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Biased Terminology Effects and Biased Information Processing in Research on Adult-Nonadult Sexual Interactions: An Empirical Investigation

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Adult-child and adult-adolescent sexual interactions have generally been described in the professional literature with value-laden negative terms. Recently, a number of researchers have criticized this state of affairs, claiming that such usage is likely to have biasing effects. The current investigation examined empirically the biasing impact of negative terminology. Eighty undergraduate students read a shortened journal article that used either neutral or negative terms to describe a number of cases of sexual relationships between male adolescents and male adults—the shortened article was adapted from Tindall (1978). Additionally, students were exposed either to descriptive information or descriptive plus long-term nonnegative outcome information. The purpose of this manipulation was to examine whether students would process the neutral and positive data in a biased fashion, because these data contradict strongly held assumptions of harm as a consequence of these contacts. Students' judgments were negatively biased by the negative terminology. The students also exhibited evidence for biased processing of the nonnegative outcome information.

“Child sexual abuse,” although defined in various ways (Haggard & Reppucci, 1988), typically is defined to include any sexual contact between a child or an adolescent and an older individual (Jones, 1990; Kilpatrick, 1987). In short, it is a catch-all term for any sort of adult-nonadult sexual contact. Other terms frequently used to describe such contacts include “sexual exploitation,” “molestation,” and “victimization,” sometimes all in the same article (e.g., Burgess, Hartman, McCausland, & Powers, 1984). As Kilpatrick (1987) noted, the use of such terms is often based “not on effects upon the child, but upon age discrepancy and community standards about what is an exploitative sexual relationship” (p. 175).

The terms used to describe the younger individual involved in such contacts are equally negative in their implications. The younger person is variously labeled a “victim” (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979a), “molested child” (e.g., Fritz, Stoll, & Wagner, 1981), “sexually exploited child” (e.g., Kempe & Kempe, 1978), or “survivor” (e.g., Summit, 1989). Again, these labels are frequently

employed without reference to the issue of effects on the younger individuals or to their own characterization of their experiences. Some researchers have explicitly asserted that adolescents or children who perceive themselves as consenting or who rate their experiences as positive should still be defined as victims (Finkelhor, 1979b; Maltz, 1989; Russell, 1986). Similarly, negative terms have been frequently used without qualification to describe the older individuals involved in these contacts. The older person has been labeled with terms such as “offender,” “aggressor,” “assailant,” “exploiter,” and “perpetrator” (e.g., Burgess et al., 1984; de Young, 1982; Johnson, 1988).

Recently, some authors have begun to question the indiscriminate use of terms suggesting victimization and harm in describing all such contacts. Kilpatrick (1987) noted that researchers often fail to distinguish between “abuse” as some type of harm to the child or adolescent and “abuse” as a violation of social norms. This is problematic, Kilpatrick argued, because it is not scientifically sound to

assume that violations of the social norms lead to harm for the child or adolescent. Okami (1990) argued that the use of only negative terms to describe adult-nonadult sexual contacts is based on the unsubstantiated assumptions of inherent exploitation and mutual exclusivity of erotic and affectional feelings in these contacts. He concisely stated his criticism of the indiscriminate usage of negative terms:

Assumptions such as these, and the consequent exclusive use of negatively loaded terminology such as “abuse,” “assault,” “attack,” “molestation,” “exploitation,” or “victimization” to refer generically to all adult human sexual behavior with children and adolescents, confound attempts to understand such interactions and may reflect . . . a serious conflict of interest between scientific inquiry on the one hand and enforcement of social norms or propagation of political ideology on the other. (p. 99)

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Going beyond the criticisms raised by Kilpatrick (1987) and Okami (1990), Nelson (1989) suggested an alternative terminology for describing adult-nonadult sexual contacts. The need for this alternative terminology, Nelson argued, is indicated by reviews of empirical investigations which have demonstrated that the reactions of nonadults to their sexual contacts with adults are not exclusively negative (Constantine, 1981; Kilpatrick, 1987). Based on these reviews, Nelson argued for a "continuum model" of such relationships which makes no assumptions about harm. In this model a range of experiences is acknowledged from those that are clearly abusive at one end of the continuum—experiences involving force or coercion—to those at the other end that involve perceptions of consent and positive responses from the younger participants. Nelson claimed that the unquestioned use of terms suggesting force, coercion, and harm reflects and maintains the belief that such relationships cannot be anything but harmful, thereby threatening an objective appraisal of these cases. Furthermore, Nelson claimed, in cases of nonnegative reactions, the use of negative terms risks creating iatrogenic victims. Recommended changes included the use of the noncondemnatory term "sexual experience" instead of terms such as "abuse" or "exploitation" and the noncondemnatory term "participant" instead of "victim" or "perpetrator." Nelson argued that these neutral terms should be used in describing specific cases unless and until negative terms are shown empirically to be appropriate.

