

Statutory sex crime relationships between juveniles and adults: A review of social scientific research[☆]

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Abstract

This paper reviews the social scientific literature about non-forcible, voluntary sexual relationships between adults and juveniles, what we have termed “statutory sex crime relationships” or “statutory relationships.” In the available literature, the topic is poorly defined and the research weak, but there are clearly a diverse variety of contexts and dynamics to such relationships. We detail a wide-ranging set of issues on which more research is needed to guide social policy and practice.

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Throughout the era of concern about sex crimes against children, there has generally been some awareness that certain juveniles enter into sexual relationships with adults in a manner that appears to be voluntary and even enthusiastic, though still proscribed under law. Less attention has been paid to these non-forcible relationships, even while the literature on sex offenses has grown tremendously. And the reason almost certainly has to do with the difficult policy and moral issues that these relationships pose.

Nonetheless, cases involving such relationships continue to confront police, prosecutors, judges, mental health practitioners, school personnel and families. One such case that drew public attention for nearly a decade was that of Mary Kay Letourneau, the teacher who, despite serving time in prison for sex with an underage boy, had children with and eventually married the youth (Olsen, 1999). Increasingly, it is clear that interventions in these cases based on models from the literature on sexual abuse and sexual assault are not sufficient. Recent articles (e.g. Manlove, Moore, Liechty, Ikramullah, & Cottingham, 2005; Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005) suggest that both professionals and the public are interested in, and might benefit from, a more systematic and evidence-based discussion of these relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to review what social scientific literature there is about such relationships between juveniles and adults with a particular eye to establishing some of the most important issues in need of research. Although much of the debate on this topic has revolved around whether and under what circumstances these relationships should be criminalized, that is not the only or even necessarily the most important issue which social science can address. For example, some of the youth and adults involved in these relationships have problems and needs that should be identified and addressed by child welfare, mental health, educational, and criminal justice authorities. Second, because some of these relationships will almost certainly continue to fall within the purview of the criminal justice system for the foreseeable future, good information on the dynamics of these relationships and likely outcomes for youth and adults may be crucial for rational decision-making within that system.

Some people may find it objectionable that this paper even discusses the question of “voluntary” sexual relationships between juveniles and adults. They might argue that this kind of discussion only abets sex offenders, who delude themselves or try to excuse criminal behavior by referring to voluntary or mutual relationships with juveniles.

It is our view that there is more to be gained than risked, however, by conducting this review and discussing this topic. The public and professionals will continue to be confronted by such relationships, and only on the basis of accurate information concerning their dynamics and characteristics of the youth and adults who become involved in them can we fashion effective responses. Especially if the goal is to prevent such relationships, strategies must be devised based on realities. Thus, for example, if some young people are initiating sexual activities with adults they meet on the Internet, we cannot be effective if we assume that all such relationships start with a predatory or criminally inclined adult.

We will discuss a variety of topics in this paper. First, we will give some consideration about how to define and refer to the type of relationship under consideration. Second, we will review what evidence is available about the prevalence and dynamics of such relationships. Third, we will report on the literature evaluating the impact of such relationships. Fourth, we will discuss what is known about the characteristics of the adult partners in these relationships. Finally, we will discuss some research needs of apparent importance to public policy in this domain, research on such issues as how to configure appropriate age of consent laws, how to discourage such relationships, and how to minimize the negative impact of investigation and prosecution.

1. Terminology

Indicative of the controversial nature of the topic, there is considerable disagreement about how to define and refer to these relationships. They have been referred to with terms like voluntary, consensual, non-forcible, and cross-

generational, and the juveniles have been referred to as compliant victims, statutory victims or even co-offenders. Among the issues implicit in the naming controversies are: (1) whether such youth are indeed victims, (2) whether they are capable morally or psychologically of consent, and (3) where on the continuum between coercion and voluntary choice one might want to draw the line, if at all, between these relationships and those that are termed sexual assault.

The term “compliant victim” has achieved increasing acceptance among professionals interested in this topic (Lanning, 2002). It has a disadvantage, however. The term suggests that the youth are “complying” with an initiative made by an adult, which, while accurate in some relationships, does not convey the full spectrum of such relationships, some of which may be initiated by youth themselves.

Although we expect the debate about terminology to continue, in this article we will use the term *statutory relationship*, meaning a relationship between a juvenile and an adult that is illegal under age of consent statutes, but that does not involve the degree of coercion or manipulation sufficient to qualify under criminal statutes as a forcible sex crime. In addition to absence of force, however, we would also prefer to confine our interest to relationships in which there were clear signs of voluntary participation by the youth, including such things as initiating sexual behavior, returning for sexual encounters, or professing romantic love for the adult.

Unfortunately, there is a complicated spectrum of relationships that can be considered here, and perhaps ultimately multiple terms are required. Voluntary acts of initiation can occur in relationships with considerable actual or threatened coercion. Ascertaining what is voluntary is almost always difficult and subject to contention in most episodes. But there is a “more voluntary” side to the spectrum that needs some special referent, such as the term statutory relationship that we are proposing.

The use of the term statutory relationship, however, draws immediate attention to the age of consent laws, which vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Generally speaking, age of consent laws range from 16 to 18 years, and some states (e.g., Colorado, Connecticut) specify a minimum age difference between the partners. However, many of the relationships we will be discussing involve situations that might be illegal in one jurisdiction, while the legal in another. Undoubtedly the ages of the participants – whether one is talking about a 19-year-old with a 16-year-old or a 32 year-old with a 14-year-old – can make a substantial difference in the dynamics of the relationship. For purposes of this paper and within our concept of the term statutory relationship, we will be confining our interest to the extent possible to youth ages 13 and older.

