Perceptions of Children's Credibility in Sexual Assault Cases

BETTE L. BOTTOMS

University of Illinois at Chicago

GAIL S. GOODMAN

University of California at Davis

Children's testimony often plays a central role in prosecutions of child sexual abuse. Nevertheless, research on jurors' perceptions of the credibility of child sexual assault victims remains limited. In three experiments, we examined mock jurors' reactions to children's testimony about sexual abuse. Participant jurors were exposed to videotaped or written scenarios of child sexual abuse trials and then rated victim credibility and defendant guilt. Analyses indicated that: (a) victim age was either inversely related or unrelated to perceptions of victim credibility, (b) women were more likely than men to find child victims credible, (c) corroborating testimony from a child victim increased the credibility of another child victim, and (d) exposure of participants to past criminal acts and other negative defendant character evidence heightened perceived victim credibility and defendant guilt. Implications for understanding jurors' reactions to child witnesses are discussed.

Increased reporting of child sexual abuse is bringing growing numbers of child victim/witnesses into the courtroom (American Humane Association, 1987). However, research indicates that mock jurors' abilities to evaluate the accuracy of children's testimony are often subject to error (Goodman, Bottoms, Herscovici, & Shaver, 1989; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Wells, Turtle, & Luus, 1989; but see Leippe, Manion, & Romanczyk, 1992). If children's actual accuracy is not the main determinant of jurors' decisions, then it is important to identify the factors that are influential.

In the present studies, we investigated several factors that may be of particular importance in child sexual assault cases: victim age and victim gender, juror and defendant characteristics, and presence or absence of

1We thank Leslie Rudy for valuable research assistance and Phillip R. Shaver and Michael R. Leippe for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. Funding for this project was provided by a grant to Gail S. Goodman from the Department of Health and Human Services.

2Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Bette L. Bottoms, Department of Psychology (M/C 285), University of Illinois at Chicago, 1007 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60607-7137.

Copyright © 1994 by V. H. Winston & Son, Inc. All rights reserved.
corroborating testimony. We examined these factors by having mock jurors render judgments after reading written scenarios of trials (Experiments 1 and 2) or watching videotapes of children testifying in an actual sexual assault case (Experiment 3).

Our main predictions were that: (a) Younger, but not older, children would be viewed as particularly credible victim/witnesses due to adults' beliefs that children are sexually naive; (b) men would be less likely than women to find child victims to be credible witnesses; (c) the testimony of a second, corroborating child victim would bolster the credibility of an initial child victim; and (d) negative defendant character evidence would heighten a child witness's credibility. We present rationales for these predictions next.

Witness Age

Research has demonstrated that witness credibility is sometimes directly, but other times inversely, related to witness age (e.g., Goodman, Golding, Helgeson, Haith, & Mitchell, 1987; Leippe et al., 1992; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989; Ross, Miller, & Moran, 1987). These mixed results may be explained in terms of Miller and Burgoon's (1982) proposal that two constructs underlie witness credibility: competence and trustworthiness. Jurors may typically consider children low on competence (cognitive ability, resistance to suggestion), yet high on trustworthiness (honesty, innocence) (Goodman et al., 1987). The relative salience of these dimensions in a particular case may determine a child's overall credibility. Survey and experimental findings support this explanation. Survey studies indicate that children are believed to be more trustworthy and sincere, but less cognitively competent, than adults (Leippe, Brigham, Cousins, & Romanczyk, 1989; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987; Yarmey & Jones, 1983). Further, in experiments in which children were viewed as less credible witnesses than adults (Goodman et al., 1987; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987, 1989, Experiment 2), younger children's attenuated credibility was attributed to mock jurors' concerns about witness competence (i.e., memory for details of an event). In experiments in which child witnesses were viewed as no less credible than adults (e.g., Johnson, 1986; Ross et al., 1987), sincerity and honesty appeared to be important.

Many published studies of mock jurors' perceptions of children's testimony have employed bystander-witness crime scenarios, in which an ideal witness has the cognitive competence to retain the event accurately and lacks motivation to lie. In child sexual assault cases, competence and trustworthiness are also likely to be salient dimensions of witness credibility; however, these two dimensions may combine uniquely with regard to judgments of sexual naïveté.
Specifically, jurors might attribute credibility to a child viewed as honest, but might also positively evaluate a child's credibility on the basis of a lack of relevant cognitive competence (i.e., sexual knowledge). That is, adults may hold a stereotype of nonabused children as ignorant of knowledge necessary to fabricate sexual encounters, leading to positive views of children's credibility when other case evidence is lacking (as is common in child sexual abuse cases) and other explanations for a child's testimony (e.g., excessively leading questioning) are unlikely.

Thus, in some, if not many, sexual abuse cases, young children may be viewed as more credible witnesses than teenagers and adults. As witness age increases, jurors' presumptions of sexual naiveté decrease, prompting concern that children have sufficient knowledge to lie about or even be responsible for sexual acts with adults. Existing studies support these propositions. For example, Duggan et al. (1989) found that mock jurors judged a 9- and 5-year-old molestation victim to be more credible than a 13-year-old victim. Jurors' deliberation comments about the younger victims revealed a belief in young children's sexual naiveté (i.e., honesty and inability to fabricate sexual abuse allegations). Interestingly, the 13-year-old's lack of credibility appeared to stem from her perceived dishonesty and responsibility for the crime (Scheiner, 1988), attributions also made about adult rape victims (see Borgida & Brekke, 1985 for a review). Similarly, Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) found that more blame was attributed to a 15-year-old victim than to an 11- or 7-year-old, and Gabora, Spanos, and Joab (1993) found that participants considered a sexual assault victim to be less credible and the defendant more guilty when the victim was portrayed as 17 years old compared to 13 years old (see also Corder & Whiteside, 1988; Finkelhor, 1984; Zellman, 1992).

In summary, when sexual naiveté is a salient evaluative dimension in sexual abuse cases, perceived credibility may be inversely related to age. Increasing age is accompanied by decreasing perceptions of sexual naiveté, fostering attributions of a child's responsibility for sexual abuse, suspicions regarding a child's capacity and propensity to lie about sex acts, and lowered perceived credibility. The present experiments explore further the perceived credibility of sexual assault victims of various ages.

