

Perspectives on Adolescent Sexual Relations With Older Persons: A Systematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Relations between minors under the age of consent and older persons are legally prohibited in many countries. However, the nature of these relationships, their impact on the lives of minors involved, and how they should be dealt by law enforcement and welfare systems are highly controversial. The differences between the way these relations are perceived by the minors involved and the public are also unclear. This literature review examines them as perceived by youths or young adults who had experienced sexual relations with a person at least 2 years older during their adolescence as well as by students and other adult members of the public. A systematic search of 977 studies initially identified as relevant yielded 16 studies that fit the inclusion criteria. Most (13) research samples were located in the United States, and the remainder were in the United Kingdom (2) and Australia (1). All were published in English. Four main themes emerged from the analysis of these studies: adolescent motives for sexual relations with older persons (two studies); characteristics of sexual relations between adolescents and older persons (6); contextual factors affecting the way such relations are perceived, including the partners' ages and genders (11); and perspectives on the legal framing of such relations (6). The studies' findings are discussed and implications for future research, policy, and practice are suggested, highlighting the complexity and ambiguity of the phenomenon and calling on intervention programs to focus on strengthening the family unit and social network of these youth and for policies to address teen sexuality as defined both normatively and legally.

Keywords

statutory rape, adolescence, age of consent, compliant victim, underage sex, sexual victimization in adolescence

Minors who are sexually involved with older persons of their own consent or without overt coercion are legally considered statutory or "compliant" victims (Berliner & Lanning, 2003). These sexual relationships are considered illegal since they involve participants under the age of consent but do not involve a degree of coercion or manipulation sufficient to qualify them as forcible sex crimes (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Oudekerk, Farr, & Reppucci, 2013). Generally, the age of consent is 16, and in most cases, a minimum age difference between the adolescent and older individual is required for such relationships to qualify as statutory rape (SR; Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004).

According to the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth, in 2011–2012, 9.2% of girls and 5.2% of boys reported a first sexual experience at age 15 or less with an individual 3 or more years older (Child Trends, 2012). Based on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Incident-Based Reporting System, in 2000, there was one SR for every three forcible rapes involving an adolescent survivor. Most SR victims reported to law enforcement authorities were 14–15 years old, and 95% were females, while more than 99% of the offenders were male (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). Additionally, most

online sex crimes involving adults and juveniles fit the SR model, with most of online sex offenders charged with non-coercive acts with victims under the age of consent (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008).

The conceptualization of sexual relations between adolescents and older persons is related to a major societal conflict over adolescents' sexuality and their ability to make consensual decisions concerning sexual relations as well as to concerns about their short- and long-term negative consequences (Oberman, 1994; Schaffner, 2002; Tener, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2015). Legal ages of consent reflect the assumptions that adolescents are not mature enough to make judicious decisions that serve their own interest in this area and that they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Higginson, 1999; C. Miller,

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Miller, Kenney, & Tasheff, 1999; Steinberg, Cauffman, Woolard, Graham, & Banich, 2009). Adults who engage in sexual activity with underage youth are thus guilty of a crime, even if it was seemingly consensual or even initiated by the adolescent. This crime is generally referred to as SR and the adults are labeled child sexual abuse perpetrators (Glosser et al., 2004).

Much has been written about the significant evidence on the negative outcomes of childhood sexual abuse for the victims including psychiatric disorders and suicide risk (for reviews, see Hillberg, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Dixon, 2011; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2013) and negative physical, emotional, and interpersonal outcomes (Hornor, 2010; Pazdera, McWey, Mullis, & Carbonell, 2013). The literature also emphasizes the potential negative psychological consequences of SR relationships, even if the youth consented at the time (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). These include higher risk of teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, problem behaviors, physical and emotional victimization, and drug and alcohol abuse (Child Trends, 2012; Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; Greenberg, Magder, & Aral, 1992; Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997; Marin, Coyle, Gomez, Carvajal, & Kirby, 2000; K. S. Miller, Clark, & Moore, 1997; Oudekerk, Guarnera, & Reppucci, 2014; Young & D'Arcy, 2005).

Yet as opposed to the straightforward legal approach, as well as empirical findings of negative consequences, social perceptions concerning such acts and the laws governing them are riddled with contradictions and ambivalences, and it is unclear whether and to what degree such consent laws are accepted by the general population (Oudekerk et al., 2013). It is even less clear how sexual relations between adolescents and older persons are perceived by the adolescents themselves.

In order to develop appropriate professional responses to SR, it is critical to gain better understanding of the various perspectives on SR relationships. More data are needed to understand (1) how these relationships vary, (2) how they are perceived by adolescents, and (3) the extent to which the legal framing of such relationships is perceived as providing adequate response to the needs of youth. The objective of this systematic review is therefore to analyze how sexual relations between adolescents and older persons are perceived by the adolescents and the general population. Its findings may guide professionals and policy makers concerning needs and beneficial interventions for the youth involved.

Method

Inclusion Criteria

To promote confidence in outcomes, this systematic review was conducted using strict guidelines. To be included, studies had to provide information about sexual relations between adolescents and older persons as perceived by (1) youths or adults who had experienced sexual relations with a person at least 2 years older during their adolescence and (2) students and other adult members of the public.