2. The research literature

The research literature we will be drawing on for this review is relatively small and is full of serious problems in its application to the issue of statutory relationships. One big problem is the highly variable nature of the samples that have been studied. At one extreme are studies that have looked exclusively at relationships that the youth described as voluntary or wanted. At the other extreme are studies that examined juveniles who had relationships with adults, some of which may have involved elements of coercion or manipulation. Some studies have been confined to adolescents at the older end of the age spectrum, such as youth 16 and older. Others have lumped together adolescents with preadolescents who may have had relationships with adults. Some studies have looked exclusively at girls, whereas others have grouped boys and girls together. Some have included adults who were in custodial relationships with the youth, such as teachers or even family members. Some have been based on highly selected groups of youth, betraying a possibly preconceived intent to find these relationships either exclusively harmful or benign. Obviously, findings may differ dramatically depending on who was included. In the first part of this review, we discuss the prevalence and dynamics of statutory relationships. To facilitate this discussion, we have broken these relationships into four categories based on the gender of the youths and adults. This categorization is based to some degree on the divisions in the literature, which have tended to treat girls separately from boys, and also on findings that show differential reactions and outcomes by gender.

3. Prevalence and dynamics

3.1. Adolescent female/adult male sexual relationships

The most stereotypical and well-researched statutory relationships are those involving an adolescent female and an adult male. This type of statutory relationship is perhaps the most frequent type (Manlove et al., 2005; Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005), and it is also the one that draws the most concern in the research and public policy fields. The concern is

due mostly to the fact that this is the only one that can result in an adolescent becoming pregnant and possibly incurring the personal and financial burden of raising a child. In addition, teenage pregnancy and parenthood can stunt both the social and psychological development of the adolescent girl (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998), keep her in a state of poverty and reliance on welfare for much of her adult life (Allen Guttmacher Institute, 1994), and is associated with the maltreatment of the child (e.g., Lee & George, 1999).

This constellation of statutory relationships seems to be the most common type reported to law enforcement agencies. In an analysis of the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) data from 21 states during the years 1996 through 2000, Troup-Leasure and Snyder (2005) reported that of the 7557 statutory rape incidents reported to law enforcement, 95% involved female victims whose offenders were virtually all men. About 60% of the female adolescents were aged 14 or 15. The median age difference between the female adolescent and the male was six years, with 18% of the female adolescents involved with males who were also juveniles. Approximately 45% of the male participants were age 21 or over, and 25% were age 24 or older. The younger the female was, the more likely it was that her male partner was also juvenile.

Although useful in elucidating the types of relationships that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies, these cases may not be representative of statutory relationships in general. They may overrepresent cases with an age or power imbalance, cases with some aggravating condition, cases that have a greater negative impact on victims or cases of concern to parents who report it to the authorities. Population-based surveys have a greater likelihood of providing more detailed information about the full spectrum of statutory relationships — both those that are reported to the authorities and those that are not. For example, according to the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), 13% of girls reported a first sexual experience with an adult male three or more years older, and this percentage has remained stable since 1995 (Manlove et al., 2005). Eighty percent of these sexual experiences were reported as being voluntary. Typically, the age gap between the girls and their adult male partners is 3–4 years, and only 13% of these relationships were with men eight or more years older. Therefore, the majority of the adult male partners based on population surveys were in the 18–20 year age range.

Although the NSFG is informative, it only asks teens about their first sexual experience; of course, teenagers can have sexual intercourse with adults following this first sexual experience. According to the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 3.5% of girls age 13–15 reported voluntary sex with adult men (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000). Although small percentages, these rates represent large numbers of youth, and are of a comparable magnitude with girls who report forcible sexual assaults during a given year (e.g., Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). The studies generally show that the relationships with adults and older partners comprise a large percentage of all sexual relationships for girls of a younger age (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; Elo, King, & Furstenberg Jr., 1999; Flanigan, 2003), constituting at least one-fifth of all their sexual relationships. This means that in comparison to girls who start voluntary sexual activity at a later age, girls who start voluntary sexual activity young are more likely to start with adults and substantially older partners (Manlove et al., 2005). A number of factors may contribute to this: The younger a girl is when she begins engaging in sexual activity, the more likely she is to be a risk taker, have poorer judgment, or come to early initiation through a history of sexual abuse that would orient her toward older partners (Lamb, Elster, & Tavaré, 1986; Manlove et al., 2005).

The research confirms stereotypes about the risk for teenage girls: that statutory relationships carry higher risks of pregnancy, single-parenthood, and other psychosocial problems. For example, 69% of unmarried adolescent girls became pregnant when their partners were 6 or more years older, 3.7 times the pregnancy rate of those whose partners were no more than two years older (Darroch et al., 1999). Some of this higher rate may reflect the fact that, in such older partner relationships, the teens are more likely to be living with the man and may be intending to start a family. Nonetheless, a majority of such pregnancies are unplanned (Darroch et al., 1999; Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku, & Martinez, 1997), and the relationships with older partners may have a shorter overall duration (Lamb et al., 1986).

Poverty seems to be a major issue for female adolescents who get involved with adult males. Studies show that adolescent mothers whose partners are older come from a significantly lower social status than adolescents mothers whose partners are of the same age (e.g., Elstein & Davis, 1997; Lamb et al., 1986). The young girls tend to get involved with older men for several reasons, including that the adult men can provide them with financial security, material things, and prestige among their peers (Elstein & Davis, 1997), and that because some of the adolescents may already be mothers, adult men, as compared to boys their own age, can provide them with the financial security that they need for themselves and their children (Higginson, 1999).