**Juror Gender**

There may be gender differences in jurors' perceptions of child witnesses' credibility, particularly in sexual abuse cases. Research on juror decision making in adult rape cases indicates that men sometimes blame victims more, identify and empathize with victims less, and attribute greater responsibility to victims than do women (e.g., Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982; Feild,
1978; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981; see Borgida & Brekke, 1985, for review). Gender differences in defendant guilt judgments are less definitive: Women appear to be more conviction prone than men (e.g., Davis, Kerr, Atkin, Holt, & Meek, 1975; Kerr et al., 1976; Nagao & Davis, 1980), but this effect has not been systematically replicated (e.g., Jones & Aronson, 1973; Velleman & Hyde, 1983).

Similar gender differences have been noted in studies of decisions in cases involving child victims of sex crimes. Gabora et al. (1993) found that compared to men, women made more pro-child victim predeliberation judgments of defendant guilt and victim credibility. Further, in Duggan et al.'s (1989) experiment, compared to men, women believed the child more, rendered more guilty verdicts, and felt that victims were more aware of the seriousness of the crime and more harmed by the experience and by testifying. And Swim, Borgida, and McCoy (1993) found that women had less favorable perceptions of a defendant and were more likely to find him to be guilty in a child sexual abuse case.

Differences in perceptions of the seriousness of child sexual abuse may contribute to these gender differences (Bottoms, 1993): Experimental and survey research has shown that compared to men, women react more negatively to child sexual abuse, perceiving it to be more serious (e.g., Attias & Goodwin, 1985; Finlayson & Koocher, 1991; Kelly & Tarra, 1984; Kovera, Borgida, Gresham, Swim, & Gray, in press). Gender differences in attributions of responsibility for child sexual abuse might also be related to discrepancies in men’s and women’s case judgments. Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that men were more likely than women to consider a child’s actions as responsible for sexual abuse, and Scheiner (1988) found men more hesitant than women to convict a defendant of child sexual abuse if they perceived a child victim to be responsible. The robustness of such gender differences was examined in our experiments.

**Victim Gender**

Issues surrounding victim gender have largely been ignored in child and adult sexual abuse research, the latter presumably because the rate of sexual assault of men (outside of a prison environment, Cotton & Groth, 1984) is assumed to be low (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; Struckman-Johnson, 1988). In the only experiment we know of that addresses perceptions of adult male victims, respondents (especially men) considered a male victim responsible for and not traumatized by female-perpetrated sexual assault. Perceptions were more victim empathic, however, in cases of homosexual assault (Smith, Pine, & Hawley, 1988).
Because it is now recognized that young boys are frequently sexually abused (Finkelhor, 1984; Risen & Koss, 1987), it is important to explore jurors’ reactions to boy as well as girl victims. Rogers and Terry (1984) suggest that cultural biases prohibit molested boys from being viewed as true victims. Boy victims’ credibility may suffer due to beliefs that sexually abused boys are not as harmed as girls and that boys are more likely than girls to initiate abuse (Finkelhor, 1984). Thus, jurors might have greater difficulty believing boy compared to girl victims.

In fact, research on perceptions of the abusiveness of adult-child sexual contact suggests that victim gender, especially in interaction with perpetrator and/or juror gender, might influence judgments in child sexual assault cases. For example, Eisenberg, Owens, and Dewey (1987) found that male health professionals thought that boys would be less harmed than girls by sexual abuse. Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that men considered perpetrators less responsible for abusing boy than girl victims. Interestingly, women’s responses were not affected by victim gender in either study. Thus, to the extent that perceptions of crime seriousness influence jurors’ judgments, men, but not women, might find boy victims less credible than girl victims. Other research, however, points to more complex effects: Kelly (1984) found that men, but not women, considered homosexual child assault more negatively than heterosexual child assault. Finkelhor (1984) reported that respondents considered heterosexual abuse more serious for girl than boy victims, but homosexual abuse more serious for boy than girl victims. Therefore, it is also possible that disdain for homosexual acts against male children may influence judgments of child credibility and defendant guilt.

Nevertheless, in the only experimental study to test mock jurors’ credibility and guilt judgments in relation to victim gender (Scheier, 1988), no significant differences were found. In Experiment 2, we further examined reactions to boy versus girl victims.

**Corroborating Testimony**

Until recently, corroboration was often required before a child could testify in a sexual assault case. Despite relaxation of this requirement, attorneys may still be hesitant to bring cases to trial when there is little physical evidence or when corroborating witnesses are other children. Although studies show that corroboration augments pro-prosecution judgments in cases involving adult witnesses (e.g., Leipple, 1985), only two studies have considered corroboration in cases involving child witnesses (Duggan et al., 1989; Johnson, 1986) and only one of those concerned sexual abuse. In that study, Duggan et al. (1989) found that corroborated testimony resulted in more guilty verdicts and higher
ratings of a child victim’s memory abilities. Further research on corroboration was carried out in Experiment 3.

**Defendant Characteristics**

Defendant characteristics affect witness credibility and verdicts in cases involving adult witnesses (Saks & Liastie, 1979). For example, prior-conviction information causes jurors to be more conviction prone (Clary & Shaffer, 1985; Kalven & Zeisel, 1966; Myers, 1979) and discredits much of a defendant’s testimony (Shaffer, 1985), especially when past crimes are similar to the crime in question (Sealy & Cornish, 1973). Negative character testimony is especially biasing if other forms of evidence are lacking or unconvincing (Kaplan, 1985), a common situation in child sexual abuse cases (Whitcomb, Shapiro, & Stellwagen, 1985). Defendants in child abuse cases sometimes have past records of similar crimes that jurors might take as evidence of enduring sexual preference and thus that prosecutors may seek to admit. However, the influence of character and past acts information remains unexplored in studies involving child witnesses. For these reasons, the impact of such information on jurors’ decisions in child sexual abuse cases was investigated in Experiment 3.3

**Experiment 1**

Experiment 1 was conducted to explore the effects of participant gender and victim age on mock jurors’ judgments in a sexual assault case. Unlike former studies of jurors’ reactions to child sexual assault victims, the present study included an adult-victim comparison group and incorporated a direct measure of participants’ reasoning, specifically, asking participants to comment on the reasons for their credibility and guilt judgments.