Regarding the age of the minor involved in the SR relation, due to the dearth of studies as well as cultural differences in defining adolescence, we used a broad definition. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), although the definition of adolescence differs across time and cultures, adolescents are in general young people between the ages of 10 and 19. To be included in the review, studies had to focus on minors involved in sexual relationships with someone at least 2 years older. Higginson (1999), who interviewed teenage mothers, was the only exception, since no specific age gap was mentioned in that study. Still, all interviewees had sex with someone older than 18 when they were minors, and all examples in the Results section refer to age differences greater than 2 years, usually at least four. In cases of studies that focused on both children and adolescents (e.g., Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007), we analyzed only the information concerning adolescents. Finally, where there was no clear separation between children and youth, the study was excluded.

Given the relative lack of studies, research design was not a limiting factor: peer-reviewed quantitative vignette studies, quantitative survey studies with students or the general population, and qualitative studies focusing the experiences of SR survivors were all included. We did exclude reports that were not peer reviewed, and in order to avoid systematic error, only studies that could be identified and secured through an electronic database were included. Other exclusion criteria included studies that were purely theoretical, that reported on less than five participants, and that focused on consequences or correlates between SR relations and psychological outcomes but not according to the respondents' perspectives. Studies conducted in non-Western cultures (e.g., Jamaica) were also excluded under the assumption that they represented different cultural patterns. These will be included in a comparative review currently under preparation. Finally, only studies published in English in 1970–2015 were included (see Table 1 for an overview).

Identification of Primary Studies

The following electronic databases were searched: Pubmed, Medline, PsychINFO, Criminal Justice Abstracts, ERIC, Family Studies Abstracts, Health and Psychosocial Instruments, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text, Violence & Abuse Abstracts, and Web of Science. Eight search terms were included "SR," "statutory relations," "compliant victim," "age of consent," "partner age gap," "older partner," "underage sex," and "sexual victimization in adolescence." In all, 977 potential studies were initially identified. Next, their titles and abstracts were reviewed to ascertain relative fit, which left 50 articles that were subjected to a full-text review. Of these, 16 met our inclusion criteria (see Table 2 for an overview).

Data Extraction

After all articles meeting our inclusion criteria had been identified, they were classified into three categories: vignettes,

Table 1. Inclusion Criteria of Primary Studies Used in the Review.

Criterion	Description
Participants	Youth or adults who have experienced sexual relations with an older person, professionals working with them, and students and the general public
Characteristics of adolescents and of the older person	Teen involved in consensual underage sex with a person at least 2 years older
Methodology	Peer-reviewed quantitative vignette studies, quantitative survey studies conducted with students or the general population, and qualitative studies focusing on the experiences of SR survivors
Sample	$N > 5$
Language	English
Year of publication	1970–2015

survey studies of the general population, and qualitative studies of SR survivors. The author reviewed the studies together with two research assistants—a doctoral student of social work and a master student of communication. The review addressed the studies' objectives, design, methodological rigor, sample characteristics, and findings and evaluated their discussion and theoretical and practical implications. Each article was reviewed independently by each of the three readers to ensure it met the inclusion criteria. After the initial independent rating, all papers where rater selections did not entirely overlap were reexamined in a full-text review, and if there was no agreement regarding the risk of bias, discrepancies were discussed and a final consensual evaluation was made.

Data Analysis

The author and the second research assistant also performed a thematic analysis, which involved the identification of prominent or recurrent themes in the literature and summarizing the findings of different studies under thematic headings (Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young, & Sutton, 2005). As no predetermined categories were used, the articles were reviewed until consensus was reached about their themes and subthemes. The articles were first read several times to familiarize the authors with the data and identify initial ideas.

In the first stage of analysis, each article was entered into a Dedoose program developed for a cross-platform application for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods research (<http://www.dedoose.com/>). Next, each article was reviewed in detail with the aim of identifying initial categories, subsequently grouped together as initial themes. As we read the cases, some themes were removed or revised and additional categories added. In the third stage, themes and subthemes were reviewed and classified by their dimensions and properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The author now referred back to the articles to retrieve additional information needed to develop the

categories (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Coder interreliability was established by having a second research assistant code the final set of 16 articles to assign themes. Lastly, we held a discussion to resolve emerging disagreements, and the final assignment reflected the author's determination.

Findings

Descriptive Overview

Three of the 16 articles were based on qualitative interviews with SR survivors; 13 employed a quantitative methodology. The number of respondents ranged from 14 to 99 in the qualitative and from 63 to 2871 in the quantitative studies. Twelve were conducted in the United States, two in the United Kingdom, one in Australia, and one study included participants from the United States, Australia, and Canada. Each article represented either of two groups of respondents: (1) adolescents or young adults sexually involved with an older person (three articles) and (2) adolescents, young adults, and adults from the general population (13).

Diversity was also found within these groups. The first group included studies on adolescents dating an older person (1), teenage mothers (1), and female adolescents arriving to a Child Advocacy Center (CAC; 1). The second group included nine articles on high school or university/college students, one on young adults, one on the public, and one on either young adults or the parents of an adolescent. Another article included two studies: one based on college/university students and the other on the public. Finally, diversity was found in the ages of the adolescents involved in the SR relationship: Eight studies used adolescents under the ages of consent (11–16); five compared adolescents under the age of consent to younger children (<11) or to adolescents above the age of consent (>16) and three studies did not specify age but stated they referred to adolescents.