In addition to issues of poverty, many of these adolescents come from homes where there is a history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and/or neglect, or where there are other issues, such as drug or alcohol abuse, that make for a chaotic home environment (e.g., [Elstein & Davis, 1997](#)). In fact, the more disadvantaged the teen's family-of-origin is (e.g., coming from a family structure other than two biological/adoptive parents; having parents with a high school degree or less; their own mothers were teenage mothers), the more likely the teen is to become involved in a statutory relationship ([Manlove et al., 2005](#)). In addition, parental bonds may be weak and/or nonexistent in the teens' families. For example, some adolescent girls report that they seek out older males to compensate for an absent or weak father-figure ([Higginson, 1999](#)), and many of these girls come from father-absent homes ([Elstein & Davis, 1997](#)). Some have argued that the adult males in these situations are perceived by the female adolescents as "rescuers" who give them the much-needed emotional support, love, attention, and stability these adolescents are lacking in their homes ([Elstein & Davis, 1997](#); [Higginson, 1999](#)).

There is also evidence that adolescent girls who become involved in statutory relationships conform to Problem Behavior Theory. That is, instead of early intercourse disrupting later psychosocial development, early intercourse seems to be associated with a host of psychosocial problems both preceding and following the sexual experiences ([Bingham & Crockett, 1996](#)). For example, in comparison to adolescent mothers whose partners were of the same age, adolescent mothers who were involved with older men were more likely to have had a previous child and to have used alcohol in the three months prior to becoming pregnant again ([Lindberg et al., 1997](#)). Although it can be argued that adolescent girls who already have a child may seek out an older partner for the financial support and that adolescent girls involved with older men may use more alcohol because of the influence of the older men, other research supports the fact that adolescent girls involved with older men may have had pre-existing problem behaviors, such as school problems and drug usage ([Lamb et al., 1986](#)).

In summary, evidence suggests that adolescent females who get involved in sexual relationships with adult men probably have substantial problems with poverty, family dysfunction, parent-child relationships, and/or other antisocial behaviors that precede the commencement of the statutory relationship. Thus, there is evidence that these girls can be seduced by adult males because of the financial and emotional security the men offer. On the other hand, there is also evidence that some of these adolescent girls actively seek older male partners because of the sexual knowledge, financial security, emotional stability, and/or other resources they feel these men can offer them; they report that they want to learn about sex from an experienced older man because they feel that it would be more pleasurable that way, and some girls report that they are just too mature to be dating boys their own age ([Higginson, 1999](#)).

3.2. Adolescent male/adult male sexual relationships

There is little good epidemiological research on the frequency with which boys have voluntary relationships with adult males. According to cases coming to the attention of law enforcement agencies, among the statutory rape victims who were male (5% of all victims), only 6% of their offenders were male, meaning the vast majority were female ([Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005](#)). However, population-based surveys should be conducted to get a better picture of the full spectrum of adolescent males who get involved in sexual relationships with adults.

Adolescent male/adult male relationships are possibly of several different dynamics. Although some relationships entail adolescents with an identified or incipient homosexual orientation who may be exploring a gay lifestyle through the adult males, others involve heterosexually oriented teens. For example, reports of case studies show that adolescent boys may get involved with adult males because the adults provide financial security and a better standard of living than the adolescent is used to in his family ([Money & Weinrich, 1983](#)). Some adolescent boys may come from families where there are issues, such as drug or alcohol abuse, that make for a chaotic home environment and possibly weak and/or nonexistent parental bonds; therefore, the statutory relationship serves as a compensation ([Money & Weinrich, 1983](#)). The adult males can be family friends, clergymen, coaches, and/or teachers. There are also case studies which show that some adolescent males engage in sexual relations with adult men for money or adventure ([Nunez, 2003](#)).

[Van Naerssen \(1991\)](#) describes four types of non-coercive adolescent male/adult male sexual relationships in his review of three accounts of positive adolescent male/adult male relationships ([Reeves, 1983](#); [Rossman, 1976](#); and [Sandfort, 1981](#), as cited in [Van Naerssen, 1991](#)): one in which the sexual relationship is the primary motive, one in which affection and friendship are paramount, a third type in which the youth acts as a prostitute and exchanges sex for money, and a fourth type in which one or both partners use the relationship as a means to explore their sexual identity.

3.3. Adolescent male/adult female sexual relationships

Relationships between adolescent males and adult females are the statutory relationships most likely to be viewed by youth and society as sexual initiation rather than sexual exploitation (Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Fritz, Stoll, & Wagner, 1981; West & Woodhouse, 1990). According to the law, however, they are considered statutory rape. Estimates for the incidence of these types of statutory relationships suggest that around 5% of men report that they had a consensual sexual relationship as an adolescent with an adult woman (Condy, Templer, Brown, & Veaco, 1987; Fromuth & Burkhart, 1987; King, Nurcombe, Bickman, Hides, & Reid, 2003; Manlove et al., 2005). In the majority of these relationships, multiple sexual encounters occur, and the encounters usually include oral or vaginal sex.

