

**Gendered perceptions of sexual abuse: Investigating the effect of offender, victim and observer gender on the perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse**

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GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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For Peer Review Only

Gendered perceptions of sexual abuse: Investigating the effect of offender, victim and  
observer gender on the perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse

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**Abstract**

Sexual abuse of children is a pervasive, global issue. Perpetrators of such abuse are often stereotyped as male; thus, research comparing perceptions of child sexual abuse by male versus female offenders is limited. This is an important omission, particularly in light of recent evidence which demonstrates the unexpectedly high frequency of sexual crimes perpetrated by women. The gender of child sex abuse victims and observers of abuse have also been shown to impact perceptions of the offence. Thus, the present study aimed to explore the effect of offender, victim and observer gender on the perceived seriousness of an act of child sex abuse. To do this, we used a 2 (offender gender: male vs female) x 2 (victim gender: male vs female) x 2 (observer gender: male vs female) between-participants experimental design. We presented members of the British public ( $N = 213$ ) with a vignette describing a hypothetical interaction between an offender and victim and asked them how serious they thought the offence was. They then reported their own gender. We found that abuse was considered more serious when the offender was male or when the observer was female, though victim gender had no impact. We also found a novel three-way interaction: in cases involving a female offender, abuse against male children was considered more serious but only when the observer was also female. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; offender gender; victim gender; observer gender; perceived seriousness

## GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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3 Sexual abuse of children has recently been acknowledged by the World Health  
4 Organization as a “global public health problem” (WHO, 2017). Figures from the NSPCC, a  
5 British children’s charity, demonstrated that reports of child sexual abuse increased by 31%  
6 between 2016 and 2017 (Weaver, 2017). Similarly, data from the Office for National  
7 Statistics (2019) demonstrated that the number of reported sexual offences against persons in  
8 the UK under the age of 16 almost doubled (from 24,085 to 53,496) between 2013 and 2017.  
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10 A recent large-scale public survey, featuring data collected from 20,582 British adults aged  
11 between 16 and 59, estimated the UK-wide prevalence rate of childhood sexual abuse to be at  
12 around 7% (ONS, 2016a). Similar rates of this kind of abuse are reported in other parts of the  
13 world (Price-Robertson, Bromfield & Vassallo, 2010). These figures demonstrate both the  
14 prolific and global nature of child sexual abuse.  
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29 The pervasiveness of this kind of abuse can similarly be seen in the recent and  
30 numerous allegations made against high-profile public figures, such as the now-deceased  
31 children’s entertainer Jimmy Saville (Greer & McLaughlin, 2013). He faced claims that he  
32 abused thousands of children over a period of more than 40 years (Boffey, 2014). Whereas  
33 Saville was never reprimanded for his crimes, more recent alleged offenders such as actor  
34 Kevin Spacey have been (Vary, 2017). In response to public outcry, Spacey was erased from  
35 his new film after it was suggested that he had previously made sexual advances towards a  
36 14-year-old boy (Carroll, 2018). This seems to reflect an increased willingness on the part of  
37 the general public to acknowledge the seriousness of child sexual abuse and to be  
38 subsequently less tolerant of the perpetrators of such abuse.  
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53 However, this is not true for all perpetrators. Though men like Spacey received  
54 significant backlash after accusations of child sexual abuse were made, alleged female  
55 perpetrators did not receive the same treatment. Actress Lena Dunham was accused of  
56 assaulting her younger sister after she published a series of personal essays which included  
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3 descriptions of sexual acts that she said had occurred between them (Williamson, 2014). At  
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5 the time of one of those events, her sister was one-year-old. Relative to Spacey, the Dunham  
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7 incident received markedly less media attention. Though there may be several reasons for this  
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9 (the Dunham episode occurred when she too was a child, while Spacey was in his twenties at  
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11 the time of his offence), it suggests that potential sexual offenders are viewed differently  
12  
13 depending on their gender. The present study aimed to explore this idea further.  
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### 16 17 18 **Offender Gender**