Main Findings

The following four themes were identified (1) adolescents' motivations to be involved in sexual relations with an older person (two studies); (2) adolescent–older person relationship characteristics (6); (3) contextual factors affecting adolescent–older person relations, with three subthemes: older person and adolescent gender (11), respondents' gender (9), and older person and adolescent's age (9); and (4) perspectives on the legal framing of such relations as SR (6). Several articles referred to one or more themes or subthemes.

Theme 1: Adolescents' Motivations

Two qualitative studies with SR survivors addressed reasons for the adolescent to be involved in sexual relationships with an older person. No article seemed to address ignorance of the illegal status of such relations as affecting the motivation for being involved in them, and it seems that in most, respondents were fully aware of their relations' illegality.

Table 2. Description of Reviewed Articles.

Study	Objectives	Sample	Methodology	Age of Teen and Older Person	Main Themes
Broussard, Wagner, and Kazelskis (1991) United States	Study the impact of victim gender, perpetrator gender, respondent gender, and victim response (i.e., encouraging, passive, resisting) on the labeling of child sexual abuse, perception of victim behavior, and effect on the child	180 Male and 180 female undergraduates	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 15 Older person: 35	Contextual factors: gender of older persons, teens, and respondents
Higginson (1999) United States	Examine excuses and justifications used by teenage mothers to account for their involvement with older boyfriends.	14 Teenage mothers at a Teen Center	Casual conversations and formal interviews, Qualitative	Teen mothers involved in sexual relationships with someone who was older than 18 when they were minors	Motivation of teen for SR; SR relationship characteristics; Contextual factors: gender and age of older persons and teens; Legal system
Horvath and Giner-Sorolla (2007) UK	Examine effects of minors' and older persons' gender and minors' age on moral and legal judgments of adult-adolescent sexual relationships.	Study 1: 224 university students (112 male, 112 female); Study 2: 96 members of the general public (37 male, 59 female)	Questionnaire and quantitative	Minor: 9, 14, and 22; Older person: 33	SR relationship dynamics; Contextual factors: gender of older persons, teens, and respondents; Legal system
Klettke and Mellor (2012) Australia	Investigate attitudes and beliefs of jury-eligible Australians relating to sexual behavior of female children and adolescents.	290 males and 290 females aged 18–83	Questionnaire and quantitative	Participants were asked to estimate the age of female sexual maturity (e.g., the age when a female stops being sexually naive)	Contextual factors: gender and age of older persons and teens; respondents' gender; Legal system
Koon-Magnin and Ruback (2013) United States	Explore how individual judgments of adolescent sexual behavior and SR are affected by victim age, perpetrator age, and the gap between them.	Study 1: 427 undergraduates; Study 2: 656 undergraduates	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 14, 15, and 16; Older person: 17, 18, and 19	Contextual factors: age of older persons and teens
Koon-Magnin and Ruback (2012) United States	Investigate the effects of participant gender, respondent gender and sexual act on young adults' perceptions of nonforcible sexual activity.	485 University undergraduates	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 12, 14, 16, and 19; Older person: 16, 18, and 21	Contextual factors: gender of older persons, teens, and respondents
Maynard and Wiederman (1997) United States	Examine how sex of the minor and adult and age of the child influence perceptions regarding the abusiveness of adult-child sexual interactions and attributions of blame and responsibility to the adult in such incidents. The relationship of gender role attitudes to perceptions of child sexual abuse was also investigated.	413 undergraduate students	Questionnaire and quantitative	Minor: 7, 15; Older person: 35	Contextual factors: gender and age of older persons and teens; gender of respondents
Okami (1991) United States	Explore the variability of intergenerational sexual experiences in childhood and adolescence from the retrospective point of view of the younger participants.	37 males and 26 females reporting childhood or adolescent intergenerational sexual contacts	Questionnaire and unscheduled telephone interview, quantitative	Minor: under 16; Older person: at least 5 years older	SR relationships characteristics; Contextual factors: gender of older persons and teens

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Study	Objectives	Sample	Methodology	Age of Teen and Older Person	Main Themes
Oudekerk et al (2013) United States	Examine whether respondent gender and partner age gap affect young adults' perceptions of SR. Examine whether perceptions of love, of the relationship as abusive, and/or negative emotions explain age gap and gender effects.	210 Young adults (50% male)	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 15-year-old female; Older person: 2, 4, or 6 years older	SR relationship characteristics; Legal system; Contextual factors: age of older persons and teens; gender of respondents
Reitz-Krueger et al. (2015) United States	Examine from the perspective of young adults and parents of teenagers how perceptions of adolescents' sexual relationships with older partners vary with the younger partner's age, the age difference, and the participant's parental status.	229 Participants (56% female) who were either young adults (18–24; $n = 118$) or parents of a child (13–17; $n = 111$).	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17; Older person: for each age the teen was paired with a partner 2, 4, and 6 years older	Contextual factors: age of older persons and teens
Sahl and Reid Keene (2010) United States	Examine the effect of gender differences, adult's gender, an authority gap and an age gap on perceptions of adult–teen heterosexual relationships.	2,871 students	Questionnaire and quantitative	The age gap between the older and younger partner was either 7 or 27 years	Contextual factors: gender and age of older persons and teens
Sahl and Reid (2012) United States	Examine the effect of respondent's gender, adult's gender, the age gap between the adult and teen, and the adult's authority on students' perceptions of adult–teen sexual relationships.	2,838 University students	Questionnaire and quantitative	Sexual relationships between a 15-year-old boy/girl and a 22/42-year-old man/woman	Contextual factors: gender of older persons and teens; gender of respondents
Sherrill, Renk, Sims, and Culp (2011) United States	Examine the importance of perpetrators' age and sex, participants' sex, gender role and sexual attitude in participants' attributions of child sexual abuse.	262 Male and female college students	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 15; Older person: 15 and 35	Contextual factors: gender and age of older persons and teens; gender of respondents
Smith et al. (1998) United States	Explore gender differences in the perception of sexual relations between an older adolescent and an adult teacher.	94 Male and 75 female students	Questionnaire and quantitative	Teen: 16, female; Older person: 39, male	SR relationship characteristics; Contextual factors: gender of older person and teen; gender of respondents
Tener et al. (2014) United States	Examine youths' perceptions of statutory rape relationships and youths' experience interacting with professionals.	22 SR victims	Interview and qualitative	Teen: 13–16; Older person: at least 2 years older	Motivation of teen for SR; SR relationship dynamics; Legal system
Thomson (2004) UK	Explore young people's perspectives by discussing the proposition that the age of consent for heterosexuals should be lowered to 14.	Focus groups ($n = 56$) and individual interviews ($n = 43$) with 11 to 16-year-old students from eight high schools	Interview and qualitative	Attitudes toward appropriate age of consent: 18, 16, or 14	Legal system; Contextual factors: age of older persons and teens