In response to Nelson's (1989) recommendations, Maltz (1989) claimed that such sexual contacts should always be defined as harmful and abusive because of differences in age, size, and power. She asserted that sex with minors is by definition exploitative and that the current terminology is accurate. In

this debate among professionals over the type of terminology to use, what is important from a scientific perspective is whether the indiscriminate use of negative terms actually does have biasing effects.

The possibility of biasing effects is suggested by several factors. First, the use of value-laden terms by professionals in past discussions of other types of disapproved sexual behavior impeded a scientific understanding of these behaviors (Bullough & Bullough, 1977). The medical community, for example, typically referred to masturbation as "self-abuse" or "self-pollution" and to homosexuality as a "perversion" or "moral degeneracy." Second, researchers in other areas have demonstrated the biasing impact of negative labels. For example, in the area of prejudice research, Greenberg and Pyszczynski (1985) found that White college students who heard a confederate refer to a Black speaker in a staged debate as "that nigger" judged the speaker more negatively than White students who heard the confederate refer to the speaker as "the pro-debator." In research on the effects of priming, studies have shown that priming individuals with words describing negative personal attributes can bias subsequent judgments of a target person, even though no association between the negative attributes and the target is stated or implied (e.g., Herr, 1986; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977).

The major goal of the current investigation was to examine empirically whether the indiscriminate use of negative terminology in professional discussions of adult-nonadult sexual contacts has biasing effects. To examine these possible effects of negative terminology, an experiment was conducted in which college students read a condensed journal article adapted from Tindall (1978) dealing with the impact of adult-nonadult sexual relationships on the nonadults. Students read a condensed version using either neu-

tral or negative terms. Based on previous research concerning the biasing effects of negative vocabulary, it was hypothesized that negative terminology, compared with neutral terminology, would result in more negative inferences of the effects of adult-nonadult sexual contacts on the nonadults and more negative perceptions and judgments of the adults involved in these contacts.

Tindall's (1978) article was chosen because Tindall used neutral terminology to describe a series of case studies involving adult-nonadult sexual contacts that he evaluated as nonharmful based on long-term outcome data. These contacts involved relationships between male adolescents and male adults. For Tindall's article, the use of negative terms to describe the contacts would have been scientifically inappropriate according to the arguments presented by Kilpatrick (1987), Nelson (1989), and Okami (1990) because such use might have led readers to form impressions that were not warranted by the evidence. Any negative impact on students' perceptions and judgments resulting from the substitution of negative terms for neutral ones in Tindall's article could therefore be interpreted as representing bias.

The use of Tindall's (1978) article afforded the opportunity to examine another issue. For each case study, Tindall provided nonevaluative descriptive information followed by long-term outcome information that, in every case, indicated healthy adjustment and either neutral or beneficial outcomes of the sexual relationships. These nonnegative outcomes contradict what most people in our society take for granted—e.g., such relationships are harmful.

Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979) showed that individuals with strong attitudes and beliefs about an issue tend to process information contradicting their attitudes and beliefs in a biased fashion. They found that

students with extreme positions for or against capital punishment accepted uncritically evidence that supported their position, but strongly criticized contradicting evidence. Because attitudes in our society concerning adult-nonadult sexual contacts are typically negative and strongly held, people may be likely to process nonnegative outcome information in a biased manner. This possibility is supported by a number of examples in the professional literature in which sex researchers displayed the pattern of criticism identified by Lord et al. (1979). When Sandfort (1984), based on his examination of 25 Dutch boys who were involved in sexual relationships with male adults, reported that "for practically all of the boys their sexual contact with their older partners emerged as a predominantly positive experience" (p. 136), Finkelhor (1984), Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny (1985), and Mrazek (1985) sharply criticized his research on methodological grounds. As Bauserman (1990) documented, their methodological criticisms were selectively applied to this positive outcome study, but not to negative outcome studies, and were largely flawed. In discussing the large proportion of children and adolescents found in many studies who are asymptomatic after being sexually involved with adults, Finkelhor (1990) suggested that this finding could be because of an inadequacy of current measuring techniques to detect harm, a "denial pattern" at the time of the evaluation, or the inclusion of cases that represent less serious abuse for which the youngsters have adequate resources to cope. Noticeably lacking from this list was the possibility that some such contacts may not be experienced as stressful or negative. Burgess et al. (1984) found in their study that a majority of the children and adolescents they interviewed showed vague or no symptoms while their sexual contacts were taking place