To tap basic preconceptions or stereotypes potential jurors bring to a trial,

---

3 Strict rules govern the admission of character information or past-acts information, and in many instances such evidence is totally inadmissible (Federal Rules of Evidence (FRE), 401, 404a). Exceptions to these rules, however, permit the admission of character evidence, dependent upon jurisdictional interpretations (Kaplan, 1985). For example, character testimony may be admissible if it establishes a general characteristic of the defendant that would seem to render him/her innocent of the crime, or is relevant to some aspect of the crime (Kaplan, 1985). FRE 404b allows for the admission of even nonconvicted past delinquencies of the defendants if they show a plan, motive, or opportunity relevant to the present crime, or if past acts were committed by a method similar to that of the crime in question (Borgida, 1979; Kaplan, 1985). Past-act and character information subsumed under such exceptions (such as that presented to participants in Experiment 3) is sometimes of particular interest in sexual abuse cases (Mooney, 1991).
written-scenario methodology was employed. It was predicted that, all else equal, child sexual assault victims would be viewed as more credible than adult victims because of children’s presumed sexual naiveté. Also, based on previous findings in the adult and child sexual assault literature, men were predicted to be less likely than women to believe the victim and to convict the defendant.

Method

Participants

Thirty-four male and 87 female students (M = 21 years old; range 18-45 years) from lower-level psychology courses participated for course credit.

Materials

A one-page scenario was constructed in which a female student (6-, 14-, or 22-years-old) claimed to have been sexually assaulted by her 28-year-old male teacher in his office after school. The alleged victim claimed that while waiting for a ride after school, the defendant invited her into his office, then forced her to engage in oral sex. The defendant testified that he remained at school later than usual on the afternoon in question because of extra work. He recalled speaking briefly with the victim before she went out to wait for her ride. Testimony was also included from three other witnesses: the victim’s mother, a male fellow teacher, and a male school administrator. The mother claimed that when she picked up her daughter from school, the daughter appeared upset. After a week of repeated questioning, the daughter told her mother about the assault. The fellow teacher testified that on the afternoon of the alleged incident, he had been surprised to see the defendant at school, because the defendant infrequently worked late. The administrator simply testified that the teacher’s past record was spotless. The defense asserted that the victim obtained the idea for the accusation from her mother’s suggestive questioning and that the victim had been motivated to pursue the accusation by a desire for revenge over poor grades.

The scenario was accompanied by a series of rating scales. One scale concerned the defendant’s guilt/innocence (dichotomous guilt judgment), and a 3-point scale (not at all confident to very confident) concerned participants’ degree of confidence in their guilt judgment. The combination of these ratings resulted in a 6-point “degree-of-guilt” scale that ranged from not guilty/very confident (1) to guilty/very confident (6). The other scales concerned the credibility of each of the five witnesses. These 6-point scales ranged from not at all believable (1) to extremely believable (6).
Procedure

Proportionally equal numbers of male and female participants were randomly assigned to one of three victim-age conditions. Students in all conditions participated in mixed, non-interacting groups of about 25 students. Participants were cautioned about the importance of their role as juror, then asked to read the scenario and indicate their judgments. In addition, 48 of the participants (equally distributed across age conditions) were required to briefly state reasons underlying their judgments. The participants did not expect to deliberate the case.

Results and Discussion

Credibility Judgments

Credibility ratings were entered into a 3 (Victim Age) × 2 (Participant Gender) × 5 (Witness) analysis of variance (ANOVA), with witness (defendant, victim, victim’s mother, fellow teacher, and administrator) varied within subjects. A significant main effect of witness, $F(4, 452) = 33.95, p < .001$, indicating higher credibility assigned to prosecution as compared to defense witnesses, was qualified by a significant Victim Age × Witness interaction, $F(8, 452) = 2.54, p < .05$ (Table 1). Simple effects analyses (univariate tests of the effect of age on the credibility of each of the five witnesses) followed by planned comparisons revealed a significant effect of age on victim credibility, $F(2, 177) = 3.58, p < .05$. The youngest victim of sexual assault was judged more credible than the adult victim, $F(1, 117) = 7.20, p < .01$. The credibility of the 14-year-old did not differ reliably from that of the 6- or 22-year-old. The lack of credibility attributed to the adult victim is particularly striking given that participants were approximately the same age as the adult victim.

Credibility of the other witnesses did not differ significantly as a function of victim age, with the exception of the defendant. He was considered less credible when the victim was 6 versus 22 years old, $F(1, 118) = 4.27, p < .05$, or 14 years old, $F(1, 118) = 7.42, p < .01$, but his credibility did not differ reliably between cases involving a 22- versus 14-year-old. There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

Guilt Judgments

A 3 (Victim Age) × 2 (Participant Gender) between-subjects ANOVA revealed that degree-of-guilt judgments varied in relation to victim age, $F(2, 109) = 5.52, p < .01$ (Table 2). Planned comparisons indicated that the
Table 1

Mean Witness Credibility Judgments as a Function of Victim Age (Experiment 1) and Participant Gender (Experiment 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Witness</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Defendant</th>
<th>Victim’s mother</th>
<th>Other teacher</th>
<th>School administrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim age(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant gender(^b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Experiment 1. \(^b\)Experiment 2.

defendant’s degree of guilt was lower when the victim was a 22-year-old, \(F(1, 109) = 12.74, p < .01\), or a 14-year-old, \(F(1, 109) = 4.59, p < .05\), than when the victim was a 6-year-old. Degree of guilt did not differ reliably when the victim was a 22- versus 14-year-old.

Similarly, age significantly affected dichotomous guilt judgments, \(F(2, 111) = 5.70, p < .01\). The defendant was assigned less guilt when the victim was 22 years old than when she was 6 years old, \(F(1, 111) = 10.79, p < .01\), or 14 years old, \(F(1, 111) = 5.14, p < .05\). The defendant’s guilt in the 6- and 14-year-old conditions did not differ significantly.