Data from NIBRS shows that the majority (94%) of the adults involved with adolescent males are female and that the median age difference between the adolescent male and the adult female is nine years (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). Seventy-three percent of the females in these cases were 21 years of age or older, whereas 8% were juveniles themselves. The recent NSFG provides more detailed information about the sexual relationships that adolescent males age 15 or younger are having with adult females (Manlove et al., 2005). Approximately 5% of these males reported that their first sexual experience was with someone who was at least three years older. These relationships constituted about 25% of all heterosexual statutory rape cases (i.e., includes forcible, coerced, and voluntary adult/adolescent sexual relationships), and over 65% of the males reported that these sexual experiences were voluntary and wanted. These relationships share some similarities to adolescent female/adult male relationships. For example, for both types of relationships, being younger and coming from disadvantaged homes were risk factors. However, there were also some key differences between the two types of relationships. For example, adolescent males were more likely to view the relationship as casual (83% v. 38%), and be considerably younger than the adult (51% of adolescent males, in comparison to 36% of adolescent females, report an age gap of 5 or more years) (Manlove et al., 2005).

An effort has been made to create a typology of female sexual abusers, and one category, termed teacher/lover, describes the dynamics of a statutory relationship (Mathews, Matthews, & Speltz, 1990). In actuality, it may be possible to distinguish lover from teacher, and identify several other categories of statutory relationships involving adult women and adolescent boys: (1) “lover” — in which the older female views herself as in love with the youth and thinks of this as a sustainable relationship; (2) “teacher” — in which the older female simply regards herself as providing sexual initiation or experience to the youth, but does not see this as a romantic or sustainable relationship; (3) “convenience/unaware” — adolescent youth and young adult women who may have casual sexual contact under conditions where no one is paying attention to age or where youths may actually be trying to appear older than they are; (4) “prostitutes” — in some parts of the country, there have been traditions of adolescent boys paying adult female prostitutes for sex; (5) “exploitation” — older women may take advantage of confused or inexperienced youth in the same way that predatory men do.

It is important to bear in mind that there are also a number of sexual relationships between juvenile males and adult females in which the juveniles are sexual assaulters and rapists. The youths use physical force, manipulation, or the compromised intellectual or emotional capacities of the adult to gain sexual access. When youth are surveyed about sexual relationships with adults, some of the “experiences with older partners” may fall into this category of youth as aggressor, but it would be a mistake to categorize or count these as “statutory relationships”.

3.4. Adolescent female/adult female sexual relationships

The adolescent female/adult female sexual relationship is the least researched type of statutory relationship. Kilpatrick (1986), with an all-female sample of university students, vocational-technical students, public school teachers, and members of church groups, community groups, and professional groups, found that 1.2% had a sexual experience prior to age 15 with an unrelated adult female that included masturbation, and 1.4% reported that an adult female masturbated them. These percentages include both voluntary and nonvoluntary sexual experiences, and the authors did not provide separate percentages based on whether the experience was voluntary or not. We also do not know much concerning the dynamics of these relationships. There may be teacher and lover type relationships as with the adolescent males. Certainly more research is needed to explore this type of relationship and the types of dynamics that can occur.

4. Impact of and reactions to statutory relationships

One of the most contentious issues surrounding statutory relationships concerns how to assess their possible negative impacts. Many youthful participants deny harm or describe them in positive terms (Higginson, 1999; Okami, 1991; Sandfort, 1984), but a variety of researchers have argued that these cannot be taken at face value. Three main arguments have been forwarded for discounting such denials of harm. One is the argument that the youth are unable to perceive or admit to the harm (Ondersma et al., 2001), and such researchers point to more objective measures. For example, even when subjective harm is not reported by such males, they are still more likely to seek therapy for an emotional problem or to have a sexual dysfunction than those males without such a history (see, Dallam et al., 2001). Most of these findings are of a cross-sectional nature, though, so we do not know whether these adolescents' psychological problems preceded the statutory relationship or were a reaction to it (e.g., Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2003; Lie, West, & Woodhouse, 1993). However, even if pre-existing, it is still possible that the statutory relationship may exacerbate these problems (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2003), and research needs to be done to examine this possibility.

A second argument is that the negative impact of such relationships may be a delayed reaction. That is, youthful participants may later come to understand the inherent power differential in the relationship, the subtle manipulation they were subjected to, and the adult's use of implied or actual threats, and will then see the harm that was done to them (Grover, 2003). An example of this type of reaction is evident in this man's reaction to his sexual relationship with an older woman when he was a teenager: "When I was a young teen, I had a sexual relationship with a woman twice my age. At the time, I thought it was great. We were in love. She taught me things that were beyond belief. At the time, I thought I was her lover. Now, as a middle-aged man, I realize I was a victim. Approaching subsequent relationships from the standpoint of that first relationship was disastrous. All relationships, until my more recent marriage, ended in failure. My marriage has been a constant struggle. I expected my lovers to recreate those fantasy-like sexual encounters. What I thought was so great and flattering years ago has haunted me like a cancer" (Mathews et al., 1990, p. 291). Such a response does point to a need for a developmental perspective on the impact of such relationships.

A third argument is that the harm is intrinsic, and is in effect a moral harm. In such an evaluation, even the perception that the relationship was positive might be taken as evidence that harm occurred, because only someone with cognitive distortions would view being a crime victim positively. Although this is a reasonable value position, it does not lend itself readily to falsification and hence is not an empirical issue.

Arguments have also been made that not just the positive perceptions, but the negative perceptions about these relationships should likewise be discounted. For example, some researchers have pointed out that the status of the relationship often determines how the adolescents view it: if they are currently in the relationship, they may not view themselves as victims or harmed; however, if the adult ended the relationship, the adolescents may feel jilted and then report the relationship to authorities as abusive and themselves as harmed (Lanning, 2002). In other words, the harm perceptions are primarily the anger and disappointment that anyone feels when a relationship is terminated, and thus should not be interpreted as some special injury related to cross-generational relationships.