Note. SR = statutory rape.

Respondents discussed several reasons for being involved with someone older, which can be broadly divided into personal and interpersonal. The first personal motivation was *physical attraction*. Some respondents described being sexually curious, with the older person viewed as a suitable partner for a pleasurable sexual experience or satisfying sexual desire (Tener, Walsh, Jones, & Kinnish, 2014). Another personal factor described by respondents was the *emotional support* offered in such relations. They felt someone cared for and took care of them (Higginson, 1999). Respondents also referred in this context to the older person's maturity: the relationship as offering greater stability and continuity as opposed to brief sexual encounters. Respondents felt the older person could identify and satisfy their emotional needs, while partners of their own age were considered too immature (Tener et al., 2014)—boys who needed to “grow up first before I'd consider them” (Higginson, 1999, p. 39). Many adolescents described themselves as falling in love with the older person (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014). In some cases, love-mediated perceptions of such relations as abusive, an issue further discussed under the following themes.

Interpersonal motivations related to family, peers, and larger society. When referring to their families, adolescents described their involvement in SR relations as an opportunity to have a *father figure*, when their own fathers were absent, neglecting or abusive. They sought a father figure they could look up to, one who could perform normative parental behaviors and be “the dad I always wanted” (Higginson, 1999, p. 39). Participants also discussed the older person's *financial or instrumental support* as contributing to their peer group status such as being able to buy expensive clothing. Finally, participants discussed *social norms* in their immediate environment that legitimized such relations. Youth involved in SR described how everybody knew but did not seem to care, how “everyone does it and nobody minds” (Higginson, 1999, p. 43), and how frequently and easily they lied about their age (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014).

Theme 2: Relationship Characteristics

Six articles focused on the types and characteristics of the relationship between the adolescent and the older person, including the two qualitative studies with SR survivors and four quantitative articles with survivors, students, and the general population. Two main relationship types emerged mutual and negative/abusive. The respondents included adolescents involved in such relations (three articles) and teens or adults from the general population (3). Four articles used quantitative and two used qualitative methodology.

Mutual relations

Qualitative studies with SR survivors. The interviewees emphasized that they entered into the relations of their own free will (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014). Interestingly, this was also true in cases, where the relations were focused strictly on sexual encounters, which were not necessarily physically

pleasurable for the youth; and yet the survivors insisted that the relations were mutual and that they, in fact, sought them actively, in some cases, lying about their age (Tener et al., 2014).

A Quantitative study with survivors. In Okami's (1991) survey study, the SR survivors, unsatisfied with the multiple choices for defining the relations offered in the questionnaire, entered in the open-ended space their own description of the relations, using terms such as “bursting with joy,” “proud,” “fascinated,” “scary fun,” “secretive,” “loving,” and “accepting” (p. 447).

Negative/Abusive Relations

Qualitative studies with SR survivors. Participants characterized their relations as unwanted, wrong, abusive, exploitative, coercive, and sometimes traumatizing (Tener et al., 2014). The older person was perceived as domineering and manipulative, in having planned in advance to exploit the naive youth, too young to understand they were being abused, and it was this exploitation that made the relationships deviant (Higginson, 1999).

Perceptions of the relations as deviant and abusive could emerge either at the time of the relationship or in retrospect (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014). For example, one of the interviewees in Higginson's study (1999) described how when looking back, she realized how she had been deceived by her older boyfriend who “nailed it into her” that she was in love with him. She described how he used to physically abuse her during intercourse, stating the need to “toughen her up” (p. 36), in case, anyone ever raped her. Looking back, she felt she was too young to understand his abusiveness and said she now believed SR laws were vital in helping girls in her position. Sometimes, youth felt relations changed over time and described how they began as voluntary and mutual but as time progressed, became unwanted, forcible, and even life-threatening (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014).