but developed many symptoms after the intervention of the criminal justice and social service systems. These reactions were interpreted as post-traumatic stress syndrome stemming from the sexual contacts, when they could more parsimoniously have been attributed to the intervention.

A secondary goal of the current investigation was therefore to examine biased processing of nonnegative outcome information. Based on the considerations just discussed, it was hypothesized that students would process the nonnegative long-term outcome information provided in Tindall's (1978) article in a negatively biased fashion.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 80 undergraduate students (40 men and 40 women) at a Midwestern university participating as part of a course requirement for an introductory psychology course. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 24 years, with an average of 19.16 ($SD = 1.02$). Subjects were recruited by placing an advertisement on the experiment board for introductory psychology students which stated that participants would read through a series of case studies involving sexual behavior and then make judgments.

Measures

The experiment consisted of four treatment conditions. Two levels of terminology (neutral vs. negative) were crossed with two levels of information (descriptive only vs. descriptive plus outcome information). Four booklets were prepared corresponding to the four treatment conditions. Each booklet contained a cover page giving instructions, followed by a condensed version of Tindall's (1978) article. At the end of each booklet was a questionnaire, asking subjects to make evaluations based on the article they just read.

In the two versions without outcome data, the instructions read

On the following pages is a shortened version of a report written about 15 years ago by a psychologist. The full-length report was published in a professional journal in 1978. The psychologist, through his counseling practice, had the opportunity to observe a number of male clients from adolescence through adulthood. In particular, he was able to gather information regarding their sexual behavior and experiences. The report that follows begins with an introduction, providing background information relevant to the type of sexual experiences his clients had. This is followed by a series of case studies of some of his clients. The case studies provide information about these clients only as adolescents—no follow-up data, when the clients became adults, are presented in these case summaries. Please read the introduction and the case studies carefully. When you are done, answer the questions that appear at the end of this booklet.

In the two versions with the outcome information, the same instructions were provided, except for the following modification:

The case studies provide information about these clients both as adolescents and as adults—follow-up data, when the clients became adults, are presented in these case summaries.

In all four versions, the condensed article began with a title and background information. Specifically, subjects read that the author was a school psychologist who, in the course of his 30-year career, had encountered 200 cases of male adolescents sexually involved with male adults. Subjects read further that the author was reporting on nine cases for which he had data ranging from puberty to adulthood and that no case was initially referred to the author because of sexual problems. The cases involved adolescents who were now adults, ranging in age from 25 to 46 years old. Subjects were informed that they would be reading four of

the nine cases. Providing subjects with only four cases was done to reduce the amount of material that they would have to read. These four cases were randomly selected from the original nine. Following the background information, subjects then read the four case histories involving adolescents with pseudonyms of Denver, Eugene, August, and Jeff. These adolescents first became involved with male adults when they were 13 or 14 years old.

Neutral terminology. In the two neutral terminology conditions, the condensed articles used the same title and neutral terms employed by Tindall (1978). The title of these condensed articles was *The Male Adolescent Involved with a Pederast Becomes an Adult*. Sexual contacts between the adults and adolescents were referred to as sexual "relations," "relationships," "involvements," "contacts," "practices," "activities," and "encounters." The adolescents were described as "boys," "adolescents," and "youths." The men involved with the adolescents were referred to as "pederasts," "older males," and "men." The adolescents were also referred to by their pseudonyms, and the men were referred to by their professional occupations (e.g., "mechanic" or "professor").

Negative terminology. In the two negative terminology conditions, many neutral terms were replaced with negative terms. Articles that use negative terminology also use neutral terms as well. Therefore, to create a more ecologically valid negative terminology article, only about two-thirds of the neutral terms were replaced with negative terms. The title at the head of these condensed articles read *The Male Adolescent Sexually Abused by a Child Molester Becomes an Adult*. Sexual contacts were now described as sexual "abuse," "exploitation," "aggression," "attack," "assault," "molestation," and "victimization." The adolescents, in addition to being referred to by their pseudo-

nyms, were now labeled "victims" and "survivors." The men were described as "perpetrators," "child molesters," "offenders," and "exploiters" and were also referred to by their occupations.