Following is a review of the empirical research to date on the reactions of and impact on teens to each of the types of statutory relationships. The majority of the studies on impact have focused on adolescent females who are or were involved with adult males. For all types of relationships, the evidence is mixed. Some studies show negative reactions, others show positive, and still others show neutral. However, all of these studies are correlational, and therefore, it is impossible to ascertain whether these reactions are truly outcomes of the statutory sexual relationship itself.

4.1. Adolescent female/adult male sexual relationships

A range of reactions has been cited for adolescent girls involved in statutory relationships with adult men. Neutral and negative reactions have been shown using self-report measures of functioning and self-reports concerning how the females view their relationships. Positive reactions have been found when researchers asked the females how they feel about the relationships.

Negative reactions have been found in surveys conducted in Vermont (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000), and among Black and Hispanic teenage girls (Miller et al., 1997). According to the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2000), sexual intercourse with older partners had a more negative impact on younger adolescent girls. Specifically, the younger the girl was when she became sexually involved with an adult male, the more likely she was to attempt suicide, use alcohol or drugs, or get pregnant. Among Blacks and Hispanics, teenage girls

who had an older partner at first intercourse, in comparison to those whose first partner was the same age, subsequently engaged in riskier sexual practices (e.g., not using a condom, becoming pregnant) (Miller et al., 1997).

Other research supports these findings in that adolescent girls who have older partners begin having sex earlier than their counterparts and have riskier sex in that they do not consistently use a condom, are more likely to contract HIV or another sexually transmitted disease, and are more likely to get pregnant (Manlove et al., 2005; Marin, Kirby, Hudes, Gomez, & Coyle, 2003; Miller et al., 1997; Sturdevant et al., 2001). What is important to keep in mind, however, is that these studies are correlational, that is, we do not know whether the girls were poorly adjusted and engaged in riskier behavior prior to meeting their adult male boyfriends, or whether these adjustments were a consequence of these relationships. It could also be the case that getting involved in sexual relationships with adult male partners could just be one more risky behavior that girls who are already at risk engage in.

Negative reactions were also found by Higginson (1999), who presented case studies of adolescent girls involved with older men. She found that once girls left the relationship, negative views seemed to predominate. That is, girls who were no longer in these relationships viewed the adult men as perverts who could not find willing partners their own age so they resorted to exploiting young, naïve girls. These girls had relationships in which they were physically abused, controlled, and manipulated into getting pregnant by their adult male boyfriends, and the girls argued that young girls cannot possibly know what love is — they equate getting gifts and being taken to dinner as love.

Although these studies suggest that girls involved sexually with adult men are poorly adjusted, other studies fail to show an association. For example, in one study of adult women, women with voluntary childhood sexual experiences did not differ from women without such experiences on measures of self-esteem, depression, marital discord, sexual discord, and intrafamilial stress. The only women who reported worse functioning were those whose experiences were viewed as forced or abusive (Kilpatrick, 1986). In another study of female college students, although the younger a girl was when she first had intercourse the worse her psychological adjustment, age of partner had no effect on psychological adjustment (Leitenberg & Saltzman, 2003). However, it is important to consider that these are college students. Thus, the girls who had a significantly older partner and suffered the most negative psychological consequences would probably not be included in such a sample.

Only two studies to date show positive reactions to adolescent female/adult male relationships. One was a qualitative study conducted by Higginson (1999), who interviewed 14 teenage mothers who were at one time involved with someone over 18 while they were still minors. She found that mothers who were still in these relationships viewed them as normal — their boyfriends just happened to be older. They argued that their boyfriends loved them and made them happy, therefore, the relationship could not be wrong, and no one was getting hurt. In a second, Okami (1991) specifically recruited people who felt they had at least a partly positive sexual experience with adults when they were minors. Of the women who were involved with adult men when they were minors, 44.4% viewed these relationships as predominantly positive.

4.2. Adolescent male/adult male sexual relationships

Evidence about these relationships is weak and mostly based on convenience samples of questionable generalizability. Sandfort (1984) reports a study of adolescent boys involved with adult males as providing evidence that at least some of these relationships can be positively experienced by the youth. It is important, however, when considering this study that the adolescent males were nominated for the study by their adult male partners, some of whom may have been involved in advocacy organizations on behalf of cross-generational sex; therefore, the results could be seriously biased. The youth stated that their adult partners paid attention to them, considered their feelings, and cooperated with them, and that the sexual relationship had no negative influence on their sense of well-being (Sandfort, 1984).

Okami (1991) also reports a study of a convenience sample of people who viewed their childhood sexual relationships with adults as at least partly positive. Nonetheless, 17.2% of those subjects who were involved in minor male/adult male sexual relationships viewed it as negative either at the time of its occurrence or in retrospect. Some researchers speculate that adolescent male/adult male relationships may be more detrimental than adolescent male/adult female relationships because of the negative attitudes that society has towards homosexuality and the fears that the boy may subsequently have that because a man was attracted to him and the boy liked the sexual contact, he must be gay (Bauserman & Rind, 1997; Watkins & Bentovim, 2000).

4.3. Adolescent male/adult female sexual relationships

How do adolescent males view their sexual relationships with adult females? Some studies show that if the relationship was not forced and the female adult was not a relative, a majority of males viewed these relationships as positive (Condy et al., 1987; Okami, 1991), about a third viewed them as neutral (Fromuth & Burkhart, 1987; Okami, 1991), and a minority (<5%) viewed them as negative (Fromuth & Burkhart, 1987). Nonetheless, they had slightly elevated levels of psychological distress: they had slightly more psychological, alcohol, and deliberate self-harming behavior problems than men without such experiences, but they were not as distressed as those who experienced forced sexual encounters (King et al., 2003).