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20 Recent research demonstrates that females perpetrate sexual crimes at much higher  
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22 rates than was previously thought. Stemple, Flores and Meyer (2017) reviewed data from  
23  
24 four large-scale US surveys conducted between 2008 and 2013 and found that the majority of  
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26 men who experienced sexual coercion or unwanted sexual contact reported female  
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28 perpetrators. Similarly, 79% of men who were “made to penetrate” had been victimized by a  
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30 woman and up to 58% of these victims reported that the offender had used violence during  
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32 the incident.  
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37 These statistics stand in antithesis to stereotypes which are commonly held about  
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39 women. Generally, they are viewed as warm and empathetic (Ellemers, 2018). Women also  
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41 tend to be thought of as the likely victims of sexual crimes rather than the perpetrators  
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43 (Depraetere, Vandeviver, Beken & Keygnaert, 2018). In contrast, sex offenders are often  
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45 labelled as being “violent, predatory male(s)” (King & Roberts, 2015). These stereotypes  
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47 inform judgements about sexual offenders and their crimes. However, the ways in which this  
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49 happen remain largely unexplored.  
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54 Research investigating the effect of offender gender on evaluations of sexual crimes is  
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56 limited and somewhat contradictory. There is some evidence that women who commit sexual  
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58 assaults are judged more negatively, as women are not stereotypically thought of as sex  
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3 offenders (Viki, Massey & Masser, 2005; Gakhal & Brown, 2011). Such counter-  
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5 stereotypical behavior represents a “double-deviance”, whereby a woman violates both social  
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7 norms and the norms associated with her gender (Heidensohn, 1987). However, this research  
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9 did not directly compare attitudes towards male and female offenders, but rather contrasted  
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11 “sex offenders” with “female sex offenders” (Gakhal & Brown, 2011). Because of this, it is  
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13 difficult to assert that attitudes towards female offenders were indeed worse, as the group  
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15 with whom they were compared was somewhat ambiguous.  
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20 In contrast, a number of studies looking at gender differences in responses to *other*  
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22 types of criminal offences suggest a resoundingly pro-female bias. Steffensmeier and Demuth  
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24 (2006) analyzed data from large urban courts over a six-year period and found that females  
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26 received, on average, shorter prison sentences compared with males. The mean sentence  
27  
28 length for women was 22 months, while for men this figure was 33 months. This same effect  
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30 has been found in other, similar studies (Farrington & Morris, 1983; Ahola, Hellström, &  
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32 Christianson, 2010). Furthermore, mothers who have killed their children are less likely to be  
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34 prosecuted than fathers who have done the same (Wilczynski, 1997). It may be the case then  
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36 that a similar pro-female bias exists when evaluating child sex abuse incidents.  
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41 In light of this research, the present study aimed to explore the effect of offender  
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43 gender on the perceived seriousness of an act of child sex abuse. **There is presently a lack of**  
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45 **social-psychological research which looks at females who commit sexual crimes in general**  
46  
47 **(Gakhal & Brown, 2011) and even less which focuses on women who offend against**  
48  
49 **children.** Such abuse has been labelled “the ultimate taboo” (Elliott, 1994), and the illicit  
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51 nature of the subject means that it has received little empirical attention to date. Thus, we aim  
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53 to fill this research gap. It is also important to conduct research in this area in order to give  
54  
55 fuller acknowledgement to the scope of sexual crimes that can be committed. As the  
56  
57 outcomes of child sex abuse are equally damaging regardless of the gender of the abuser  
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(Denov, 2004), understanding any bias in favour of female perpetrators seems to be an important and appropriately egalitarian strategy.

We hypothesize that crimes committed by male offenders will be judged more harshly than crimes committed by female offenders. This will be reflected in increased perceptions of the offender's actions as serious. We expect this to be the case as previous research indicates that men are more likely to be prosecuted and to receive longer sentences than women who commit the same, or similar, crimes (Wilczynski, 1997; Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2006; Farrington & Morris, 1983). Such differences suggest that crimes with male perpetrators are deemed to be more serious than those with female perpetrators.