The nature of the relations was significant for many respondents. Reluctance to label them as abusive or even as SR was commonplace: It was hard for many respondents to define the relations automatically as abusive, even when they fit into the legal definition of SR. Two articles (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014) discussed love as a factor that differentiated SR relations from abuse. Being in a loving relationship with the older person was perceived as a buffer against deviancy or coerciveness and as a way to legitimize the relations (Higginson, 1999). In some of these relations, the youths were pregnant or had a child with the older person and wanted to start a family (Tener et al., 2014). Finally, participants were also much less likely to label the relationships criminal or deviant if they were considered normative in their own culture or in others (Higginson, 1999).

Quantitative studies with survivors, students, and the general population. Similarly to the qualitative studies, in some of the quantitative studies, SR relationships were perceived by

students and the general population as potentially harmful and problematic (Okami, 1991). In Horvath and Giner-Sorolla's (2007) study, when students were presented with vignettes on such relations, they generally expressed disapproval, including presumptions of harm and moral emotions of anger and disgust, as well as a tendency to judge them as wrong. In Smith, Fromuth, and Morris's (1998) study, although students were presented with a teacher–student sexual scenario that was voluntary and did not involve coercion, these relations were still perceived as abuse of power.

As in the qualitative studies, the quantitative studies found the nature of the relations important for defining them as abusive (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007). Oudekerk, Farr, and Reppucci (2013) found that about 60% of young adults felt that love should be considered a mitigating factor when determining the relationship's criminality, the older person's responsibility, and the need for legal intervention—even when the partners' age difference was 4 or 6 years. Finally, as in the qualitative studies, cultural norms also reduced the likelihood of these relationships to be labeled criminal (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007).

Theme 3: Contextual Factors

Subtheme 1: Partners' Gender

Eleven papers addressed the effect of the older person and adolescent's gender on their relations. Ten used quantitative and one used qualitative methodology.

A Qualitative study with SR survivors. In Higginson's (1999) study, female perpetrators were perceived as less responsible and female teens were perceived as more naive and vulnerable. For example, one of the female respondents described how she watched a talk show presenting relations between adult women and younger males, which she perceived as positive; when presented with an adult male dating a female teen, however, she felt it was "sick" (p. 34).

Quantitative studies with students and the general population. In most articles reviewed, respondents tended to judge men in relationships with girls more harshly than they did women in relationships with boys. Female perpetrators were perceived as significantly less responsible and blameworthy, and vignettes with them were perceived as significantly less abusive and less representative of child sexual abuse (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Sahl & Keene, 2010; Sherrill, Renk, Sims, & Culp, 2011). Conversely, compared to male teens, female teens were perceived as more naive, as being more negatively affected and as suffering greater damage from SR relations (Sahl & Keene, 2010; Smith, Fromuth, & Morris, 1998). Note, however, that in Koon-Magnin and Ruback's (2012) study, female participants were blamed more than male participants, regardless of their role in the scenarios presented (perpetrators or victims).

Attitudes toward gender were also influenced by whether the relationship was same or opposite sex. Maynard and

Wiederman (1997) reported that opposite-sex interactions, regardless of the minor's age, were rated as less abusive. In opposite-sex relations, the adult was also blamed less. Horvath and Giner-Sorolla (2007), on the other hand, found no such bias. In fact, female–female relationships were seen as the most acceptable.

Some studies indicated no gender bias. Maynard and Wiederman (1997) found that regardless of the child's or adult's sex, or endorsement of traditional gender role attitudes, respondents generally perceived the interaction to be an instance of child sexual abuse, with the adult seen as responsible and blameworthy. Similarly, in Sahl and Keene (2012), respondents were not influenced by the adult's gender when determining whether she or he should be placed on a sex-offender registry or be restricted in future access to children. Accordingly, the authors argued that "the softening of a female offender's image does not appear to shield her from the significant and consequential label of sex offender" (p. 18).

Subtheme 2: Respondents' Gender

Nine *quantitative studies with students and the general population* referred to the effect of respondents' gender on how they perceived adolescent–older person relationship. Most found significant differences (Broussard, Wagner, & Kazelskis, 1991; Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Klettke & Mellor, 2012; Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2012; Sahl & Keene, 2012; Sherrill et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1998), while only two found none (Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Oudekerk et al., 2013).

In most articles in this category, women, regardless of context, perceived adolescent–older person relations more negatively. Female respondents were more inclined to identify the offender as a sexual predator, agree to child-contact restrictions, and recommend placing the adult on a sexual offender registry (Sahl & Keene, 2012). They were also less willing to attribute a male offender's motivations to intimacy and companionship. Conversely, they were more willing to attribute the acts of a female offender to intimacy (Sahl & Keene, 2012). Finally, compared to their male counterparts, female respondents were more likely to attribute more blame and responsibility to the older person and less to the adolescent and to consider any SR scenario as abusive or harmful (Broussard et al., 1991; Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Sherrill et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1998).

In Koon-Magnin and Ruback (2012), female respondents were highly critical of both victim and perpetrator, equally when the victim was male, regardless of the sexual act, whereas male respondents were more critical toward females than males, whether victim or perpetrator. In Klettke and Mellor (2012), male respondents had significantly higher age estimates for female maturity, including, for example, the age in which they believed a women stopped being sexually naive. In both Maynard and Wiederman's (1997) and Oudekerk et al.'s (2013) studies, no gender differences were found between respondents.