Descriptive information only. All four conditions presented case histories of the four adolescents, which included background information (e.g., reason for referral, academic skills, interests) and a brief sexual history, describing age of puberty, any peer sexual involvements, and then the sexual relationship with an adult male. The origins of the relationship were described, as were the types of sexual activities engaged in and the length of the relationship. The two descriptive-only conditions contained only this information—no long-term outcome information was presented.

Descriptive plus outcome information. The other two conditions, in addition to the background and sexual history information, also included long-term outcome information that described the adolescents' functioning as adults. All adolescents were described as well-adjusted as adults, having incurred no harm from their relationships and having actually benefited from the relationships in three of the cases. For example, Denver became a valued mechanic with the same company for 20 years and attributed his success to his adult friend, who was a master mechanic. August stayed in touch with the professor with whom he was sexually involved as an adolescent and continued to regard him as a parent surrogate. And Jeff, who was involved with a state legislator, ran for a political position at age 24. In both the neutral and negative terminology conditions with long-term outcome information, this follow-up information was presented exactly as it appeared in Tindall's (1978) original article—i.e., in the negative terminology condition, neutral terms were not translated to negative terms.

At the end of the booklet was attached a questionnaire consisting of 18 items, assessing subjects' judgments of the adolescents and adults described in the case studies, their judgments of male adolescents and male adults in general cases of sexual involvement, and their perceptions of the objectivity of the condensed article and the appropriateness of the terminology used. Two demographic items were included at the end of the questionnaire. These 18 items were identical in all conditions—questions were asked using only neutral terms. The first item read "What do you think was the most likely reaction of the adolescent boys in this study to their sexual involvement with the adult males at the time that the sexual involvement took place?" Below this question was a 13-point bipolar scale, anchored by *extremely negative* and *extremely positive*. The intermediate odd-numbered points on the scale were labeled, respectively: *very negative*, *negative*, *neutral*, *positive*, and *very positive*. The second item was "What do you think were the most likely effects of the sexual contacts described in this study on the adolescent boys' overall functioning and adjustment when they became adults?" This item was followed by the same 13-point scale described previously. Because we thought that subjects in general might assume highly negative reactions, the items concerning subjects' perceptions of immediate and long-term reactions contained 13-point scales to avoid possible floor effects. Labeling the odd-numbered scale values was done to help subjects make adequate distinctions among the scale values. The third item read "How consenting to their sexual contacts with the adult males do you think the adolescent boys in this study were?" This was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *not at all* and *completely*. The fourth item read "How manipulative do you think the men described

in this study were in terms of getting the boys involved sexually?" This was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *not at all* and *very much*. The fifth item was "How much therapy do you think the boys described in this study should have received if their sexual involvements with the adult males had been discovered at the time they took place?" This was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *none* and *a great deal*. The sixth item was "How would you describe the mental health of the adult males discussed in this study who were involved sexually with the adolescent boys?" This was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *mentally ill* and *mentally healthy*. The seventh item read "If they had been discovered, how should the men in this study who were sexually involved with the adolescent boys have been dealt with by the criminal justice system?" This was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *not dealt with at all* and *very harshly*.

The next seven items were identical to the first seven, except that they were concerned with subjects' evaluations and judgments of male adolescents and male adults in general who are involved in sexual contacts. For example, the ninth item was "What do you think are the most likely effects *in general* of sexual contacts between men and adolescent boys on the boys' overall functioning and adjustment when they become adults?" The fifteenth and sixteenth items concerned perceptions of the author's objectivity and the appropriateness of the terminology used. The fifteenth item read "How objective and unbiased do you think the author of this study was in terms of describing the phenomenon of sexual contacts between adult males and adolescent boys?" This item was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *not at all objective* and *very objective*. The sixteenth item asked "How scientifically appropriate and proper do

you think the author's language and terminology were in terms of discussing these sexual involvements?" This item was followed by a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by *not at all appropriate* to *very appropriate*. In the last two items subjects were asked to indicate their sex and age.