No significant participant gender differences emerged; however, differences between men’s and women’s guilt judgments were in the predicted direction, especially in the oldest victim age condition. Although an approximately equal proportion of women and men found the defendant guilty when the victim was either 6 or 14 years old, a very low proportion of men found him guilty when she was 22 years old.

Finally, correlations between witness credibility (defendant and victim) and guilt judgments were computed to examine whether these judgments were related (Table 3). Regardless of victim age, mock jurors who believed the victim and discredited the defendant were more likely to find the defendant guilty.
Table 2

_Guilt Judgments as a Function of Victim Age and Participant Gender (Experiments 1 and 2)_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree of guilt</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>Degree of guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.67</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>4.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Judgment Rationale_

Participants’ rationales for their credibility and guilt judgments were coded in terms of eight response categories derived from literature on child sexual abuse: sexual naïveté, honesty, cognitive ability, characteristics expected of sexual assault victims, capacity for revenge, suggestibility, victim responsibility, and miscellaneous.⁴ Within each category, subcategories were created for positive comments (indicating enhanced witness credibility) and negative comments (indicating lowered witness credibility): For example, positive comments included “A girl of 6 knows very little about parts of the body like a penis” [sexual naïveté]; “Usually children tell the truth” [honesty]; “She seems

⁴In a previous report of this study (Goodman et al., 1989), the sexual naïveté category was not included. Instead the statements coded here in the sexual naïveté category were coded in the general cognitive and honesty categories. Subsequent research (e.g., Dugan et al., 1989) prompted us to rescore our data.
Table 3

Correlations Between Defendant Guilt and Witness Credibility Judgments for Each Victim Age Condition (Experiments 1 and 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Witness credibility</th>
<th>Defendnat</th>
<th>Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree of guilt</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>-.77**</td>
<td>-.67**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>-.53*</td>
<td>-.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiment 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>-.78**</td>
<td>-.70**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>-.83**</td>
<td>-.66**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>-.59**</td>
<td>-.55**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, two-tailed. **p < .001, two-tailed.

clear about what happened” [cognitive]. Negative comments included “I find it hard to believe she took a whole week to tell her mother” [expected characteristics]; “Her mother could have pressured her, unintentionally, into making up the story” [suggestibility]; and “She could have avoided this type of assault” [victim responsibility].

Two raters independently scored the protocols of 19% of the participants with an acceptable proportion of agreement of .81. Disagreements were resolved by discussion, and one rater scored the remaining protocols. Chi-square analysis indicated that significantly more positive comments were made about the younger victim’s compared to the older victim’s sexual naivété, suggesting that the youngest child was viewed as a particularly reliable witness due to her presumed sexual naivété and resulting inability to fabricate sexual abuse allegations (Table 4).5

5Although it is generally held that the chi-square test should be used only if minimum expected frequencies are 5 or more per cell, it has been shown that chi-square tests may be legitimately performed when the average expected frequency is as low as 2 (Glass & Hopkins, 1984).
Table 4

Frequency of Comments Made About the Victim as a Function of Victim Age (Experiment 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of comment</th>
<th>Victim age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>$p$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sexual naïveté</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total honesty</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cognitive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected characteristics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total revenge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total suggestibility</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total blaming victim</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For several categories, it was impossible to calculate valid $\chi^2$ due to low expected values.
Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was conducted to determine if findings of Experiment 1 would generalize to a different sexual assault scenario and to investigate a new variable, victim gender. Given findings in the adult rape literature, possible interactions between victim and participant gender were of particular interest. Victims were described as 6, 10, or 14 years old. Based on results of Experiment 1 and Duggan et al.'s (1989) study, it was expected that a 6-year-old would be perceived as particularly credible. It was also predicted that a 14-year-old would be considered past the age of sexual naiveté and therefore judged less credible than a 6-year-old, a prediction based on Duggan et al.'s (1989) findings that dishonesty and responsibility were assigned to a 12-year-old victim. A 10-year-old victim was included because Scheiner (1988) found that the average age at which mock jurors considered children capable of desiring sex was 12 years; if this estimate indicates the age at which children are believed to lose sexual naiveté, a 10-year-old victim's credibility might be more similar to that of a 6- than a 14-year-old.

Method

Participants

Sixty-two men and 61 women ($M = 19$ years; range 16-39 years) from lower-level psychology courses participated for course credit.

Materials

A one-page scenario describing a sexual assault trial was constructed based on details from an actual case (see Experiment 3). In the scenario, a 28-year-old male teacher was accused of molesting a student in whom the teacher had taken a special interest. This student was presented as either 6, 10, or 14 years old, and as either male or female. It was stipulated that the teacher would give the child rides home from school, rides that he allegedly used as an opportunity for forcing the child to engage in oral sex with him. Additional witnesses were a female teaching aid, the child's mother, and a male school principal. The defense claimed that the child was emotionally disturbed and motivated by revenge to make up the story, and that the accusations were suggested to the child by the mother. Witness credibility and defendant guilt scales were identical to those used in Experiment 1.

Procedure

The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1.
Results and Discussion

Credibility Judgments

Each participant’s credibility ratings were entered into a 3 (Victim Age) x 2 (Participant Gender) x 2 (Victim Gender) x 5 (Witness) ANOVA, with witness varied within subjects. No reliable differences in credibility judgments emerged due to victim gender, F(1, 111) = .09 (girls, M = 4.52; boys, M = 4.44) or, surprisingly, victim age, F(2, 111) = .08 (6 years, M = 4.41; 10 years, M = 4.41; 14 years, M = 4.62).

There were, however, pervasive participant gender effects. Consistent with previous research on the credibility of adult and child sexual abuse victims, women in Experiment 2 were more pro-victim than were men. Specifically, a significant main effect of witness, F(4, 444) = 61.60, p < .001, was qualified by a Witness x Participant Gender interaction, F(4, 444) = 10.09, p < .001 (Table 1). Analyses of simple effects revealed that women rated the victim and the victim’s mother as significantly more credible than did men, F(1, 111) = 13.67, p < .001, and F(1, 111) = 9.85, p < .01, respectively. Men were more pro-defense, rating the alleged perpetrator and the male principal who gave pro-defendant testimony more favorably than did women, F(1, 111) = 6.11, p < .05, and F(1, 111) = 8.69, p < .01, respectively. There were no differences in men’s and women’s ratings of the credibility of the teaching aid, F(1, 111) = .22.