### **Victim Gender**

In general, crimes perpetrated against female victims are judged as more serious than crimes against male victims, and this is related to stereotypical views that are held about women. They tend to be seen as the victims in a sexual assault scenario, rather than the perpetrators (Depraetere, Vandeviver, Beken & Keygnaert, 2018). This is, in part, because women are more likely to be the victims of sexual crimes. Recent data from The Crime Survey for England and Wales indicated that women were around three times more likely to report having been the victim of childhood sexual assault compared with men (ONS, 2016a). Stereotypes about women also perpetuate the idea that they are vulnerable and frail, whereas men are aggressive and intimidating (Gerber, 1991).

These beliefs about women impact judgements about an offence, and this extends to cases of child sex abuse. Williams and Farrell (1990) demonstrated this by assessing 43 cases of child sexual abuse which took place in day care centers. They found that when the nature of the offence fitted with stereotypical ideas of child sex abuse (in particular, when the perpetrator was male, and the victim was female) there was an increased likelihood of a

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3 formal response being evoked. In cases where the abuse deviated significantly from  
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5 stereotypical patterns, additional pressure had to be applied before any response was given.  
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7 This suggests that offences perpetrated against young women are seen as more serious, as  
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9 they are more likely to incur subsequent legal action. Furthermore, male rape is often  
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11 portrayed as humorous in the media, or at the very least, as something which is much less  
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13 serious than female rape (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). Within the context of the present study,  
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15 this suggests that crimes involving a male victim would be considered less serious than those  
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17 involving a female victim. Thus, we hypothesize that victim gender will impact evaluations  
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19 of child sexual abuse such that when the victim is female, the offence will be considered  
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21 more serious than when the victim is male.  
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### 27 **Observer Gender**

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30 Evaluations of sexual crimes can be influenced not only by the gender of those who  
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32 are directly involved in the crime (the offender and the victim) but also by the gender of those  
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34 who observe it. Female participants tend to view sexual offences as more serious, and sex  
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36 offenders more dangerous than their male counterparts (Harnett, 1997). Similarly, women  
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38 rated sexual abuse of children as more severe and assigned greater blame to the perpetrators  
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40 than men (Rogers & Davies, 2007). These findings can be explained in terms of Shaver's  
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42 defensive attribution theory (Shaver, 1970), which posits that the more an observer perceives  
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44 similarities between themselves and a perpetrator, the greater their desire to shift blame away  
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46 from the perpetrator. As sexual offenders are often stereotyped as being male (King &  
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48 Roberts, 2015), women identify less with them and are consequently more willing to  
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50 acknowledge the seriousness of the offence and to assign more blame to the offender. Men, in  
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52 contrast, identify more greatly with the offender and so ascribe more blame to the victim (and  
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54 less to the perpetrator) in order to shift focus away from the perpetrator. This is a defensive  
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56 mechanism which stems from a desire to protect themselves from blame if they were in a  
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3 similar position to the perpetrator in a future interaction. In light of this research, we expect  
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5 that female observers will consider child sex abuse more serious than male observers. We  
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7 also wished to explore the potential interactions between these three predictors.  
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### 10 11 **The Present Experiment**

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14 The current research aimed to investigate the role that gender plays in evaluations of a  
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16 sex offender's actions. Specifically, we wished to assess the effect of offender, victim and  
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18 observer gender on the perceived seriousness of a child sex abuse incident. We used  
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20 seriousness judgements as our dependent variable as previous research has used this measure  
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22 to compare sexual offences to other types of crime (Harnett, 1997). However, there are no  
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24 known studies which directly ask how the seriousness of a sex offender's actions differs  
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26 depending on the gender of the offender, victim and observer in cases of child sex abuse. The  
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28 present experiment aimed to fill this gap.  
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33 The current research will investigate the following four hypotheses. Firstly, that the  
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35 gender of an offender will affect judgements about their crime, with child sex offences  
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37 committed by males being perceived as more serious than offences committed by females.  
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39 Secondly, we expect that the gender of their victim will impact seriousness judgements, with  
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41 female victims eliciting comparatively more serious evaluations than male victims. We also  
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43 hypothesize an effect of observer gender whereby female observers will rate child sex abuse  
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45 incidents as more serious than male observers. Finally, we will explore whether there are any  
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47 interactions between offender, victim and observer gender.  
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### 51 52 **Method**