Procedure

Subjects participated in groups ranging from 8 to 16 in one of the psychology labs at the university. When subjects arrived for the experiment, they were reminded of the description for the experiment and were informed that, especially because of the sensitive nature of the stimulus materials, they could withdraw immediately or at any time during the experiment. They were also assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality in their participation. An informed consent form that all subjects read and signed repeated all of these points. No subject declined to participate, and all subjects completed the experiment. After giving participants instructions orally, the experimenter, a male college professor in his 30s, randomly handed out the booklets to subjects, with the one constraint of balancing men and women in the different conditions. When subjects completed the questionnaire at the end of their booklets, they returned the booklets to the experimenter, who then gave them a debriefing sheet.

Results

Multivariate Analyses

As a first step in examining the issues of biasing effects of negative terminology and biased processing of nonnegative outcome information, two MANOVAs were performed, one on subjects' responses to the first seven items—i.e., those concerned with perceptions of the specific cases of sexual contacts between the adolescents and men described in the case studies—and the other on subjects' responses to

the next seven items—i.e., those concerned with perceptions of general cases of sexual contacts between male adolescents and men. Because the condensed articles concerned sexual relationships between men, it was of interest to examine gender differences in subjects' responses. Hence, the MANOVAs were performed on data from a 2 (Gender) X 2 (Terminology: neutral or negative) X 2 (Information: descriptive-only or descriptive plus long-term outcome) between-subjects factorial design. The MANOVAs revealed no main effects or interactions involving the gender factor. Hence, the data were collapsed across this factor, and the MANOVAs were performed using the remaining two factors.

For the MANOVA for the specific items, a main effect occurred for terminology, Wilks' lambda = .83, $F(7, 70) = 2.27$, $p < .04$, and for information, Wilks' lambda = .65, $F(7, 70) = 5.32$, $p < .001$. The terminology X information interaction was nonsignificant, Wilks' lambda = .92, $F(7, 70) = .91$, $p > .10$. For the MANOVA for the general items, a main effect occurred for terminology, Wilks' lambda = .71, $F(7, 70) = 4.13$, $p < .001$. No main effect for information occurred, Wilks' lambda = .87, $F(7, 70) = 1.43$, $p > .10$, and the terminology X information interaction was also nonsignificant, Wilks' lambda = .93, $F(7, 70) = .79$, $p > .10$.

Univariate Analyses

To determine the direction of the terminology and information effects, a series of univariate analyses (ANOVAs) involving the first 14 measures was performed. Because these analyses revealed no significant terminology X information interactions, the statistical results concerning the main effects for these two factors were considered separately, allowing for a clearer examination of the two experimental hypotheses.

Terminology. Table 1 presents the results for terminology. The

major hypothesis in this experiment was that the use of negative terminology would negatively bias judgments and perceptions. Support for this hypothesis was provided by subjects' judgments and perceptions of general cases of sexual encounters between male adolescents and male adults. Significance was reached for six of the seven analyses. In the last column of the table, effect sizes are provided. The measure of effect size chosen was the product-moment r , a measure that has been used with focused tests (e.g., F s with 1 df in the numerator) with increasing frequency because of its advantages over more traditional measures (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1988). Positive effect sizes indicate that the means were in the predicted direction, and negative effect sizes indicate the opposite. Effect sizes of .10, .30, and .50 can be interpreted as indicating small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 1988). For the general items, the effect sizes were all positive, and the average effect size was moderate ($r = .31$). Although all pairs of means were in the predicted direction for the specific items—all effect sizes were positive—only one of the seven analyses yielded a significant main effect for terminology. Four of the remaining six main effects were marginally significant, however. The average effect size for these items ($r = .20$) was smaller than that for the general items. These results indicate that negative terminology had consistent biasing effects on subjects' perceptions of general cases, but less reliable and weaker effects on their perceptions of the specific cases.

Information. The second hypothesis was that nonnegative outcome information would be processed in a negatively biased manner. Relevant to this hypothesis are the results of the ANOVAs involving the information factor (see Table 2). Table 2 presents only the analyses of the specific items because the MANOVAs yielded a significant

Table 1

Mean Perceptions and Judgments of Male Adult-Male Adolescent Sexual Relationships as a Function of Terminology