Guilt Judgments

Guilt judgments followed the same pattern as credibility judgments (Table 2). There were no significant differences attributable to victim gender or victim age in ratings of degree-of-guilt, all Fs(1, 108) ≤ .78, or dichotomous guilt, all Fs(1, 111) ≤ 1.30. Again, however, men were more pro-defense than were women. Women were more likely than men to vote guilty as indicated by higher degree-of-guilt scores, F(1, 108) = 9.17, p < .01, and higher dichotomous guilt means, F(1, 111) = 8.14, p < .001.

Interestingly, although the distribution of women’s degree-of-guilt ratings generally reflected a pro-victim bias, men’s judgments were bimodally distributed across all victim-age conditions (Table 5). Thus, there was a sub-group of men who made pro-victim judgments. Bottoms (1993) has identified various constructs (e.g., empathy for child victims, attitudes related to child sexual abuse) that underlie in part judgments in child sexual abuse cases, and found that men and women differ with regard to these constructs, on average. Such research suggests that the minority of men who made pro-victim judgments in
Table 5

Distribution of Degree-of-Guilt Judgments as a Function of Victim Age and Participant Gender (Experiment 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant gender</th>
<th>Degree-of-guilt rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Experiment 2 were more victim empathic and held pro-victim attitudes, as more commonly held by women. Research on attitudes toward adult rape victims reveals similar individual differences among men; for example, men who espouse traditional sex roles for women are less pro-victim than men who embrace more progressive liberal attitudes (e.g., Macrae & Shepherd, 1989).

Finally, as in Experiment 1, significant correlations between degree of guilt and witness credibility, and between dichotomous guilt judgments and witness credibility indicated that participants in each age condition were more likely to find the defendant guilty if they believed the victim (Table 3).

Experiment 3

The influence of participant gender and victim age on decisions in child sexual abuse cases were further explored in Experiment 3. Leippe and Romanczyk (1989) argue that participants’ exposure to actual testimony may alter the expression of generalized pretrial stereotypes about child witnesses. Thus, a main concern was whether gender differences evident in Experiment 2 would replicate when videotapes of actual child witnesses were viewed, increasing the ecological validity of the findings. Previous child witness research using videotaped child testimony (e.g., Duggan et al., 1989; Goodman et al.,
1987) employed child actresses who repeated testimony that may not have sounded age-appropriate nor captured the emotional distress evidenced by actual victims. The latter, also lacking when children testify about filmed events (e.g., Wells et al., 1989), may have a powerful effect on perceptions of children's credibility in real trials (Goodman et al., 1992; Limber & Etheredge, 1989). Thus, in the present study mock jurors were presented with videotapes of child victim/witnesses who actually testified in a sexual assault case.

The effects of two new factors were also examined: defendant characterization and corroboration by another victim/witness. It was predicted that mock jurors who received an unfavorable compared to a favorable characterization of a defendant would be more likely to find the defendant guilty and to consider the victim more credible. Also, it was predicted that participants would consider a child victim more credible and a defendant more guilty if there was corroborating testimony from another child victim than if there was no corroborating testimony. Finally, whether the impact of these two variables would be the same on male and female participants was of interest.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five male and 27 female undergraduates ($M = 23$ years; range 19-48 years) participated in return for $10.00.

Materials

Videotaped testimony of two boys (11 and 14 years old) about sexual abuse allegedly perpetrated by their teacher served as stimulus material. The 35-min tapes were of the boys as they gave testimony at a school board hearing to determine whether the accused teacher should be dismissed from his post. The atmosphere was comparable to that of a criminal trial, with questioning conducted by the defense and prosecution attorneys who argued

---

6The tapes were procured for research purposes with the consent of the District Attorney's office that handled the case, the boys' families, and the boys themselves. Legal liability was cleared by university attorneys and by the District Attorney who handled the original case. To assure confidentiality for the families, we carefully screened out participants who had a chance of knowing about the case or the identity of the boys. Approximately one dozen students were not allowed to participate because they were from, had spent time in, or were planning to move to, the state in which the case occurred, or a state adjoining that state. Remaining participants were instructed about the confidential nature of the tapes and were told at the end of the session the verdict in the actual trial, which was "not guilty."
the case in criminal court. The hearing was held after the boys had testified at a preliminary hearing but before the actual trial.

A two-page scenario was given to participants to provide background details of the case and to introduce manipulations of key variables. To summarize the case, an 11-year-old boy participated in frequent outings with his teacher. The boy began to withdraw from the teacher, and classroom relations became so strained that an aid was assigned to teach him. The boy’s mother noticed a marked change in the child’s behavior, and her questioning prompted his claim of repeated sexual assault by the teacher during the outings. The defense maintained that the boy was disturbed and had made the accusations for revenge, and that the story had been suggested to the boy by his mother. These were the details of the actual case.

There were four variants of this scenario, depending on condition. In creating favorable and unfavorable characterizations of the defendant, most details were taken from the actual case, but redistributed in terms of their positive or negative valence. A few details were added to create a plausible character description. If favorable, the characterization read that the teacher was the “big brother type” with a spotless record, active in the community and church, and respected by his teaching aid. If unfavorable, the characterization read that similar accusations had been made against the teacher in the past, and that his aid thought his actions toward the boy mimicked those of an adult romantic relationship.

Participants in the corroborating witness condition received scenarios that included additional information about a second victim who was 14 years old. In the scenarios, as in the actual case, it was explained that a police investigation revealed that this boy had also taken overnight trips with the teacher, and, when questioned, he also accused the teacher of sexual abuse. It was stated that neither boy knew the other and that their testimonies were independent, with the exception that the same police officer interviewed both children, as was true in the actual case. Although the videotaped testimony of both boys dealt with sexual assault by the teacher, the first (younger) child’s testimony was more extensive than that of the second (older) child. For example, the younger child provided fairly detailed accounts of several assaults by the teacher and was questioned repeatedly concerning the exact dates of abusive incidents that had occurred over a period of many months. The older child’s testimony was in response to questions focusing on whether the allegations were suggested to the child by the officer, who knew the details of the younger child’s story before he questioned the older child. The older child alleged fewer incidents of abuse,

To ensure that the scenarios were realistic, they were read and commented on by the District Attorney who tried the original case.
described them in less detail, and was not subjected to as detailed questioning about the time frame in which the abuse occurred.