#### 53 54 **Participants**

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57 We recruited our sample online through various internet fora. All participants were  
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59 members of the British public who took part on a voluntary basis. Of those who initially  
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3 chose to participate, 48 were removed as they did not complete all measures that were  
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5 relevant to the study. Since gender was an independent variable in this experiment, 16  
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7 participants who did not select either “male” or “female” as their gender were also excluded.  
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9 This resulted in a final sample of 213 participants (95 males, 118 females, *mean age* = 27.19,  
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11 *SD* = 10.04), all of whom self-identified as heterosexual. We opted to use this inclusion  
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13 criteria as heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants may have responded differently to  
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15 the experimental manipulation, as sexual orientation could be implied in the patterns of abuse  
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17 described.  
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**Design**

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25 The current research employed a 2 (offender gender: male vs female) x 2 (victim  
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27 gender: male vs female) x 2 (observer gender: male vs female) between-participants factorial  
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29 design. The design was experimental, with one pre-existing independent variable (observer  
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31 gender). The perceived seriousness of the offender’s actions was the dependent variable.  
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**Materials**

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38 In order to ensure that participants were blind to the experiment’s true hypotheses,  
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40 they were only told that they were taking part in a study investigating perceptions of sex  
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42 offenders. At no point during the experiment were participants made aware that the gender of  
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44 the offender or victim were being investigated or manipulated. Likewise, they were not told  
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46 that their own gender was a variable of interest. In keeping participants unaware of our  
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48 research goals and hypotheses, this reduced the likelihood of responses which were motivated  
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50 by social desirability biases. The scales used in this research are described below:  
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55 **Offender and victim gender manipulation.** Participants were instructed to spend  
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57 one minute reading a short passage (totaling 74 words in length) which described an  
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59 interaction between a hypothetical sex offender and their underage victim. Our stimulus  
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material was adapted from a vignette used by Rogers, Hirst and Davies (2011), which also featured a 35-year-old offender who was described as a family friend, and a child victim aged 10. The passage presented to participants is given below:

*Jeff is 35 years old. Ever since he was a teenager, he felt sexually attracted to pre-pubescent boys. About a year ago, Jeff met Kyle, a friend's son, at a party. Kyle was 10 years old at the time. During the party, Jeff groped Kyle's genitals and tried to kiss him. This happened on one occasion only, and it was the first time that Jeff had any kind of sexual contact with a minor.*

The gender of the offender and the gender of their victim was varied depending on condition. In the "male offender" condition, the offender was named "Jeff" and he was described using male pronouns. In the "female offender" condition, the offender was named "Jenny" and her pronouns were adapted as appropriate. Similarly, in the "male victim" condition, the victim was named "Kyle" and was described as the friend's "son"/using male pronouns. In the "female victim condition", the victim was called "Katie" and she was described as the friend's "daughter"/using female pronouns. In the former condition, the offender was described as being attracted to pre-pubescent "boys", while in the latter the offender was attracted to "girls". Aside from the experimental manipulation, the vignette contained the exact same information across all conditions.

**Observer gender.** Participants indicated their gender by selecting one box on the online questionnaire. The options given were "male", "female", "prefer not to say" or "other". Only male and female participants were included in our analyses.

**Perceived seriousness.** To assess the level of seriousness ascribed to the offence, participants were asked the following: *Please indicate how serious you feel that the adult's actions were, using the sliding scale below.* Participants could select responses ranging from

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0 (“not serious at all”) to 100 (“very serious”). Hence, higher scores reflected increased evaluation of the adult’s action as serious.

All measures were completed on Qualtrics, an online survey platform.

### Procedure

Participants were first presented with a total of four filler questionnaires which served to distract them from the true purpose of the study. Then, they were asked to spend one minute reading a vignette which described a hypothetical interaction between a sexual offender and their victim. The gender of the offender and the gender of the victim varied depending on the condition to which participants were assigned. They were then asked to judge how serious the actions of the offender were. Following this, participants submitted demographic information about themselves, including their gender, age, ethnicity and religious beliefs. After completing all of the measures that were relevant to the study, participants were thanked for their time and given an online debrief form. In total, the experiment took around 10 minutes to complete.