Subtheme 3: Partners' age

Ten articles reported how the ages of the older person and the adolescent were perceived by respondents. Nine used quantitative and one used qualitative methodology. This subtheme seemed to range along a continuum. On one end, the age factor played no significant role for the respondents, while on the other, it was perceived as a major factor affecting the relations. In the middle of the continuum, respondents referred to contextual factors such as the size of the age gap and the presence or lack of love.

A Qualitative study with SR survivors. While some respondents emphasized the inability of adolescents to make judicious decisions about SR relations, others considered the age factor irrelevant (Higginson, 1999). Interestingly, even some of the teen mothers who did not have older partners themselves did not consider age as significant in the relationship, as long as it was consensual. Teens who thought age was irrelevant also did not approve of the legal concept of age of consent. Being considered by the law as too young to decide was perceived as equivalent to pathology or to having impaired mental capacity such as being a drug addict. In the middle of the continuum, participants tended to be ambivalent and considered the size of the age gap to be an important factor (Higginson, 1999).

Quantitative studies with students and the general population. Respondents for whom the age gap was significant tended to perceive the older persons as using their knowledge, experience, and authority to take advantage of inexperienced, immature, and impressionable adolescents in order to trick them (Sahl & Keene, 2010). On the other end of the continuum, the age factor was perceived as noncriminal (Oudekerk et al., 2013). Most respondents tended to be inconclusive and in trying to decide on the issue, they referred to contextual factors, mainly the size of the age gap. Wider gaps were perceived as more abusive and criminal, and the older person involved was considered more responsible and deserving punishment (Klettke & Mellor, 2012; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Oudekerk et al., 2013; Reitz-Krueger, Warner, & Newsham, 2016; Sahl & Keene, 2010, 2012; Sherrill et al., 2011).

For example, in Oudekerk et al. (2013), young adults rendered harsher judgments on the responsibility and blameworthiness of the older persons when the adolescent partners were 6 and 4 years younger, compared to only two. They also considered love to be a mitigating factor. The respondents in Reitz-Krueger, Warner, and Newsham (2016) tended to view 13-, 14-, and 15-year olds collectively as significantly less mature than 16- and 17-year olds. In another article, family planning program managers did not consider the age gap between the adult and teen to be a significant mitigating factor (Sahl & Keene, 2010). In Thomson's study (2004), there was ambivalence concerning the age of consent. On the one hand, respondents opposed the idea of "putting an age on loving"

(p. 138). On the other, although some participants ridiculed the idea of the state intervening in their intimate lives, they did not argue for the abolition of the age of consent, and some even though it should be raised from 16 to 18.

Theme 4: The Legal Framing

Six articles addressed youth and young people's perceptions on SR and age of consent laws. Two used qualitative and four used quantitative methodology.

Qualitative Studies with SR Survivors

In both Higginson (1999) and Tener, Walsh, Jones, and Kinish (2014), respondents were opposed to the idea of automatically defining relations with older persons as abusive and criminal, especially if they were voluntary and consensual (Higginson, 1999; Tener et al., 2014). In Tener et al.'s study (2014), some of the youths considered SR laws as arbitrary, irrational, and one-dimensional, unable to capture the true context of their relationship. They felt that since was not harmful to the younger partner or to society, such relations should not be a legal offense. Yet at the same time, some respondents rejected the idea of lowering the age of consent, since teens were considered less capable of judicious decisions concerning such relations (Higginson, 1999).

Quantitative Studies with Students and the General Population

All articles reviewed revealed ambivalence and contradictory beliefs surrounding existing laws and legal interventions. For example, as we have seen, in Thomson's study (2004) although young people ridiculed the idea of the state intervening in their intimate lives, they did not argue for the abolition of the age of consent. Although they did not recognize the authority of the law in determining their sexual practices, they grudgingly accepted that the law could lend support when the youth was pressured to have sex (Thomson, 2004). Most respondents opposed the idea of defining such relations automatically as criminal (Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007; Oudekerk et al., 2013; Thomson, 2004), and some also believed it was the parents' rather than the police's responsibility to intervene (Thomson, 2004). In Horvath and Giner-Sorolla (2007), out of about half the respondents who believed sexual relations between a minor and an adult should be considered criminal, most recommended only very short-term probation for the latter. At the same time, the law was perceived as necessary and helpful in cases of cultural or peer pressure to have sex or when the SR relations became coercive and violent (Thomson, 2004).

Discussion

This review summarized the findings of empirical studies on how sexual relations between adolescents and older persons were perceived by the adolescent participants and members

of the public. Four themes emerged from our analysis: adolescents' motivations for having sexual relations with an older person; the characteristics such relations; contextual factors affecting how they are perceived, including the partners' age and gender and the gender of the respondents; and, finally, perspectives on the legal framing of the relations as SR. Despite the paucity and certain methodological limitations of these studies, the current findings offer deeper understanding of the phenomenon as well as directions for future research, policy, and practice.

Main Findings

Several personal and interpersonal reasons played a major role in adolescents' motivation for being sexually involved with an older person. Physical attraction and sexual experience as well as the older person's perceived emotional maturity played some part, but one of the most consistent factors was the emotional support provided by the older person. The respondents mentioned the ability of the older person to attend to their emotional needs, given the lack of emotional support from others, especially family members. The literature on sexual offenders often uses the term "grooming" when referring to the offender's "seduction" methods prior to committing abuse, designed to gain access to future victims and prepare them to be compliant with abuse (Bennett & O'Donohue, 2014). Providing emotional support can be seen as one such technique. Yet one question arising from the findings is whether focusing on the legal definition of these relations, which frames the older person as deviant and abusive, overshadows the need to address the unfulfilled emotional needs described by the adolescents. Lack of support within their immediate social environment may be the trigger for minors to seek support outside (Oberlander et al., 2011), and targeting these relations cannot free society of the responsibility to meet these needs.