A series of rating scales was developed to assess victim credibility and defendant guilt. Fifteen of these scales concerned the child’s credibility, covering aspects of the child’s testimony such as perceived accuracy, truthfulness, suggestibility, consistency, confidence, attractiveness, intelligence, and likelihood of revenge as motivation. The 6-point answer continua ranged from negative attribute, extremely inaccurate (1), to positive attribute, extremely accurate (6). There was also a dichotomous guilt scale and a 6-point confidence-in-guilt scale; the combination thereof produced a 12-point degree-of-guilt scale ranging from not guilty/extremely certain (1), to guilty/extremely certain (12). Finally, participants were asked the age at which they considered a child capable of making up a story such as the one presented.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions, with approximately equal numbers of male and female jurors included in each condition. In groups of about 15, participants were informed of the confidential nature of the videotapes and the importance of their role as jurors, read the case summary appropriate for their experimental group, and then viewed the videotaped testimony. In the one-victim condition, participants viewed the testimony of the younger child and were then engaged in a filler activity (i.e., watching a nature film for 35 min, the amount of time participants in the two-victim condition spent watching the older child testify). They then completed the scales described above for the younger child. Participants in the two-victim condition watched the testimony of both victims and completed scales for the younger and then the older child. Unbeknownst to them, equal numbers of participants were tested simultaneously in defendant-unfavorable and defendant-favorable conditions (within corroboration conditions).

There was no counterbalanced condition in which participants saw only the older child because: (a) The older child’s testimony was less detailed than the younger child’s, and (b) it was impossible to edit the older child’s testimony to omit mention of the younger child’s involvement, as could be done with the younger child’s testimony.

Had participants in the one-victim condition immediately provided judgments, details of the child’s testimony would have been fresher in their minds than the minds of participants in the two-victim condition, who viewed the intervening 35-min tape of the second child’s testimony. Thus, we chose to avoid a 35-min empty period during which participants could freely release the first child’s testimony, by showing the engaging, yet emotionally neutral film.
Results and Discussions

Credibility Judgments

Factors formed from judgments of the younger victim. To explore the possibility that judgments about the younger boy’s testimony (e.g., suggestibility, accuracy, truthfulness) would form meaningful clusters, individual rating scale items were entered into a principle components analysis with varimax rotation. (Judgments concerning the older child were not subjected to such an analysis because only half of all participants rated that child.) The analysis suggested three factors corresponding to opinions about the younger child’s: (a) in-court credibility, (b) precourt suggestibility, and (c) attractiveness/intelligence (Table 6). Items loading .57 and higher were included in the factors.

Reliability analyses were performed to determine if the items included in each factor formed internally consistent scales. The same items that loaded highly on Factor 1 formed a reliable “In-Court Credibility Scale” (α = .93) corresponding to issues such as whether the child was accurate and truthful in his actual testimony. Items that loaded highly on Factor 2 formed a “Pre-court Suggestibility Scale” (α = .84), corresponding to whether the child’s story was suggested to him by other persons before the courtroom appearance. Factor 3 was composed of only two items, concerning the victim’s attractiveness and intelligence. Because the alpha coefficient of the scale formed from these two items was low (.44) and the two items did not intuitively belong together, we chose to treat intelligence and attractiveness as separate items.

Effects of independent variables on perceptions of credibility, suggestibility, attractiveness, and intelligence. Each participant’s mean scores for the In-Court Credibility and Precourt Suggestibility scales and for their individual judgments of attractiveness and intelligence were entered into separate 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Corroboration) × 2 (Defendant Characterization) ANOVAs. There were significant main effects of defendant characterization, $F(1, 44) = 7.19, p < .05$, and corroboration, $F(1, 44) = 4.17, p < .05$, on in-court credibility scores. Participants who read an unfavorable defendant characterization, $M = 4.31$, and those who heard two children testify, $M = 4.26$, perceived the child to be more credible than did participants who received a favorable characterization, $M = 3.78$, or heard no corroborating witness, $M = 3.79$. These main effects, however, were qualified by a significant Characterization × Corroboration interaction, $F(1, 44) = 4.36, p < .05$. Participants who heard only one child testify rated the child as more credible if they received unfavorable character information, $M = 4.31$, rather than favorable information, $M = 3.32$, $F(1, 23) = 8.33, p < .01$. Only when participants received a favorable characterization was the corroboration of a second child
Table 6

Specific Items Included in Factor-Based Scales Concerning Participants’ Judgments of the First Child Witness (Experiment 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.66</td>
<td>Accuracy regarding the time frame of abuse events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.78</td>
<td>Accuracy regarding the number of abuse incidents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.67</td>
<td>Accuracy regarding description of the setting of abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.71</td>
<td>Accuracy regarding description of the abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.70</td>
<td>Truthfulness in answering questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.57</td>
<td>Overall suggestibility while giving testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.78</td>
<td>Consistency of testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.72</td>
<td>Confidence in giving testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.78</td>
<td>Ability to distinguish fact from fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.66</td>
<td>Likelihood that the witness fabricated allegations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.66</td>
<td>Likelihood that revenge motivated the allegations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factor 2 (1.42)

| .81             | Suggestibility with regard to mother                                 |
| .83             | Suggestibility with regard to police officer                         |

Factor 3 (1.25)

| .57             | Attractiveness of child                                              |
| .87             | Intelligence of child                                                |

Note. Eigenvalues are presented in parentheses.

victim effective in increasing the first child’s credibility, \(M = 4.21, F(1, 25) = 6.97, p < .05\) (simple effects). In the unfavorable characterization condition, the first child was rated no more credible when corroborated \((M = 4.27)\) than when testifying alone. An unfavorable defendant characterization was thus sufficiently damning that the child was considered quite credible regardless of corroboration.
Precourt suggestibility was significantly related to defendant characterization and participant gender. When the defendant was portrayed unfavorably, mock jurors were more likely to credit the young child with the ability to resist suggestion, $M = 3.76$, than when the defendant was portrayed favorably, $M = 3.11$, $F(1, 44) = 7.75$, $p < .01$. Further, women participants rated the victim as less suggestible, $M = 3.65$, than did men, $M = 3.18$, $F(1, 44) = 4.25$, $p < .05$.