### Results

Participants were split approximately evenly between conditions across the three independent variables (see Table 1). Of all the demographic variables collected, only age was significantly related to perceptions of seriousness ( $r = -.22, p = .001$ ). For this reason, age was included as a covariate in our analyses.

We conducted a 2 (offender gender: male vs female) x 2 (victim gender: male vs female) x 2 (observer gender: male vs female) independent-measures, univariate ANCOVA. Perceived seriousness of the adult’s actions was the dependent variable. Means and standard deviations for all conditions are shown in Table 2.

**Main effects.** The effect of offender gender on perceived seriousness scores approached significance:  $F(1, 204) = 3.78, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . Offences carried out by males ( $M = 95.38, SD = 8.77$ ) were considered more serious than offences carried out by females ( $M = 92.26, SD = 12.29$ ). Victim gender had no impact on perceived seriousness scores:  $F(1, 204) = .70, p = .41, \eta^2 = .003$ . Thus, scenarios involving a male victim were not considered any more or less serious than those involving a female victim. However, the gender of the observer did have a significant impact on seriousness scores:  $F(1, 204) = 8.42, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$ . Male participants ( $M = 91.18, SD = 12.52$ ) rated the incident of child sexual abuse as less serious compared to female participants ( $M = 95.98, SD = 8.52$ ). The ANCOVA also revealed a significant effect of the covariate, participant age, on the dependent variable:  $F(1, 204) = 6.36, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$ .

**Interaction effects.** We found a significant three-way interaction between the offender, victim and observer gender variables:  $F(1, 204) = 5.94, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ . Subsequently, we divided our dataset according to the gender of the offender and ran appropriate follow up tests. Perceived seriousness scores in the male and female offender conditions are reflected in Figures 1 and 2 respectively.

An ANOVA was performed on those in the male offender condition ( $n = 108$ ). Participant age was not correlated with the dependent variable ( $r = -.13, p = .17$ ) so was not included in the analysis. We found no effect of victim gender ( $F(1, 104) = 2.94, p = .09, \eta^2 = .03$ ) or observer gender ( $F(1, 104) = 3.18, p = .08, \eta^2 = .03$ ) on perceptions of seriousness when an offender was male. There was also no interaction between victim and observer gender ( $F(1, 104) = 3.45, p = .07, \eta^2 = .03$ ).

In the female offender condition ( $n = 105$ ), we used an ANCOVA to investigate possible interaction effects, as age correlated with seriousness scores ( $r = -.26, p = .007$ ). We

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found that victim gender did not affect perceptions of seriousness ( $F(1, 100) = .004, p = .95, \eta^2 = .000$ ). However, observer gender did: ( $F(1, 100) = 6.14, p = .02, \eta^2 = .06$ ). Male observers ( $M = 89.06, SD = 14.08$ ) rated abuse perpetrated by female offenders as significantly less serious than did female observers ( $M = 95.16, SD = 9.64$ ). There was also a significant effect of the covariate on seriousness scores:  $F(1, 100) = 6.57, p = .01, \eta^2 = .06$ . The interaction between victim and observer gender approached significance ( $F(1, 100) = 3.68, p = .06, \eta^2 = .04$ ), so was explored further using post-hoc tests.

We compared seriousness scores across levels of the observer gender variable for participants who had read a vignette featuring a male victim (and a female offender). We used post-hoc t-tests with a Bonferroni-adjusted alpha level of .025. Our results showed a significant effect of observer gender ( $t(25.63) = -2.85, p = .009$ ), with men ( $M = 86.96, SD = 17.71$ ) who were exposed to a hypothetical female offender-male victim pairing rating the offence as less serious than women under the same conditions ( $M = 97.54, SD = 4.41$ ). We then performed the same analyses for participants who had read a vignette featuring a female victim (and a female offender) and this was not significant. ( $t(53) = -.68, p = .50$ ).

Furthermore, none of the potential two-way interactions were significant. There was no interaction between offender and victim gender ( $F(1, 204) = .51, p = .48, \eta^2 = .002$ ), offender and observer gender ( $F(1, 204) = 1.51, p = .22, \eta^2 = .007$ ) or victim and observer gender ( $F(1, 204) = .38, p = .54, \eta^2 = .002$ ).

