss a double standard in sentencing whereby women should receive the same treatment under the law as men, illustrating a common reaction to the light treatment of female offenders (Reid, 2012; Simmon, 2012). Although we could not determine commenters' genders, comments from men's rights activists, who readily accused women's rights groups of applauding the justice system for its favoritism of female offenders, reveal the desire for women to receive the same harsh punishment as convicted male teacher sex offenders.

Whereas calls for greater punishment suggest commenters' recognition that a serious crime has occurred, commenters who showed this recognition typically had little to say about the victim. Those who reference the victim typically perpetuate victim-blaming rhetoric or deny victimization through reliance on sexual scripts. Such comments demonstrate the perception that Byers (1996) discusses in her review of the literature on sexual scripts. She describes the traditional, heterosexual sexual script as follows:

[The traditional sexual script] depicts men as "oversexed" and women as "undersexed." As such, men are described as having strong sexual needs, being obsessed with sex, being highly motivated to engage in sexual activity, and willing to exploit or pursue any sexual opportunity made available by a woman. (Byers, 1996: 9)

Over 35 percent of comments repeat this script by neutralizing the offender's behavior and congratulating the victim for engaging in sexual relations with his "hot" teacher. They describe the students as succumbing to the sexual opportunities their teachers provide. Evidence suggests this societal construction of masculinity can extend to a case where a 30-year-old female teacher raped her 13-year-old student and defined it as a "learning experience" (Broussard et al., 1991; Dollar et al., 2004).

Comments that praise the victim for fulfilling the male "hot teacher" fantasy and portray them as "lucky," as well as those claiming it is impossible to induce tumescence in an unwilling participant, perpetuate rape myths about men. Scholars have warned that the media's portrayal of female sex offenders perpetuates these myths (Broussard et al., 1991; Chiotti, 2009; Denov,

2003; Dollar et al., 2004; Frei, 2008; Reid, 2012). Although over half of all comments expressed exacerbation and a negative tone, these comments were mainly directed at the offender's punishment, as opposed to the victim. Only 10 percent of all comments believed that the teacher and the student engaged in non-consensual relations, recognizing the power dynamic between the teacher and student. The other 90 percent of comments ignored this power dynamic and either neutralized the relations or focused on the offender's punishment. These narratives further support the notion that men cannot be rape victims, specifically when involving a female perpetrator, and even further, that they should be blamed for their circumstances.

Implications

This study fills an important void in the existing research on both media depictions and public perceptions of female sex offenders. While media glamorizes and romanticizes female sex offending and consequently diminishes the offenders' blameworthiness (Reid, 2012), the effect of that glamorization has not been studied directly. By looking at online comments, we examine a very close connection between media presentations of female sex offending and the public's opinions. It is, then, crucial to understand public perceptions of female sex offenders and their punishments, as they influence policy makers, criminal law, victim reporting practices, and mental health professionals (Denov, 2003: 313).

The most pressing implications of these findings illustrate the need for more research on societal perceptions of female sex offenders and responses to male victimization. These implications are especially pertinent in light of widespread media attention on female sexual offending and the digitization of news media that has made these stories increasingly available to the public. It is even more important to recognize that men account for 10 percent of all sexual assault, sexual abuse, and rape victims in the United States (RAINN, 2009). However, due to gender role expectations, traditional sexual scripts, lack of treatment, and fear of disbelief (Davies and Rogers, 2006; Kassing and Prieto, 2003: 455; Mezey and King, 1989), male rape is often underreported and victims often face immense stigma when they do choose to report their victimization. These findings illuminate how male rape victims are silenced and stigmatized, and sometimes even congratulated, within today's rape culture. Given the new anti-rape movement underway, the comments that frame the victim as "lucky" for being victimized are deeply troubling and merit future investigation.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of this study warrant some caution when trying to generalize from its results. Primarily, we collected the data exclusively from one online news outlet. Although the results do provide insight into public perceptions of female teacher sex offenders, they may not be generalizable to other news sources. For example, the *Huffington Post* exists as a liberal news source and therefore may primarily attract liberal commentary or individuals with similarly founded socio-political perceptions. Future research may want to explore a more conservative news outlet to compare differences in discourse. Also, this study focused on a small, select group of white female offenders who were chosen for their adherence to conventional Western beauty standards and definitive status in the sentencing process. Selecting only five stories strictly based on these criteria

further limits the generalizability of our findings. Though it is not clear if a content analysis of comments on stories about women who do not fit these conventional beauty standards, identify as non-white, or engage in sexual relations with a female student would yield different results, it is possible.