Ratings of attractiveness were unaffected by either participant gender, characterization, or corroboration, all $Fs(1, 44) < .67$. However, the child’s perceived intelligence was significantly related to participant gender, $F(1, 44) = 4.63$, $p < .05$. Men rated the younger child as more intelligent, $M = 4.16$, than women did, $M = 3.74$. This finding may not necessarily reflect men considering the child more credible: The more cognitively competent a child, the more he or she may be considered able to fabricate abuse allegations.

*Relation between individual judgments and main independent variables.* To examine more specifically the influence of the main independent variables, ratings of all individual judgment items were analyzed separately in analyses identical to those above. The results generally duplicated those already reported, however, several interesting gender effects emerged from the analyses of credibility judgments. Women ($Ms = 4.60$ and 3.48) were more likely than men ($Ms = 3.90$ and 3.00) to believe that the younger victim was not motivated by revenge or influenced by his mother’s questioning, respectively. Also, participant gender interacted with corroboration in influencing judgments of the younger child’s accuracy in describing the setting of the abuse, $F(1, 44) = 7.68$, $p < .01$. Women’s ratings of the younger victim’s credibility did not reliably change when they heard one, $M = 4.61$, versus two, $M = 4.71$, victims testify, $F(1, 25) = .10$. In contrast, men considered the younger victim to be less accurate if they heard only one child, $M = 3.50$, compared to two, $M = 4.85$, $F(1, 23) = 13.91$, $p < .01$. Further, men’s ratings of the uncorroborated child’s accuracy was lower than women’s ratings, $F(1, 23) = 9.88$, $p < .01$ (simple effects).

*Older versus younger child victims.* Experiment 1 indicated that age may be inversely related to credibility in sexual assault cases. To test for a similar trend in Experiment 3, a series of 2 (Characterization) × 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Victim: Younger vs. Older) ANOVAs, with victim varying within subjects, was conducted on ratings made by participants who heard both children testify. These results must be interpreted with considerable caution because: (a) Testimony content was not standardized, (b) the older child’s testimony mainly served to corroborate that of the first child, (c) personal characteristics of the two children differed, and (d) order of testimony presentation was not counterbalanced.
Table 7

*Mean Credibility Judgments of Older and Younger Witnesses (Experiment 3)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Credibility dimension</th>
<th>Older</th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>$F(1, 23)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truthfulness</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to distinguish fact from fantasy</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of having fabricated abuse</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>9.75</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of having been influenced by the policeman</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>16.68</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>76.83</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>22.26</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Higher values indicate more positive attributes for the child.

Nevertheless, as in Experiment 1, mock jurors considered the younger child more credible than the older child on several credibility dimensions (Table 7). The main effect of age on intelligence, however, was qualified by a significant Gender × Victim interaction, $F(1, 23) = 4.60, p < .05$. Men considered the younger child, $M = 4.15$, to be more intelligent than the older child, $M = 3.15$, $F(1, 12) = 26.00, p < .001$. Women did not differ in their judgments of the older, $M = 3.43$, and younger, $M = 3.78$, victims’ intelligence, $F(1, 13) = 3.22$ (simple effects).

**Guilt Judgments**

Two (Participant Gender) × 2 (Corroboration) × 2 (Characterization) ANOVAs performed on guilt judgments revealed a significant main effect only of characterization for dichotomous judgments, $F(1, 48) = 5.66, p < .05$, and degree-of-guilt judgments, $F(1, 44) = 5.99, p < .05$. As expected, the defendant’s guilt and degree of guilt were judged to be lower when he was characterized positively, $M = .37$ and $M = 5.75$, rather than negatively, $M = .69$ and $M = 8.38$, respectively.

To determine whether the main credibility dimensions could predict perceptions of guilt, participants’ individual ratings of attractiveness and intelligence, mean In-Court Credibility scale scores and mean Precourt Suggestibility scale scores were entered into separate stepwise multiple regression
analyses examining guilt judgments. The child's in-court credibility (but no other factor) accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in dichotomous guilt judgments, $\beta = .48, t(50) = 3.88, p < .001$, and degree-of-guilt judgments, $\beta = .52, t(50) = 4.29, p < .001$.

**Perceptions of Children's Capacity to Fabricate Sexual Abuse**

Finally, participants' estimates of the age at which a child is capable of making up sexual abuse allegations ranged from 5 to 18 years ($M = 11.7$ years, median = 13 years), similar to estimates given by participants in Scheiner's (1988) study and to the age of the younger, more credible, witness in Experiment 3. Men's and women's estimates were compared to test the possibility that men might find child witnesses less credible than women do because men consider children capable of fabricating sexual assault allegations at younger ages. In fact, men's estimates, $M = 12.29$, did not differ reliably from women's estimates, $M = 10.98$, $F(1, 43) = 1.90$.