A point to consider is that societal standards have in the past given a certain legitimacy to sexual contacts between adult women and teenage boys, in contrast to the perceptions of adult men having sexual relationships with teenage girls. Because society tends to condemn this latter type of relationship, teenage girls may more readily describe harms done; however, because society tends to view adolescent male/adult female sexual relationships as nonabusive and perhaps as “sexual initiation”, teenage boys and adult males who had these types of experiences may be unable to admit to any negative repercussions or recognize the relationship as abusive, and adult women who become involved with teenage boys may also not view their behaviors as abusive (Mathews et al., 1990). Although some boys may legitimately view these relationships as positive (as do some girls involved with adult men), case examples and some empirical studies give indications that not all boys are positively affected by these experiences.

4.4. Adolescent female/adult female sexual relationships

In Okami's (1991) study, three of the four subjects involved in a minor female/adult female sexual relationship reported that the relationship was experienced positively, and one reported that they experienced it as neutral. No subjects reported any negative aspects of this type of relationship. However, Okami specifically advertised for childhood sexual experiences that the subject viewed as positive; thus, it is inherently unlikely that any woman who had a consensual adolescent female/adult female relationship that they later viewed as negative would be a participant in his study.

5. Characteristics of adults in statutory relationships

5.1. Adolescent female/adult male sexual relationships

A few studies have provided information on the kind of adult men who seek out adolescent girls for relationships (Lamb et al., 1986; Lindberg et al., 1997; Nakashima & Camp, 1984). In comparison to both adolescent fathers and adult men who fathered children with adult women, the men in statutory relationships were more likely to have criminal histories (Lamb et al., 1986; Nakashima & Camp, 1984), were less likely to have a high school degree, and had a history of poorer school performance (Lamb et al., 1986; Lindberg et al., 1997). They have been described as having feelings of inadequacy and arrested psychosocial development (Nakashima & Camp, 1984). Their criminal histories and poor earning potential make them less desirable for older women, but for adolescent girls, they may seem to have a lot of money because these girls compare them to adolescent boys (Lindberg et al., 1997).

5.2. Adolescent male/adult male sexual relationships

Research on the characteristics of adult men who seek out adolescent boys for sexual relationships has been criticized because oftentimes, researchers lump together the men who seek out prepubescent children with the men who seek adolescent boys, and there could be important variations between the two (Nunez, 2003). There is some preliminary evidence that men who chose adolescent boys for sexual relationships may have experienced a similar type of relationship themselves as adolescents which they are recreating as adults. Men who are attracted to adolescent boys have reported that one motivation to become involved with them is that they are less demanding, less critical, and more easily dominated than their adult peers. The adolescent boys, some adult men have stated, are usually sexually curious and naïve, which relegates the adult male to the position of mentor, an ego-satisfying position (Nunez, 2003). Based on clinical experience, Nunez (2003) asserts that these men fall into one of two categories: (1) they are recapturing their

adolescence through these relationships and functioning both emotionally and psychologically at an adolescent level; these men view the adolescent boys as their peers and see themselves as adolescents when interacting with them; or (2) they see themselves as a mentor to the boys; they are the stronger, more powerful person in the relationship, and they enjoy having the control in the relationship.

Preliminary research on priests who had sexual relationships with adolescent boys (whether the boys were willing in these relationships is unknown) shows that these priests tended to have narcissistic or dependent personality types, but were popular in their public life. Evidence regarding a history of abuse, substance abuse, or family dysfunction is mixed (McGlone, 2000). Moreover, in comparison to other priests, priests who became sexually involved with young boys (i.e., under the age of 19) tended to be passive, did not show any signs of overt hostility, were low in anxiety yet high in extraversion, and displayed signs of cognitive effemininity.

5.3. Adolescent male/adult female sexual relationships

Condy et al. (1987) found that adult women who had sexual relationships with adolescent males displayed elevated levels of Schizophrenia and Hypomania on the MMPI, which is associated with unconventional lifestyles and socially inappropriate behavior. In addition, they tended to have had early sexual experiences themselves with older sexual partners. Specifically, the mean age of their first sexual encounter was 13 years of age, and their adult partner was on average 23.5 years old. Mathews et al. (1990) reported that in their clinical experience, women who had sex with teenage boys tended to display some defensiveness and a denial or minimization of their actions as well as the possible impact of their behavior. The women were unable to acknowledge any character flaws in themselves, and tended to have a history of dependent relationships and substance abuse.

Overall, the description and analysis of the adults in statutory relationships are based on small and potentially unrepresentative clinical samples, and are of limited generalizability, but do provide some evidence about a diversity of types.

6. Research agenda

Public policy on the topic of statutory relationships could clearly benefit from a considerably more detailed understanding of the nature of these relationships as well as from an understanding about the capacities of youth. What follows is a discussion of some of the research that might benefit some of the various policy issues that confront this topic.

6.1. Setting statutory parameters

Some may feel that the prohibitions and legal restrictions that apply to statutory relationships flow from moral principles that are not open to empirical investigation. For those open to considering an empirical perspective on the matter, the age of consent laws appear to be based on presumptions about several possibly researchable issues. These concern the developmental progression of a person's ability to consent to sex: (1) what young people of different ages know and understand about sexual behavior and sexual relationships; (2) how young people of different ages make decisions in general and particularly about sex; and (3) what the power and influence dynamics are in relationships between persons of different ages, and in particular relationships that become sexual; that is, under what conditions (age being a central one) youth are easily manipulated, or have difficulty acting as full decision-making parties in their own interest.