Based on prior research that included a comparative analysis between female sex offenders and male sex offenders in the media (Chiotti, 2009; Landor, 2009), we suspect that a comparative analysis would show that comments on stories about female teacher sex offenders are different to those on stories about male teacher sex offenders. A methodological problem a researcher would face—which we faced ourselves in designing the current study—is that few articles depict male teacher sex offenders, and the level of violence those articles depict is extreme.¹⁷ Future research that examines this comparison may be valuable in understanding how public perceptions differ and may also support previous findings about gendered discourse in media framing of these individuals. Lastly, a future project might analyze both news stories and comments to examine how media framing of female teacher sex offenders directly affects public perceptions.

Conclusion

Though the media's portrayal of female sex offenders is undoubtedly sensationalized, these results show that, by giving these offenders increased media attention and thus placing them into public view, the media has given the public an understanding that: 1) women *can* be sexual predators; 2) men *can* be victims of sexual abuse; and 3) there is a disparity in sentencing between female and male sex offenders. However, change is coming slowly. Comments suggest that the glamorization of female teacher-student sexual relations, the trivialization of male victimization, and the idea that these crimes are not as harmful as those perpetrated by male teachers against female students all persist.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Our use of the term "white Western beauty standards" draws on Kwan and Trautner (2009: 49), who write that standards of beauty in contemporary Western societies "embrace youth and privilege whiteness as embodied in fair skin, eye color, and hair texture."
2. The *Huffington Post* is one of many online and print publications whose coverage of female teacher sex offenders overshadows that of their male counterparts (Chiotti, 2009; Reid, 2012).
3. According to Chiotti (2009: 89), female sex offenders account for 45 percent of all media publications about sex offenders in general, yet they represent only 10 percent of case-report research and between 20 and 40 percent of self-report studies.
4. See, for example: *Teacher Appreciation Week: 25 Hottest Sex Offenders* (<http://www.gunaxin.com/teacher-appreciation-week-25-hottest-sex-offenders/7531>) and *Hot for Teacher 2010: The 42 Sexiest Female Sex Offenders* (<http://coed.com/2010/10/26/hot-for-teacher-2010-the-40-sexiest-female-sex-offenders/>).
5. Drawing upon Denov (2004), we acknowledge the problematic nature of using the term "victim" throughout this paper. Lew (1990) found that feminists, clinicians, and victims alike have taken issue

with the term, arguing that it “denotes powerlessness, hopelessness, and vulnerability” (Denov, 2004: 8). We recognize that this term fails to sufficiently portray experiences of sexual abuse, but use it throughout for consistency.

6. A “moral panic” describes a “condition, episode, person, or group of persons which merge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972: 9).
7. To be certain, there is an enormous field of research that has critiqued traditional heterosexual sexual scripts that position male sexuality as inherently aggressive and pursuant and in binary opposition to women’s sexuality as passive and compliant. There is also an increasingly emerging literature which extends beyond this one common male rape myth.
8. Since its inception in 2005, the *Huffington Post* has received over 260 million comments from its community of readers (Landers, 2013).
9. Each month the site attracts more than 40 million unique visitors, 500 million page views, and 3 million comments about political, social, economic, and cultural issues (Vinnedge, 2013).
10. The *Huffington Post* was created as an outlet for liberal commentary in response to their conservative counterpart, *The Drudge Report* (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2013).
11. We were unable to verify the number of comments on each article that only included comments on the main thread, as articles only displayed the total number of comments.
12. According to its “Comment Policy,” all comments posted on the *Huffington Post* are human moderated. More information about the *Huffington Post*’s “Comment Policy” is available at: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/faq/#moderation>.
13. Comments coded as “irrelevant” did not reference the news story, the offender, and/or the victim in a direct or indirect way (e.g. “men are not organized”).
14. All authors discussed the coding scheme and went over several examples that served as test cases for all of us to discuss. After resolving any discrepancies in opinion, and following the best practices of previous scholarship, the primary author coded all statements independently.
15. Dirks, Heldman, and Zack (2015) also uses this variable to examine commenters’ perceptions of female offenders on *Mugshots.com*.
16. In drawing on Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “techniques of neutralization” to direct their discussion, Brennan and Vandenberg (2009: 153) used the following seven themes to measure neutralization in newsprint articles about female offenders: overall favorable tone, denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, appeal to higher loyalty, condemnation of the condemners, and reformation through disengagement. To measure exacerbation, the themes included: overall unfavorable tone, guilt attributed, real injury, real victim, self-interest, praise for the condemners, and no hope for reformation.
17. According to a basic count, the *Huffington Post* has published 18 stories about female teacher sex offenders, compared to six stories about their male counterparts, within the past two years.

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