Second, the review suggests that adolescent sexual relations with older persons are perceived either as abusive and negative or as mutual. The older person is often perceived by both those who experienced such relations and by the general population as abusive, even if the relations were consensual at the time: He is seen as exploiting authority and position, whereas the adolescent is seen as lacking real choice. Although at the time the relations may have been perceived positively by the youth, some of the minors involved in the past now reframe them as abusive. This reframing reflects the conflictual issue of decision-making ability in adolescence. According to the literature, although adolescents are usually able to understand the consequences of their future actions as well as adults and are able to perceive the risks of their activities, they still engage in more risky activities than adults do in real-life situations (Defoe, Dubas, Figner, & van Aken, 2015; Padon & Baren, 2011), including substance abuse (Balogh, Mayes, & Potenza, 2013). This conduct, however, is also affected by social context and expected norms. A study on adolescent girls, for example, found that social context and expected norms played a major part in their decision-making concerning relationships with

older persons and that the adolescents felt the older partners did not directly force them to have sex, but that they understood this was what expected of them (Fantasia, 2011).

Adolescents perceiving the relationship as a loving one were strongly opposed to its reframing as abusive. Far from the straightforward and inflexible legal definitions of SR, for many of the participants in this review, age gap and being an adolescent were simply not enough to determine criminal abuse (Sahl & Keene, 2010). Social narratives around SR relationships that tend to portray a young, naive victim exploited by an older offender are problematic, since they are not only rejected by many respondents but also reduce the complex phenomenon to a single perspective (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). According to the just world theory, many people have a strong desire or need to believe that the world is a predictable place where people "get what they deserve" (Lerner, 1980). Therefore, when we encounter evidence to the contrary, we feel intimidated and quickly act to restore justice—in theory or in practice—using a variety of techniques. The common social tendency to frame the minor and the older person stereotypically may serve that need. Such labeling, though, may contradict the perception of the minor involved. In these cases, legal intervention, rather than the SR relations themselves, are experienced as offensive and abusive (Tener et al., 2014).

This review also found, moreover, that even when relations were perceived by minors as offensive and exploitative, legal intervention was still often perceived as harmful. This raises the question whether legal intervention really helps youth in these relations, regardless of how they are perceived. This question becomes even more critical when considering the fact that teenagers may have a negative perception of law enforcement to begin with, often based on firsthand experience. Indeed, studies in the United States demonstrate that minors labeled as SR victims tend to be undereducated female African Americans living in inner cities (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Kandakai & Smith, 2007; Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007; Vézina et al., 2011). Minority populations are usually more exposed to surveillance by the authorities (e.g., Brunson & Weitzer, 2009), resulting among other things in higher rates of SR reporting.

Third, the review highlights that the way SR relations are perceived is deeply affected by contextual factors, especially gender and age. Concerning gender, there seems to be a social tendency to judge men in relationships with girls more harshly than women in relationships with boys. Moreover, compared to male teens, female teens are perceived as more naive and as more negatively affected. At the same time, the findings also indicate that minor males involved in SR relations with older women are sometimes perceived by others as fortunate and as having higher social status. Such perceptions should raise several concerns, since studies reveal that boys involved in SR relations can suffer negative psychological consequences similar to those of girls (Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2005; Oudekerk et al., 2014). Yet in Koon-Magnin and Ruback's (2012) study, females were blamed more than males, whether presented as victims or perpetrators. This could be the result of a perception that they do not meet their

social gender expectations. Another concern is that such social perceptions frame men and women dichotomously as predators and victims, respectively, a framing not necessarily compatible with the perceptions and needs of minors involved in the SR relationships.

Finally, perceptions and opinions on SR laws seem to highlight the ambiguity surrounding the legal framing of SR relations as deviant and abusive. On the one hand, participants opposed the idea of “putting an age on love” and the automatic legal framing of SR relations as abusive. On the other hand, some felt the law protected youth who were not mature enough to consent to such relations (Manlove, Terry-Humen, Ikramullah, & Moore, 2006; Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1989). Participants in the articles reviewed also perceived the law as too ambiguous and at times even confusing to read, containing contradictions and double meanings. Indeed, the literature points to the limits of the law, including its unclear definitions, as well as questioned the extent to which SR laws are known, and perhaps more importantly accepted in society, the inconsistency concerning its sanctions, and mandatory reporting issues (Oudekerk et al., 2013; Sachs, Weinberg, & Wheeler, 2008).

To conclude, the review highlights several major issues. First, it reveals that teens’ motivations to enter relationships with older persons are diverse and highlights their need for emotional support that is unavailable from other sources in their lives. It also reveals that these relations are perceived by the minors involved and members of the public in diverse ways, as opposed to the rigidly dichotomous perspective of the law. They may be perceived as abusive, out of the assumption that youth are unable of judicious decisions regarding sexual relations. Alternatively, they may be perceived as mutual and noncoercive relations, rejecting that implicit assumption. The literature also discusses possible negative consequences of such relations, tending to emphasize individual rather than familial, social, and cultural factors. It focuses on contextual factors affecting the perception of these relations, mainly in articles on the effect of gender and age of both the younger and older person, with mixed findings. Other possible contextual factors such as sociocultural conditions are largely absent from the literature.