Knowledge. Some research exists about young people's sexual knowledge. For example, the average young adolescent has poor knowledge regarding sex: In one national survey, 13-year-olds did not know the most effective pregnancy prevention method, and only 10% of girls and 7% of boys understood the female fertility cycle and its effects on the likelihood of getting pregnant (Albert, Brown, & Flanigan, 2003). Thus, only a small minority of younger adolescents have the knowledge that is necessary to make informed decisions regarding sexual behavior, particularly sexual relationships with adults. However, to our knowledge, there are no studies that track the developmental progression of this knowledge in a detailed way. Studies also need to look not just at the average level of knowledge, but the level of knowledge among those with the least knowledge, and perhaps, as well, among some of the groups who might be most vulnerable to exploitation, such as youth who were sexually abused at an earlier age. As Guerrina (1998)

has argued, some adolescent girls who are involved in adult/adolescent sex have had previous sexual experiences, which should give them the ability to make informed decisions regarding sexual activity. However, she further argues that a girl's sexual knowledge may not be a good proxy for her maturity. For example, a girl with a history of sexual abuse may have knowledge of sex that increase her capability to make an *informed* decision regarding sexual relations; however, her history of sexual abuse may also make her extremely vulnerable and may cause her to act in a sexually provocative manner in order to attain affection, love, and attention, a situation which makes her too immature to make such decisions (Guerrina, 1998).

Decision-making ability. There is some literature concerning the ability of youth to make decisions at different stages of development. For example, some research has established that there is a delayed development of the prefrontal cortex, a seat of decision-making, in adolescents (Segalowitz & Davies, 2004). In other research, adolescents who have sex often do not perceive it as a decision that they made, merely something that “just happened” (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg Jr., 1989; Chilman, 1983), suggesting perhaps difficulties in projecting sequences of activity into the future (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg Jr., 1989; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998).

Drawing policy conclusions from such findings is not easy, however. The potential vulnerability to prejudgment on the basis of other values are illustrated by the contrasting conclusions of those concerned about consent to sex with those concerned about consent to abortion (American Psychological Association, 2000) or youth culpability for criminal behavior (Donovan, 1997; Lanning, 2002). Some of the same evidence marshaled to support youth capacity to decide to have an abortion might equivalently be cited in support of youth capacity to consent to sex with an adult. It may indeed be the case that decision-making capacity does vary from context to context. For example, the interpersonal pressures or likelihood of manipulation may be greater in the sexual relationship than in the abortion decision. However, this illustrates how research about general decision making capacities may be inadequate to the problem, and research may need to look at how adolescents reason and decide about very specific domains of behavior.

Relationship dynamics, power, and influence. Some researchers and those who deal with statutory rape cases have described a seduction and grooming process to which adolescents presumably are subjected (e.g., Lanning, 2002). They argue that the seducers treat the adolescents better than other adults in their lives have. For example, the adults listen to the adolescents' problems and concerns and fulfill their emotional, physical, and sexual needs. As testimony to the adults' skillfulness, the adolescents often willingly return for sex. According to accounts of other dynamics, adolescents (particularly boys) are typically sexually curious, rebellious, inexperienced, and easily sexually aroused. This makes them targets for adults who wish to sexually seduce them, and once seduced, easily convinced to return. Eventually, the adolescents may initiate sexual contact themselves, which may create the impression that they consented to this process. In addition, some adolescents are willing to trade sex for attention, gifts, and affection, and will deny that they are victims (Lanning, 2002).

Grover (2003) uses dissonance theory to explain why an adolescent who has gone through this seduction process nevertheless would argue that s/he freely consented to the relationship. She argues that adolescents perceive that they were compliant in the sexual acts because they were given cues by the adult to imply that they had a choice (i.e., no force was used). The adult gradually convinces the adolescent through steps over the course of time to “consent” to the sexual relationship. Because they falsely perceive that they have chosen the situation, they assert that they consented to the relationship.

Although many adolescents may be subjected to such a grooming process, there is evidence that not all are. In fact, some adolescents have sex with the adults during their first meeting (e.g., Sandfort, 1984), and a minority of adolescent girls who are involved with adults state that they sought out adults because they wanted to learn about sex from an older, experienced, more knowledgeable partner (Higginson, 1999); they believed that their first sexual experiences would be much more pleasurable this way, and many of these girls admitted to seducing reluctant older men to reach these goals. Other girls have reported that they and their female peers seek out older men because their male peers are not considered an acceptable dating pool; they feel that they are too mature to be dating someone their own age, and that older men would be able to provide for their sexual and other needs much better (Higginson, 1999). Additional research is needed to describe the full range of dynamics in the variety of statutory relationships.

Another issue that needs to be resolved empirically is the nature of the power differential in these relationships. Some argue that the adults hold all power, which precludes the adolescent from making a free choice (Grover, 2003; Guerrina, 1998; Watkins & Bentovim, 2000); others argue that even if the adult does have the power, that does not mean that s/he will misuse the power (Sandfort, 1984), and still others argue that sometimes the adolescent has power over the adult (Money & Weinrich, 1983). No empirical studies have been done to our knowledge to resolve this

argument concerning power perceptions and realities in these relationships and how the power differentials affect the ability of the adolescent to make decisions. Because these relationships tend to be furtive and stigmatized, their uncontaminated dynamics may be hard to study. Other things that need to be looked at concern how these dynamics differ depending on the age difference between the partners, itself an important matter that can be regulated in sexual consent statutes.