Case and Measure	Terminology		<i>F</i> (1,76)	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
	Neutral	Negative			
Specific					
Immediate reactions	7.70	7.42	.26	>.10	.06
Long-term effects	5.65	4.90	2.77	.099	.19
Consent	5.13	4.68	3.28	.074	.20
Manipulativeness	4.90	5.45	3.15	.08	.20
Therapy	5.80	6.08	1.40	>.10	.13
Mental health	3.00	2.33	3.74	.057	.22
Criminal justice system	5.45	6.28	13.48	<.001	.39
General					
Immediate reactions	6.30	4.60	7.04	.01	.29
Long-term effects	4.33	3.70	2.21	>.10	.17
Consent	3.95	3.05	9.36	.003	.33
Manipulativeness	5.60	6.38	17.37	<.001	.43
Therapy	5.83	6.28	4.37	.04	.23
Mental health	2.43	1.78	6.20	.02	.29
Criminal justice system	5.80	6.55	14.18	<.001	.42

Note. Each mean is based on $n = 40$ subjects. For immediate and long-term effects, 13-point scales were used; otherwise, 7-point scales were used. Higher values indicate more negative judgments for manipulativeness, therapy, and criminal justice system; otherwise, lower values indicate more negative judgments. Positive r s (effect sizes) indicate that negative terms produced more negative judgments.

information effect only for the specific items. Of the seven analyses presented in the table, only one produced a statistically significant result. Subjects exposed to long-term neutral and positive outcome information judged the long-term effects of the sexual contacts on the adolescents more positively than did subjects in the descriptive-only condition. Three of the remaining six statistics were marginally significant. The average effect size was positive, but small ($r = .16$).

Of the seven measures for the specific cases, only two are directly relevant to the assessment of the hypothesis that the nonnegative outcome information would be processed in a biased manner. The first measure is perceptions of long-term effects of the sexual contacts on the adolescents. This measure is relevant because the additional information that half of the subjects read concerned long-term effects. If the hypothesis of biased processing was correct, then perceptions of

Table 2

Mean Perceptions and Judgments of Male Adult-Male Adolescent Sexual Relationships for the Specific Cases as a Function of Outcome Information

Measure	Outcome Information		$F(1, 76)$	p	r
	Absent	Present			
Immediate reactions	7.10	8.03	2.93	.091	.19
Long-term effects	4.20	6.35	22.80	<.001	.48
Consent	4.88	4.93	.04	>.10	.02
Manipulativeness	5.33	5.03	.94	>.10	.11
Therapy	5.85	6.03	.57	>.10	-.09
Mental health	2.33	3.00	3.74	.057	.22
Criminal justice system	6.05	5.68	2.79	.099	.19

Note. Each mean is based on $n = 40$ subjects. For immediate and long-term effects, 13-point scales were used; otherwise, 7-point scales were used. Higher values indicate more negative judgments for manipulativeness, therapy, and criminal justice system; otherwise, lower values indicate more negative judgments. Positive r s (effect sizes) indicate that long-term outcome information produced more positive judgments.

long-term effects should have been the same whether subjects read the nonnegative outcome information or the descriptive-only information. As noted previously, subjects evaluated the long-term effects more positively when they were exposed to the nonnegative outcome information. This finding does not support the hypothesis of biased information processing. To test the hypothesis further, the mean evaluation of the long-term effects by subjects exposed to the nonnegative outcome information was compared with the neutral scale value for this measure (i.e., 7). If processing was unbiased, then it follows that this mean evaluation should have been nonnegative (i.e., greater than or equal to 7) because the outcome information was nonnegative. Separate comparisons were made for subjects in the neutral and negative terminology conditions who were exposed to the nonnegative outcome information. The mean evaluation given by subjects in the neutral terminology condition ($M = 6.95$) was not significantly less than 7, $t(19) = -.11$, $p > .10$, one-tailed, failing to support the hypothesis of biased processing. The mean evaluation given by subjects exposed to negative terminology ($M = 5.75$) was significantly less than 7, $t(19) = -2.70$, $p < .01$, one-tailed, supporting the hypothesis of biased processing.

The second measure that is relevant to the hypothesis of biased processing of nonnegative outcome information is perceptions of therapy needed because the additional information addressed long-term psychological adjustment. If information processing was unbiased, then judgments of therapy needed should have been less among subjects who read the nonnegative outcome information than among those who did not because the nonnegative outcome information indicated no problems in adjustment and hence no need, or at least less of a need, for therapy. Subjects exposed to the nonnegative outcome infor-

mation did not differ from subjects exposed to the descriptive-only information in their judgments, supporting the hypothesis of biased processing.

Author Objectivity and Terminology Appropriateness

Two additional items were included among the dependent measures to assess how objective subjects thought the author of the condensed article was in terms of discussing the issue of adult-nonadult sexual relationships and how scientifically appropriate and proper the terminology employed by the author was.