The implications of these results are discussed below.

### Discussion

Sexual abuse of children is a widespread problem, the extent of which is just beginning to be recognized on a broader societal level (WHO, 2017). The majority of research looking at perceptions of sex offenders presupposes that the offender in question is

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3 male, an assumption which is problematic in light of recent evidence demonstrating the  
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5 pervasiveness of sexual crimes committed by women (Stemple, Flores & Meyer, 2017). The  
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7 present research aimed to address this gap in the literature by investigating the effect of  
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9 offender, victim and observer gender on the perceived seriousness of an act of child sex  
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11 abuse. To do so, we employed a between-participants experimental design ( $N = 213$   
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13 heterosexual members of the British public) in which participants read a vignette featuring a  
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15 hypothetical sex offender interacting with a hypothetical 10-year-old victim. The gender of  
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17 both the offender and victim varied according to condition. Participants were asked to report  
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19 how serious they felt the offence was, then stated their own gender. Our findings are  
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21 discussed below.  
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27 We first hypothesized that a scenario featuring a male offender would be considered  
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29 more serious than an identical scenario featuring a female offender. Our results supported this  
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31 assertion and thus lend support to the body of research demonstrating that crimes committed  
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33 by women are viewed with greater leniency than crimes committed by men (Steffensmeier &  
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35 Demuth, 2006; Farrington & Morris, 1983; Ahola, Hellström, & Christianson, 2010;  
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37 Wilczynski, 1997). Our study extends these findings by showing that the same pro-female  
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39 bias occurs in instances of child sex abuse.  
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44 Our second hypothesis, that crimes perpetrated against a female victim would be rated  
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46 more seriously than those involving a male victim, was not supported. This is unexpected, as  
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48 evidence suggests that sexual crimes involving a female victim are more likely to incur a  
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50 legal response (Williams & Farrell, 1990) while male rape is taken comparatively less  
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52 seriously (Turchik & Edwards, 2012). We propose two possible explanations for this finding.  
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54 The first is that it may be related to the age of the victim depicted in our vignette. Maynard  
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56 and Wiederman (1997) demonstrated that victim age predicted perceptions of abusiveness in  
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58 child sex abuse cases, with incidents involving a seven-year-old victim rated as more abusive  
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3 than those involving a 15-year-old. As our vignette depicted a child who was 10-years-old  
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5 (and thus still clearly well below the legal age of consent in the United Kingdom),  
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7 participants likely considered the abuse to be very serious irrespective of the child's gender.  
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10 Alternatively, the null finding may reflect an erosion of stereotypes surrounding victimization  
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12 in child sex abuse cases. Traditionally, it is women and girls who are thought of as victims in  
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14 sexual abuse scenarios (Depraetere, Vandeviver, Beken & Keygnaert, 2018). However,  
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16 reports of male rape in the media are becoming more common ("Reported Sex Offenses  
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18 Against Males", 2018). The counter-stereotypical nature of such reports may challenge any  
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20 existing beliefs held by members of the public that victimization is gender-specific. The  
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22 increasing understanding that anyone can be the victim of a sexual crime (and suffer  
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24 consequences as a result of such victimization) may explain why we did not find any gender  
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26 differences. If this account is accurate, then our results represent positive societal progress.  
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31 Our findings demonstrated that female observers considered child sex abuse more  
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33 serious than male observers, in line with our third hypothesis. This is unsurprising, given that  
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35 women tend to react more negatively to sexual crimes (Harnett, 1997), including those  
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37 involving children (Rogers & Davies, 2007). The present study provides new evidence of this  
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39 effect and thus adds meaningfully to the existing literature.  
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43 We also explored the potential interactions between offender, victim and observer  
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45 gender. Interestingly, we found a three-way interaction in which female observers responded  
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47 more negatively than male observers to an abuse scenario which featured a female offender  
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49 and a male victim. This may be related to the way in which female-on-male sexual abuse is  
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51 depicted in the media. Reports of this kind of abuse, including those involving underaged  
52  
53 victims, tend to offer sympathy to the offender while diminishing the impact of the crime on  
54  
55 the victim. A recent report of a 26-year-old female teacher who performed sex acts on a 13-  
56  
57 year-old boy said she was "partly driven by loneliness" (Brown, 2018). The comments  
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3 accompanying the article described the offender as “attractive” and the dynamic as a  
4  
5 “fantasy” for the victim. Thus, it may be the case that men have internalized the message that  
6  
7 abuse perpetrated against them by females is not taken seriously by society, even when they  
8  
9 are below the age of consent. This belief may be reflected in their relatively lower evaluations  
10  
11 of female-on-male sexual abuse as serious.  
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### 14 15 **Strengths & Implications**