Conclusion. Even with considerably more information about the developmental progression of knowledge, decision-making ability and relationship dynamics, it might still be very difficult to apply this information to the practical problem of establishing age of consent limits. An example of the difficulty is posed by the problem of gender equity. Suppose it were to be found that younger boys were considerably less subject to manipulation in statutory relationships than younger girls. It seems unlikely and may be even constitutionally impossible that policymakers would craft laws that would then set different standards according to gender. Nonetheless, the policy obstacles should not inhibit the pursuit of more information on these topics.

7. Prevention/intervention research

7.1. *How to prevent youth from becoming involved*

Advocates have argued for a variety of programs and policies that would discourage young people from becoming involved in relationships with adults (Elstein & Davis, 1997). Two lines of research might be very useful to help build and enhance such initiatives. One would focus on understanding the main risk factors for and reasons why youth become involved in such relationships with a specific eye to trying to target vulnerable youth and meet their needs and deficits in an alternative way.

A variety of suggested risk factors and reasons need to be fully explored:

- Youth involved in conflict with their families who may be looking for alliances with adults to help them gain independence more completely than they could through relationships with other youth.
- Youth who are isolated from peers or have other barriers to peer involvement that may orient them more toward adult relationships.
- Youth who have extremely limited career or employment opportunities, for whom relationships with adults may provide a quicker route to motherhood or family formation.
- Youth who are sexually precocious, who may gravitate to adults for sexual opportunities not available among their peers.
- Youth who are gay, confused about sexual orientation or have other sexual concerns that may make them vulnerable to offers from adults to help mentor them around these concerns by engaging with them sexually.

A second line of research would try to discover what kinds of information or messages are most persuasive in discouraging positive attitudes about or openness to cross-generational relationships. For example, would it be useful to emphasize to young people that such relationships are illegal and may result in prosecution and incarceration for the adults? Or, does such a message fail to persuade because it seems authoritarian, reminds youth of their immaturity and even adds to the allure of such relationships? By contrast, would it be useful to emphasize that such relationships generally do not work out or may involve deceptions by the adult? Focus groups, surveys and evaluation studies of prevention efforts should all be directed at identifying the components of an effective prevention message.

7.2. *How to prevent adults from entering relationships*

The adults who become involved with youth in statutory relationships may well be a diverse group, if the research reviewed here and experience in regard to other sexual offenders is any guide (Lanning, 2002). Although there may be some statutory offenders who bear resemblance to child molesters, who have compulsive or predatory sexual patterns, and who use deception, there may likewise be others who are dissimilar to other categories of more conventional sex offenders. Nonetheless, there have been few, if any, studies of these adults to catalog their diversity and explore the question of whether there are important differentiable subtypes. Such studies would be useful to aid prevention efforts. As has been tried with other sex offenders against children, it may even be useful to talk with

statutory sex offenders explicitly about factors that might have inhibited their behaviors (Conte, Wolfe, & Smith, 1989).

An issue of considerable potential for prevention concerns offenders who were frankly ignorant of the laws criminalizing adult–youth sexual behavior, that is, individuals for whom reinforcement or knowledge about laws and norms might have been a deterrent. Social surveys may also be useful to ascertain whether there are some groups in society among whom the norms are supportive of such behavior. As with prevention messages for youth themselves, it may be useful to test a variety of messages with adults in focus groups, surveys and evaluation studies, to investigate which may be most effective in discouraging a proclivity toward sexual involvement with youth. Such studies should look at different subcultural groups and adults of different ages. In addition, it is probably important to look at these issues with gay adults, who may have a different set of rationales and concerns, although such research obviously needs a great deal of sensitivity to avoid reinforcing the unsubstantiated stereotype that in comparison to heterosexual adults, gay adults are more predatory toward youth.

7.3. *How to minimize iatrogenic impacts on youth*

A policy issue of considerable interest is how to make sure that criminal justice interventions do not cause additional harm to victims. Some of the potential for iatrogenic harm that is widely acknowledged in the sexual assault area (Jones, Cross, Walsh, & Simone, 2005) would certainly be expected in regard to statutory victims. Because some of these youth may have considerable allegiance to the offenders, they may not see themselves as victims, may see the criminal justice system as agents for their parents and as limiting their own autonomy, and may experience interventions as highly coercive and hostile. Intervention may also create considerable stigma for the youth, including such humiliations as outing their sexual orientation, and may cause them to feel guilt and self-blame for actions taken against the offender. Observers have noted that adolescents who are brought into the judicial system as part of these investigations may embellish or change their stories to please the legal authorities (Berliner, 2002), to adhere to societal expectations and/or to avoid embarrassment (Lanning, 2002). Thus, “they inaccurately claim they were afraid, ignorant, or indoctrinated” (Lanning, 2002, p. 6). However, no systematic research has been conducted to verify whether and how often adolescents behave this way.

Research could fruitfully be directed to identifying the most alienating and stressful components of criminal justice intervention for youth involved in statutory relationships. Such research could be the basis for designing interventions that mitigate such harms. Given that these youth frequently have additional problems, the research might suggest adjuncts to criminal justice interventions that may help the youth and improve cooperation with authorities.

8. Conclusion

Statutory sex crime relationships show every indication of being a continuing issue in law enforcement and public policy. It would be a service to everyone involved – law enforcement, practitioners, youth, offenders, parents – if there was good social scientific research to help inform opinion and public policy. In this article, we have detailed a wide range of issues that need more study. We hope that it will help inspire people to look into these issues, discuss their implications, and craft policies around their conclusions.

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