



Perceptions of credibility of sexual abuse victims across generations



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ABSTRACT

The success of prosecutions of perpetrators of sexual abuse often depends substantially upon the perceived credibility of the victim witness. However, perceptions of credibility may vary by generation of the observer, and the constitution of juries may therefore lead to bias. In this study we examined whether perceptions of credibility of female victims of sexual abuse varied across generation Y, generation X, “baby boomers”, and “builders”. One hundred and twenty-eight jury-eligible members of the community from each generation ($N = 512$) responded to ten questions assessing the perceived believability, competence, trustworthiness, demeanour and sexual naiveté of females providing testimony related to alleged sexual abuse. Although consistent between-generation differences were not found for all questions, or all four groups of generational cohorts, in instances where significant differences were found, it was consistently the older generation groups (builders and baby boomers) that attributed less credibility to the victim than the younger generation groups (generation Y and generation X). The implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In sexual abuse cases, and particularly when the victim is a child, there is often little or no objective proof, such as physical evidence or independent witnesses (Christian et al., 2000; De Jong & Rose, 1989). In the absence of such evidence, jurors must rely heavily on victim testimony. This can increase their susceptibility to influence by extra-legal factors (e.g. Cossins, 2008; Higgins, Heath, & Grannemann, 2010), a term used to describe attributes of the case that should have no impact on the decision making process for a juror (Hackett, Day, & Mohr, 2008). The perceived credibility of victims and their testimony may be inferred from these extra-legal factors, which often take the form of behavioural cues such as physical appearance or non-verbal expression (Davies, Rogers, & Whitelegg, 2009; Vrij, 2000). Juror's judgements of credibility can also affect their attitudes towards these victims, and this can significantly influence verdict outcomes (Cutler, Moran, & Narby, 1992), particularly when evidence is equivocal (Moran, Cutler, & De Lisa, 1994).

Victim witnesses in both child and adult sexual abuse cases often receive much scrutiny and judgement in terms of their reliability and credibility (Raitt, 2010). As a result of this, victims of sexual abuse may also experience what is termed secondary victimisation (negative experiences encountered through interactions with social groups and authorities) in addition to the direct negative impact on the individual as a result of sexual abuse (Campbell & Raja, 1999). Perceptions of victim blame and low credibility, and subsequent secondary victimisation,

may explain, in part, why attrition rates of sexual abuse cases are extremely high, and why many cases go unreported (Daly & Bouhours, 2010; Department of Families et al., 2012; Gregory & Lees, 1996).

The relationship between behavioural cues and observers' perceptions of credibility has been borne out through a range of research findings. For example, the confidence with which a victim witness speaks is associated with perceptions of his/her truthfulness, competence, and trustworthiness (Boccaccini, 2002), inconsistencies in victims' accounts of sexual abuse reduce their perceived credibility (Frohmann, 1991), and when victims maintain a relaxed posture with frequent eye contact with the jury their perceived believability is increased (Boccaccini, 2002).

In particular, a victim's demeanour, or level and type of emotional expression, is seen as an important behavioural cue in determining the credibility of a sexual abuse victim. Dubbed the ‘emotional victim effect’ (Ask & Landström, 2010), numerous studies have found that victims who are emotionally expressive and distressed in comparison to calm or controlled are viewed as more credible witnesses (e.g. Bollingmo, Wessel, Eilertsen, & Magnussen, 2008; Kaufmann, Drevland, Wessel, Overskeid, & Magnussen, 2003; Schuller, McKimmie, Masser, & Klippenstine, 2010). Indeed, emotional displays have been found to have more bearing on the perceived credibility of a victim than the actual description of a sexual abuse (Kaufmann et al., 2003). Furthermore, studies have found that individuals with preconceived expectations of emotional expressiveness from a rape victim were more likely to attribute credibility to a victim if their behaviour conformed to those expectations (Hackett et al., 2008). These expectations have been found to mediate the ‘emotional victim effect’ (Ask & Landström, 2010), with failure to meet expectations of high emotional expressiveness significantly

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reducing the perceived credibility of victims (Kaufmann et al., 2003). However, it is understood that victims respond differentially to sexual abuse, and many do not exhibit visible signs of distress (Holmstrom & Burgess, 1978). Given this, when victims' behaviour does not align with observer expectations of emotional expressiveness, this may serve to create a bias that reduces the perceived credibility of victims.

The attitudes and beliefs that underpin expectations of a victim's behaviour when testifying, and how this relates to their perceived credibility, are likely to be influenced by demographic, social, cultural, and psychological factors (Hackett et al., 2008). Both gender and age are amongst such factors. The role of perceiver gender has previously been explored in relation to attitudes towards sexual abuse, however, the focus has predominantly been on perceived culpability, for example, blaming of victims (Kopper, 1996; Krulewitz & Nash, 1979; Maurer & Robinson, 2008). Here the perceivers' gender is widely accepted to influence the level of victim blaming in a sexual abuse case (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). In terms of credibility, male perceivers have been found to see victims as less credible in general, and females as more likely than males to believe a child abuse accusation (DeMarni Cromer & Freyd, 2007; Rogers, Titterton, & Davies, 2009; Rubin & Thelen, 1996). Suggested reasons for gender differences have included women being generally more empathetic (Bottoms & Goodman, 1994), or that men are more likely to hold views that no victim is entirely innocent (Rogers et al., 2009).