A gender X terminology X information ANOVA performed on the author objectivity data yielded no significant effects. Thus, for example, the author's objectivity was judged to be statistically the same whether he used negative or neutral terms. The mean objectivity rating for all subjects was slightly above the neutral point on the 7-point scale ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.74$), indicating that subjects perceived the author to be objective, but only moderately so.

A gender X terminology X information ANOVA performed on the data regarding the appropriateness of the terminology used also yielded no significant effects. The mean appropriateness rating for all subjects indicated that subjects judged the terms to be appropriate ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.30$). Thus, subjects considered negative terms and neutral terms to be equally valid in describing sexual contacts between men and male adolescents.

Discussion

The major purpose of the current investigation was to examine empirically whether the use of negative terminology can bias perceptions and judgments of adult-nonadult sexual interactions. It was hypothesized that negative terminology would lead to more negative impressions of these interactions

than neutral terminology would. Results of the experiment conducted to test this hypothesis showed that students' impressions of both specific and general cases of sexual contacts between male adolescents and adult males were negatively biased by negative terms, providing support for the hypothesis. Biasing effects, however, were weak and inconsistent in the specific cases. In contrast to this, biasing effects of negative terms on students' impressions of general cases were stronger and quite reliable.

It is significant that students' impressions of general cases of adult-adolescent sexual relationships were especially affected by negative terminology. This finding indicates that, by describing specific cases of adult-nonadult sexual relationships with negative terms, researchers can give their readers the impression that general cases of these relationships are abusive even when the evidence in the specific cases points to neutral or even positive outcomes, as in the shortened article that students read in the current study. Thus, researchers who firmly hold that such relationships are abusive regardless of the empirical evidence (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979b; Maltz, 1989; Russell, 1986), and who consequently use negative terms indiscriminately, may be creating and maintaining in their readership a biased perception of adult-nonadult sexual relationships.

It is also important to note that the biasing effects of negative terminology in this study seemed to occur without the awareness of the students. Students considered the terminology employed in the shortened articles to be appropriate, whether the terminology was neutral or negative. Thus, students perceived as equally appropriate terms such as "sexual relationship" or "sexual assault," "men" or "child molesters," and "boys" or "victims." When the language employed by the media and by most profession-

als is considered, the finding that the students in this study saw nothing unusual in reading a professional journal article replete with negative terms is not surprising. On the other hand, students did not find neutral terms any less appropriate. This result was most likely the case because terms such as "sexual relationship" are compatible with negative, neutral, or positive effects, and as such are not inappropriate regardless of the readers' expectations. Importantly, despite the fact that students perceived no difference in the appropriateness of the terms used, their evaluations and perceptions were nevertheless affected by the type of terminology to which they were exposed.

The results of this investigation provide some initial empirical justification for the concerns recently expressed by authors such as Kilpatrick (1987), Okami (1990), and Nelson (1989) regarding the use of negative terminology in describing all adult-nonadult sexual encounters. The finding that the mere choice of terminology used to describe such contacts can lead to biased judgments and perceptions suggests that a central goal of science—to communicate evidence in an unbiased manner—is not being served when negative terms are used indiscriminately.

The possibility that terms such as "participant" and "relationship"—as opposed to "victim" and "exploitation"—are themselves biased, carrying positive rather than neutral connotations, must also be considered. Although this is a valid concern, the results of the current study suggest that these terms do not necessarily carry positive connotations. Students in this study considered these terms to be appropriate despite their negative views of these sexual contacts—their negative views are indicated by their consistently negative mean evaluations provided in Table 1. If students in the neutral terminology conditions had considered the terms

to be positively biased, it is likely that they would not have judged the terms to be appropriate, given their negative views.