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18 We used a between-participants design to investigate our experiment’s four  
19  
20 hypotheses. This made it difficult for participants to anticipate our research questions and so  
21  
22 reduced the chance of social desirability biases influencing our results. Furthermore, the  
23  
24 design was experimental, which allowed us to make stronger inferences about causality. We  
25  
26 used a sample drawn from the British public, unlike much research in social psychology,  
27  
28 which uses student samples. These samples have been heavily criticized for lacking  
29  
30 generalizability (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010).  
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35 As well as the theoretical implications discussed above, our results also provide a  
36  
37 plausible explanation for real-world phenomena. For example, the disparity in public  
38  
39 attention paid to Kevin Spacey verses Lena Dunham (both of whom were accused of sexual  
40  
41 offences against children) can be partially attributed to the general public’s belief that crimes  
42  
43 perpetrated by men are more serious than crimes perpetrated by women. Our results also  
44  
45 demonstrate that the British public take child sexual abuse seriously, as scores on our  
46  
47 dependent variable were high across all conditions.  
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### 51 52 **Limitations & Future Research Directions**

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55 The present research makes a novel contribution to the literature on gender and the  
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57 way that it impacts judgements about sexual offences. However, on account of this novelty, it  
58  
59 is difficult to draw strong conclusions from this single study alone. We suggest that future  
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## GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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3 research strive to replicate our findings in order to validate the robustness of the effects found  
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5 in this experiment. These confirmatory studies should use larger sample sizes to increase  
6  
7 power, as not all of the effects in the current research attained significance at the 5% level.  
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11 We also propose a number of ways that our research could be extended. Firstly, the  
12  
13 finding that victim gender had no effect on perceptions of seriousness is worth investigating  
14  
15 further. We suggest that it may be due to the age of the victim depicted in our vignette.  
16  
17 Therefore, future research may wish to replicate our study with victim age as an additional  
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19 variable of interest. If there was still no effect, it lends support to our second suggestion (that  
20  
21 the absence of any effect is a sign of the times, with the British public now more aware that  
22  
23 victimization is not gender-specific). There is also evidence which suggests that female  
24  
25 offenders tend to abuse younger victims than male offenders (Peter, 2009). Thus, including  
26  
27 victim age as a variable of interest would allow for perceptions of seriousness to be compared  
28  
29 across abuse scenarios which fit stereotypically male-perpetrated and stereotypically female-  
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31 perpetrated patterns.  
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37 The finding that female observers rated abuse scenarios involving a female offender  
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39 and male victim more seriously than a female offender-female victim pairing is interesting  
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41 and should be explored further. Future research may wish to investigate factors which  
42  
43 underly this. Hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs (Glick & Fiske, 2001) as well as levels of  
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45 rape myth acceptance (Burt, 1980) have each been shown to predict attitudes towards  
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47 women, and so seem particularly relevant for research which may wish to focus specifically  
48  
49 on female offenders.  
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53  
54 Finally, there are no known studies which apply the principles of defensive attribution  
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56 theory to female offenders. Therefore, it is currently not understood whether women will  
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58 identify more greatly with female sex offenders and if this will subsequently affect their  
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3 evaluations of those offenders. This is an important omission in the literature which future  
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5 studies should seek to address.  
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### 8 **Conclusions** 9