Age is another characteristic of a perceiver that has been examined in attitudes to sexual abuse. For example, Anderson, Cooper, and Okamura (1997) found that older participants were more likely to report acceptance of rape. Further evidence that the age of the perceiver can influence court outcomes stems from Kulik, Perry, and Pepper (2003). When examining the outcomes of sexual harassment cases they found outcomes that were in favour of the plaintiff in 16% of cases when the judge was older, while this number increased to 45% when the case was heard by a younger judge. This is particularly meaningful given that gender of the judge did not yield significant differences (Kulik et al., 2003).

More recently Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, and Morrison (2005) found that younger participants had more favourable views of rape victims using the Attitudes Towards Rape Victims Scale (Ward, 1988), which included items covering victim blame, victim deservedness, and disbelief in victim stories. Nagel et al. (2005) note that although their results provide evidence that older participants held certain views of victims of rape, the methodology of their research precluded the identification of cohort effects.

Whilst research had indicated that the age of the perceiver can influence the outcomes of sexual assault trials, research systematically exploring age through generational cohorts as a factor is limited (Parris & Wren, 2008). A generational cohort refers to a group of individuals who experience the same events within the same time intervals, and are typically grouped together by birth dates across a 15–20 year period (Ryder, 1965). This may represent a fruitful area of inquiry given that generational cohorts differ in terms of values (Twenge, 2010), biases, (Nteta & Greenlee, 2013), and beliefs about gender norms (Scott, Alwin, & Braun, 1996) that may influence the attitudes and beliefs held around expectations of sexual victims, and therefore their perceived credibility, when providing evidence. For example, older generations are more likely to conform to traditional concepts of male and female roles (Scott et al., 1996), which have been found to be predictive of higher rape myth acceptance (Anderson et al., 1997). In the context of a female victim who does not appear distressed when providing testimony, the incongruence between expectations and behavioural cues, which may be dependent on generational cohort, may then influence perceptions of their credibility.

Overall, it seems that characteristics that influence perceivers' attitudes and beliefs towards female sexual abuse victim may be influential in their perceptions of extra-legal factors and how a victim witness should behave, along with subsequent judgements of their credibility.

Although expectations and attitudes may be related to generational cohort and gender differences, these factors have not yet been explored in combination. In addition, studies exploring victim credibility have frequently used homogeneous samples consisting of university students (e.g. Schuller et al., 2010) or police officers (e.g., Bollingmo et al., 2008), with limited age ranges. This is likely to be unrepresentative of the population from which a jury is formed.

The current study aimed to address this gap in the literature and prior limitations by exploring the relationship between gender and generational factors on attitudes towards the credibility of a female victim of sexual abuse in a community sample with a broad age range. Our study is novel by investigating perceptions of sexual assault by using a structured cohort sample, based on the general public and balanced for age and gender within each generation. Although this study was predominantly exploratory, based on prior research discussed above it was anticipated that older generations would find female victims of sexual abuse less credible than younger generations, and that males would perceive victims as less credible than females.

2. Method

2.1. Design

To examine the effects of gender and generational cohort on perceptions of victim credibility, a survey-based, cross-sectional study with a between-factors design was employed. The gender factor had two levels (male; female) while the generation factor had four levels (generation Y, generation X, baby boomers; builders). The dependent variables consisted of statements relating to the perceived credibility of females providing testimony of sexual abuse, to which participants responded in terms of their agreement.

2.2. Participants

Initial recruitment was conducted by student researchers, who utilised a sample of convenience with snowball sampling. To counter-balance the number of male and female participants, and to even the distribution of age within the sample, the survey was then administered via a data collection agency. This agency invites potential participants from a database of members of the Australian public who have volunteered to complete surveys of their choice for a nominal payment. The initial sample comprised 788 individuals. This sample was then split into four generation groups using age parameters provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013): Generation Y (born between 1980 and 1994), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Builders (born before 1946). To ensure equal cell sizes, the smallest gender by generation cell size was identified ($n = 64$) and the same number of cases were randomly sampled from the remaining cells, which varied in size from $n = 71$ to $n = 201$. The final sample consisted of a total of 512 participants: 256 male and 256 females, with 128 participants in each generation group.

2.3. Materials

This study was based on an online survey addressing perceptions of a sexually-abused female, hosted by the University. Participants first provided basic demographic information and, amongst other items, responded to ten statements relating to the perceived credibility of a female victim of sexual abuse. Specific details surrounding the sexual abuse were not provided, however, the age of the victim was described as either 5, 10, 15, or 20 years of age. The victim age that participants were presented with was randomly determined. These particular ages were chosen for two reasons: The majority of females sexual abuse victims in Australia fall in this age range (Australian Government &

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