A secondary hypothesis of the current investigation was that non-negative outcome information would be processed in a biased manner. Two measures were critical for assessing biased processing: the long-term effects and the therapy recommended in the specific cases. Analysis of the first measure provided mixed support. No bias was exhibited by students in the neutral terminology condition who were exposed to the nonnegative outcome information. Their conclusions concerning long-term effects were consistent with the outcome information. However, students in the negative terminology condition who were exposed to this information did exhibit biased processing. Their negative assessments of the long-term effects were inconsistent with the outcome information. Thus, for this measure, pre-existing negative attitudes, beliefs, and expectations alone did not lead to biased processing; the addition of negative terms was necessary for this to occur. The negative terms may have had a priming effect (cf. Herr, 1986; Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977), prompting students to interpret the long-term outcome information in a biased fashion. Analysis of the second measure provided clear evidence for biased processing. Students' perceptions about the amount of therapy that the adolescents described in the case studies should have received had their sexual relationships been discovered were not consistent with the outcome information. Students who read the nonnegative outcome information recommended extensive therapy, despite being exposed to information that implied therapy was not essential. They recommended as much therapy as did students who were not exposed to the outcome information. This bias may be the result of a cultural belief that associates disapproved

sexual behavior with sickness (Bullough & Bullough, 1977), resulting in the perception of a need for treatment, regardless of the observed effects of the behavior. The finding of biased processing is consistent with previous research demonstrating the biased processing of information that contradicts strongly held attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Lord et al., 1979).

The current investigation was conducted using a sample of undergraduate college students who read case studies of male adolescents sexually involved with male adults. Several questions of generalizability of the findings in this study thus need to be addressed. One question concerns the representativeness of the sample of students who participated. Research has shown that volunteers for studies involving sex tend to be more liberal and unconventional than nonvolunteers (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1976). Thus, it is possible that a group of nonvolunteer students might have responded differently. Another issue concerns whether professionals or people from nonacademic populations would have responded similarly. These are empirical questions. Importantly, the sample examined in the current study came from the same population (i.e., college students) that is likely to be exposed to these articles at some point (e.g., as secondary sources in college textbooks). Therefore, the impact of an author's choice of terms is an important matter in a practical sense.

Another question of generalizability concerns what the effects of the experimental manipulations would have been had the boys been preadolescents, the younger partners been girls, or the older partners been women. Researchers examining attributions of responsibility to younger persons for their sexual encounters with adults have found that adolescents are seen as more responsible than preadolescents (Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984) and that boys are seen as more

responsible than girls (Broussard & Wagner, 1988). Thus, because Tindall's (1978) cases involved male adolescents, students in the current study may have attributed more responsibility to the younger persons than they would have for other types of cases. These considerations suggest that students' evaluations might have been more negative for younger boys or for girls, irrespective of the experimental manipulations. The impact of these age and gender differences is unclear. Further research is needed to examine the generalizability of the current findings to other cases.

A final question of generalizability concerns the sample of adolescents described in Tindall's (1978) report. These adolescents were apparently consenting and successful in terms of adjusting to their sexual experiences. These cases fell on the positive end of Nelson's (1989) continuum of experiences. Additional research might address biasing effects when cases are used that fall along other parts of the continuum.

The current investigation added empirical data to the recent debate among a number of professional sex researchers concerning whether the use of negative terms to describe all adult-nonadult sexual interactions has biasing effects. Our experiment conducted to address this issue demonstrated that the use of negative terms can negatively bias readers' impressions of these interactions. This negative biasing effect was particularly evident for inferences about general cases of sexual interactions even though students were exposed to information involving only a few specific cases. The finding of a biasing effect indicates that an author's choice of terms can affect readers' impressions irrespective of the actual empirical findings of the author's study. We also examined the issue of biased processing of nonnegative information regarding the outcome of these interactions. We found, based on an examination of two critical measures, that stu-

dents did exhibit biased processing, although this effect was moderated in the case of one of the measures by the type of terminology to which students were exposed. This finding suggests that negative terminology can have a priming effect on readers such that they are predisposed to process evidence in a biased manner.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

HARRY BENJAMIN INTERNATIONAL GENDER DYSPHORIA ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

The Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association will hold its next conference in New York, NY, from October 22 to October 24, 1993. For information, please contact, Alice Webb, MSW, CSW-ACP, Executive Director, 18333 Egret Bay Blvd., Houston, TX 77058, USA. Phone (713) 333-2278.

THIRD ASIAN CONFERENCE OF SEXOLOGY

The Third Asian Conference of Sexology with a study tour to the ancient temples of India depicting erotica has been organized by the Department of Sexual Medicine, Seth G.S. Medical College and KEM Hospital, Bombay under the auspices of the Asian Federation for Sexology from November 27 to December 1, 1994 at the Taj Palace Intercontinental, New Delhi, India. For further details contact: Prof. Dr. Prakash Kothari, 203 A Sukhsagar, Patkar Marg, Bombay 400 007, India. Phones: 3612027/3619165; Fax: 9122-204-8488.