**General Discussion**

Previous research indicates that the credibility of child witnesses is often lower than that of adult witnesses (e.g., Goodman et al., 1987; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987). Supporting predictions of exceptions to this trend (Goodman et al., 1987), in three experiments, younger child sexual assault victims were perceived to be no less credible, and in two experiments, more credible than older victims. In Experiment 1, more pro-victim judgments were given when a victim was 6 as compared to 22 years old (evidenced in victim credibility and defendant guilt judgments) or 14 years old (evidenced in defendant credibility and guilt ratings). In Experiment 3, an 11-year-old was perceived as more credible than a 14-year-old. Thus, although significant age differences did not always appear (Experiment 2), when evident, they were in the direction of a younger child being particularly credible. Underlying this trend may be the belief that young children's sexual naiveté precludes fabrication of sexual allegations, and further, that young children are unlikely to possess capacities that lower adult rape victim's credibility, such as previous sexual experience, sexual provocativeness, sexual desire, or ability to give meaningful consent (e.g., Borgida & Brekke, 1985; Brownmiller, 1975). Judging from the results of Experiments 1 and 3 and the findings of Duggan et al. (1989) and Scheiner (1988), such considerations start to become salient components of preconceptions or stereotypes about 11- to 13-year-old children. Thus, although older victims may be perceived as cognitively competent, they may not always be seen as trustworthy witnesses in sex abuse cases. Miller and Burgoon (1982) suggest it takes both to be credible.
The present work also explored effects of victim and juror gender on case evaluations. Consistent with past research, women perceived child victims more favorably than did men. In Experiment 2, compared to men, women judged child victims to be more credible and the defendant more guilty. In Experiment 3, women considered a child more credible on several dimensions such as truthfulness and suggestibility. Future research is needed to explore determinants of cross-gender as well as within-gender differences (indicated by bimodal judgment distributions in Experiment 2) in child sexual abuse case judgments. For example, victim empathy and attitudes relevant to child sexual abuse have been found to partially account for gender differences in reactions to child sexual abuse cases (Bottoms, 1993).

Replicating Scheiner's (1988) findings, Experiment 2 indicated that jurors are not differentially influenced by the gender of child sexual assault victims. Thus, differences in societal attitudes toward the sexual victimization of boys compared to girls (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 1987; Finkelhor, 1984; Rogers & Terry, 1984) may be unrelated to credibility and guilt judgments in specific child sexual abuse cases. However, further research is clearly needed. Given Smith et al.'s (1988) findings that perceptions of male and female adult rape victims differ, it is important to investigate the age at which victim gender begins to influence juror decision making. It is plausible that both very young girls and boys are perceived to be equally naive, innocent, and in need of protection, but the age for which these perceptions change may differ as a function of victim gender. The possibility of interactions of victim gender with defendant gender should also be explored (Finkelhor, 1984; Smith et al., 1988).

Finally, the influence of corroboration and defendant character and past-acts information were investigated in Experiment 3. Child victim corroboration led to increased credibility for a child victim, especially when a defendant was portrayed favorably, but it did not affect guilt judgments. Thus, although corroboration from another child witness may positively affect a child's perceived credibility, it does not guarantee a conviction in a sexual assault case. However, this interpretation must be made with caution. The corroborating testimony in the present study was from a 14-year-old boy who was less credible than the younger victim. A stronger corroboration effect may have obtained had our corroborating witness been younger. In fact, Duggan et al. (1989) found that more guilty verdicts were rendered when corroboration was provided by a 9-year-old compared to an adult witness.

Character and past-acts information clearly influenced juror decisions. An unfavorable characterization of the defendant was very damaging to his case, positively influencing jurors' perceptions of the victims and increasing the likelihood of guilty verdicts. Disclosure of even unfounded past-act information or other negative character details may be damaging to a defendant for a
number of reasons. Once past acts are revealed, negative information about a defendant is more likely to be expected, becomes more salient, and therefore is more likely to be believed (Hamilton & Fallet, 1974; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972). Negative information may also influence judgments by coloring all other evidence in a case (Hamilton, 1981; Penrod & Cutler, 1987). In addition, jurors may make an inference about the likelihood of the defendant having committed a crime in question based on their perceptions of the consistency of the defendant’s past behavior (Kelley, 1967; McArthur, 1972). That is, if jurors learn that a defendant has committed past crimes of a similar nature under similar circumstances, they may attribute to the defendant a stable “child molesting disposition.” In turn, they may think it more probable that the defendant committed the crime in question than they might without the consistency information that led to the child molester attribution. Finally, jurors may hold a schema for a type of person who commits crimes (Wrightsman, 1987). Character or past-act evidence may activate such a schema, which is used in predicting specific behaviors (Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

A few words of caution must be included in discussion of the present studies. In general, experimental jury studies cannot fully duplicate the experience of serving on a real jury (Weiten & Diamond, 1980). In the present study, for example, participants were not provided with the amount of information that jurors receive in a trial, nor did they deliberate. In Experiments 1 and 2, jurors were not presented with the testimony of actual child witnesses; written scenario studies may tap only observers’ stereotypes. Testimony of actual victim witnesses was used in Experiment 3, but as a consequence, several important factors relevant to comparisons of the two children’s testimony could not be controlled. Nevertheless, findings across the three experiments formed a consistent pattern.

Caution in generalizing our results is also warranted because our participants were undergraduates rather than community citizens. However, in investigating juror sensitivity to adult eyewitness identification evidence, Cutter, Penrod, and Dexter (1990) found little difference in the judgments of community and undergraduate participant jurors. Further, Isquith (1988) found no overall differences in verdicts between community and student jurors in a simulated child sexual assault case, but did find differences in length of sentencing and attribution of responsibility to a child victim. Thus it appears that the most pertinent judgments (i.e., guilt verdicts) vary little between student and community jurors (Leippe, 1988; Lind & Walker, 1979).

Conclusions and Future Directions

The present work identified several factors of importance to judgments of
children’s credibility in child sexual abuse cases, but numerous others are likely to exist. For example, what would jurors’ reactions be to children’s testimony about sexual assault in cases involving custody disputes? Cases involving multiple defendants? Under what circumstances does concern about children’s suggestibility and adult coaching come into play? Might such concerns overshadow belief in young children’s sexual naiveté, especially when leading questioning has been documented, as in highly publicized cases such as the McMartin day care case?

Special problems arise when children enter the courtroom as victim/witnesses. To help ensure the rights of victims and defendants, researchers need to continue to identify legal and extralegal factors that influence jurors in child sexual assault cases. Findings of such research may eventually lead to a more educated courtroom, one in which fact finders are aware of potential biases and ways to avoid them in making consequential judgments.

References


Isquith, P. (1988, April). Students and community members as jurors. In M. Levine (Chair), *Simulated jury research on a child as a witness*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Buffalo, NY.


Scheiner, J. L. (1988, April). The use of the minimalist vignette as a method for assessing the generalizability of videotape trial simulation results. In M. Levine (Chair), Simulated jury research on a child as a witness. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Buffalo, NY.


Imagination, Cognition, and Personality, 11, 37-51.