10  
11 The present research aimed to establish the effect of offender, victim and observer  
12  
13 gender on the perceived seriousness of an incident of child sex abuse. We found that offences  
14  
15 committed by males were considered more serious than offences committed by females, and  
16  
17 that women who observed an incident of child sex abuse rated it as more serious than a male  
18  
19 who observed the same incident. However, there was no effect of victim gender. We also  
20  
21 found a novel three-way interaction, whereby female offenders abusing male victims were  
22  
23 judged as having committed more serious offences, but only by female observers. These  
24  
25 results show that when both genders are subject to investigation, assessments of sexual  
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27 crimes become more complicated than may have previously been assumed. This reinforces  
28  
29 the need for more research in this area, to disentangle the complex ways in which gender (of  
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31 the offender, victim and observer) impacts evaluations of sexual crimes against children.  
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**Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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## Tables

*Table 1: Number of male and female observers assigned to each level of the offender and victim gender variables.*

Observer gender	Offender gender		Victim gender	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Male	45	50	45	50
Female	63	55	60	58
Total	108	105	105	108

## GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

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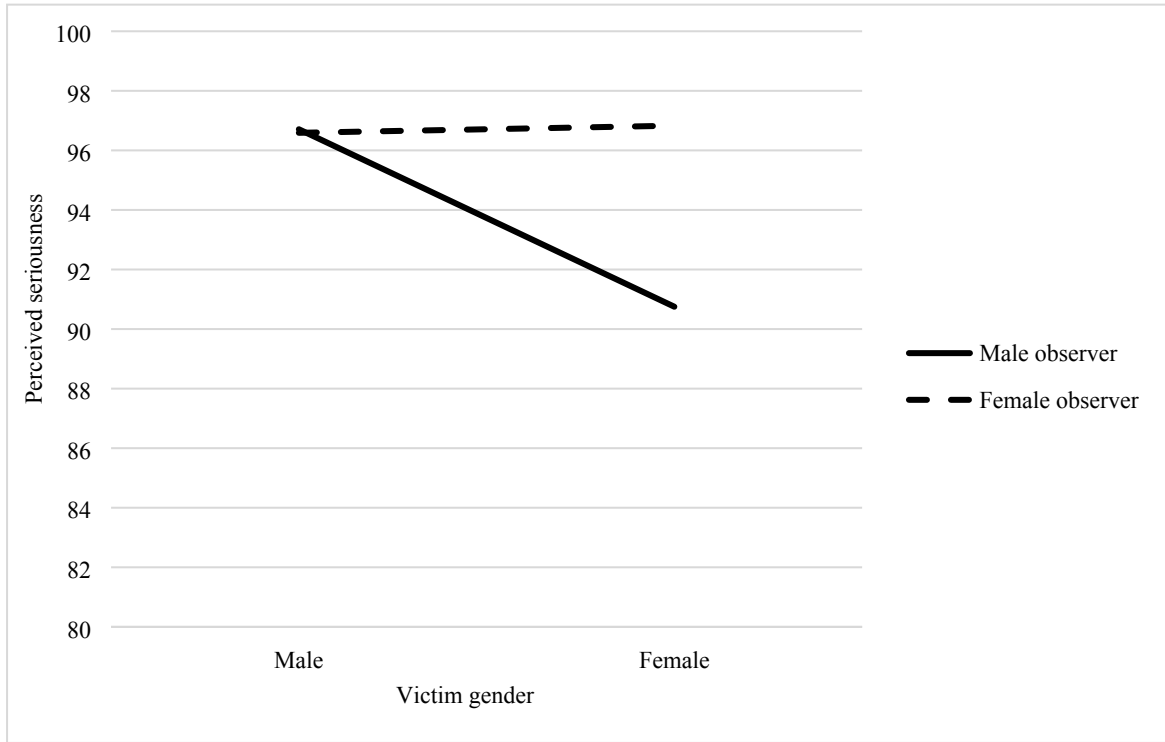
*Table 2: Means and standard deviations across all conditions.*

Observer gender	Male offender		Female offender	
	Male victim	Female victim	Male victim	Female victim
Male	96.71 (10.01)	90.75 (9.69)	86.96 (17.71)	91.00 (9.56)
Female	96.59 (6.54)	96.83 (8.43)	97.54 (4.41)	93.03 (12.32)

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### Figures

Figure 1: Perceived seriousness scores in the male offender condition, according to victim and observer gender.



View Only

Figure 2: Perceived seriousness scores in the female offender condition, according to victim and observer gender.