Perhaps the most resonant question arising from the findings is whether SR relations may be understood through patterns and characteristics familiar from other, more “normative” relationships. Specifically, they question whether the legal perspective is the most desirable and effective angle from which to address this phenomenon.

Limitations

This literature review is the first we know of that systematically summarizes research findings on the way SR is perceived by those who experienced it as well as by the general population. Nonetheless, several limitations should be noted, including both methodological and contextual ones.

Methodological limitations. First, the definition of SR relations varied across articles. Some addressed the legal age of

consent while others emphasized the age gap. The papers reviewed here contained varied definitions of the ages of an adolescent versus a child or adult and of the age of consent. Second, most of the studies representing the general population relied on nonrandom convenience samples of undergraduate students, which may not be representative of other groups in society. Moreover, the studies were not longitudinal, and most were retrospective. Consequently, changes in perspectives on SR relations over an extended period could not be addressed in this review. Third, while the studies varied considerably in their methodologies, making it difficult to assess the relative strength of their findings, there were too few of each methodology to determine exactly whether and how this affected their findings.

Contextual limitations. The total number of articles available for this review was relatively small and the findings of the review were limited by the questions addressed by the researchers. Thus, a variety of issues important in understanding the perspectives on adolescent sexual relations with older persons could not be determined, and other core issues were touched upon only briefly. First, the perspectives on the effect of the SR relations on the lives of minors were hardly addressed in the articles reviewed, despite being a critical issue. Second, it was impossible to compare perspectives on other- versus same-sex SR relations, despite the prevalence of the latter phenomenon in real life.

Another major factor not addressed in this review was culture or religion, as it focused exclusively on Western societies. Such information can be crucial. For example, Wood, Hutchinson, Kahwa, Hewitt, and Waldron (2011) addressed the experiences of adolescent girls and older male sexual partners in Jamaica, which seem to be unique. For instance, being involved sexually with more than one partner at the same time was described by some of the participants as a cultural norm. In turn, this norm affected the way SR relations were perceived and constructed by respondents. Finally, it should also be noted that the legal framework concerning SR in these studies was based on U.S. laws, and this may not accurately represent the legal reframing of these phenomenon in other cultures. Future studies should therefore focus on the sociocultural context of SR, as it may affect both the perceptions of the phenomenon and the legal approach to it.

In addition to culture, this review could not address the effects of the socioeconomic status of the adolescents, despite indications that some families of younger partners were financially dependent on the older person. Although hardly discussed in other papers, this issue seems crucial for understanding SR. Failing to address it is a major limitation, since one of the dilemmas around SR relationships is that the relationships themselves are not necessarily the cause for the consequences attributed to them, but rather another symptom of the lifestyle of at-risk youth (Oudekerk et al., 2014; Vézina et al., 2011; Young & D’Arcy, 2005). Consequently, focusing on these relationships as the cause as well as on personal rather than social and structural factors may prevent beneficial support to these teens while stigmatizing them.

Another major limitation of this review is the absence of the older persons' perspectives on the circumstances and motivations that brought them to be in relation with younger partners, the relations themselves and how disclosure affected their lives. Relatedly, the perspectives of those who actively experienced SR relations as opposed to other respondents may differ tremendously, and the fact that the dearth of studies forced us to include them in the same analysis represents another limitation. For example, the encounter with legal authorities in the CAC after the relations had been reported to the police and the older person arrested may deeply affect the perspectives of adolescents interviewed (Tener et al., 2014).

Finally, since SR involves minors for whom online communication usually plays a key role, it is recommended that future studies address perceptions on social media communications as a context for forming or experiencing SR relations. This is specifically important since studies reveal Internet sex crimes are likely to fit a pattern of SR rather than a model of forcible sexual assault (Wolak et al., 2008).

Implications for Practice and Policy

The current review highlights the complexity and ambiguity surrounding relations between an adolescent and an older person. It also highlights the significant role these relations play in adolescents' lives. Two main policy issues can be considered in this light. The first is the lack of clear law enforcement guidelines. Most respondents knew the SR law existed but were unsure about its definition, scope, and consequences for minors involved. The second is its questionable helpfulness. Although some respondents believed the law could protect young people unable to decide about sexual relations with an adult, and some believed that it empowered minors in such a relationship, many felt the police had no business interfering in such relations and was in fact not actively enforcing the law for lack of motivation or resources.

Based on this study's findings, intervention programs should focus on strengthening the family unit and the social network of these youth. Policy should also address teen sexuality. It is not clear whether approaching this from legal rather than therapeutic angle is more beneficial. Sex education programs for both teens and their parents may be helpful. Clinicians may benefit from being aware of two main aspects arising from this review. The first is the diverse nature of SR relations: While they may be perceived as abusive and coercive, they could also be perceived as mutual, with contextual factors including the age of the younger and older person and whether love is involved playing a major role in their perception. Another aspect is the motivation for such relations. One of the strongest motivations mentioned by adolescent interviewees in the studies reviewed above was the emotional support received from the older person. Such support is vital where other sources of support are lacking. Forbidding such relations without offering alternative sources of support may be counterproductive.

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