Perceptions of Adolescents’ Maturity and Responsibility
in the Context of Sexual Relationships with an Older Partner

Rebecca Newsham

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Faculty Advisor: N. Dickon Reppucci, Ph.D.
Second Reader: Joseph P. Allen, Ph.D.
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Abstract

The wide variation in statutory rape and consent laws across states demonstrates a lack of consensus regarding adolescents’ competency to make sexual decisions. This study investigated perceptions of adolescents’ sexual relationships with older partners. Younger partner age and partner age difference were varied across 15 vignettes. Participants (N = 76) read each vignette then rated younger partner maturity and both partners’ responsibility for the relationship. Consistent with our hypotheses, adolescents were viewed as more able to consent and more responsible for relationships as their age increased and partner age difference decreased. These results suggest that statutory rape and consent laws that consider factors such as partner age difference may be viewed more legitimately than those with strict ages of consent.

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Perceptions of Adolescents’ Maturity and Responsibility in the Context of Sexual Relationships with an Older Partner

In the United States, it is common for teenage girls to date and have sex with slightly older boys. Roughly half of girls who date in middle and high school report one- to three-year age gaps in their relationships (Kaestle, Morisky, & Wiley, 2002), and 29% of sexually active 15- to 17-year-old girls are three to five years younger than their partners (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999). However, people are often unaware that such relationships can constitute statutory rape. The public’s general confusion may stem from the wide variation among laws governing adolescent sexual relationships. Since there is no national consensus on age of consent or appropriate age differences between partners, what constitutes a legal relationship in one state may be a crime in another (Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004). The inconsistency of these laws may reflect a lack of knowledge about adolescents’ competence to make decisions of a sexual nature. Although many studies have analyzed adolescents’ cognitive maturity and psychosocial immaturity (Ambuel & Rappaport, 1992; Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Scott, Reppucci, & Woolard, 1995; Weithorn & Campbell, 1982), maturity in the context of sexual behavior has not been investigated in detail and therefore cannot be used to inform statutory rape laws.

Despite this gap in the research on adolescent maturity, state legislatures can still create legitimate and uniform statutory rape laws by considering the public’s views of adolescents’ relationships with older partners. When laws reflect the values and beliefs of the people they govern, citizens view the laws as having more authority and are more likely to comply with them (Tyler, 2006). If lawmakers made regulations that reflected the public’s opinions of adolescents’ relationships with older partners, these laws would probably be more relevant and respected. In
an attempt to inform statutory rape laws, this study investigates people’s perceptions of adolescents’ maturity and responsibility in relationships with older partners, and examines how these perceptions change depending on the younger partner’s age and partner age differences.

**Statutory Relationships in the United States**

Modest age gaps between older males and younger females are relatively frequent during adolescence. Roughly 60% of high school seniors have had sex (Grunbaum et al., 2003), and adolescents often differ in age from their partners (Darroch et al., 1999). Girls are more likely than boys to have older partners, and girls who date older partners are on average one and a half to two years younger than their partner (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). In comparison, boys with older partners typically have an age gap of a few months (Carver et al., 2003). Given the average partner age gaps, it is not unreasonable to expect that many older adolescents, especially girls, have had a partner who is 18 or older and therefore legally an adult.

Although these types of relationships appear to be somewhat normative, there is also evidence that older partners can have negative effects on younger partners, particularly in regard to their sexual development and health (Darroch et al., 1999; Kaestle et al., 2002). However, these detrimental consequences seem to be limited to adolescents who are at least six years younger than their partners (Darroch et al., 1999; Kaestle et al., 2002). Girls under 18 who date partners at least six years older use contraceptives less often and have a higher risk of pregnancy (Darroch et al., 1999). Adolescent girls with much older partners are also more likely to have sex and with greater frequency (Kaestle et al., 2002). For example, a 13-year-old girl with a 19-year-old partner is six times more likely than two 13-year-old partners to have sex, while a 17-year-old girl with a 23-year-old partner is only twice as likely to have sex as two 17-year-old partners (Kaestle et al., 2002). These findings indicate that not all statutory relationships are
equally harmful, and it appears that more common forms of statutory relationship (i.e. those with less than a six-year age gap) are not as problematic as those between young adolescents and much older partners.

**Laws Governing Adolescent Sexual Behavior**

Statutory rape and sexual consent laws exist to keep adolescents safe. The stated purposes of these laws vary slightly between states, but they generally aim to protect minors from exploitive sexual relationships with older partners (Davis & Twombly, 2000). Although these laws are well-intentioned, they often criminalize more than just predatory relationships. Only 7% of 15- to 17-year-old sexually active teenage girls are at least six years younger than their partners, and thus especially vulnerable to negative health outcomes (Darroch et al., 1999). However, adolescent partners who are only a few years younger than their partners may also be considered victims of statutory rape (Glosser et al., 2004). While statutory rape laws are theoretically designed to protect children from predatory and otherwise unhealthy relationships, in practice, these laws apply to a range of relationships, many of which may be relatively healthy and normative. Unfortunately for youth and their parents, the complexity and variation among these laws often make it difficult to determine exactly which sexual relationships are and are not legal.

There are a number of factors that contribute to the public’s confusion about the legality of certain adolescent sexual relationships. First, many states do not have clear standards for appropriate adolescent sexual activity; these regulations are often only briefly mentioned in more general sexual offense laws (Glosser et al., 2004). Statutory rape laws are further complicated by the fact that only 12 states have a single age of sexual consent (Glosser et al., 2004). Instead, the majority of states have varying ages of consent based on a combination of “age differences
between the partners, the age of the victim, and the age of the defendant” (Glosser et al., 2004, p. ES-1). Depending on the state, the minimum age of the victim – the age below which a person cannot engage in any sexual activity – ranges from 10 to 18 years old (Glosser et al., 2004). The minimum age of the defendant, or the “age below which an individual cannot be prosecuted for having sex with a minor” varies from 14 to 24 years old (Glosser et al., 2004, p. ES-2), and acceptable partner age gaps range from two to ten years (Glosser et al., 2004). These circumstances illustrate the lack of national consensus about the conditions that constitute statutory rape.

Since there are no firm guidelines about how states should establish their definitions of statutory rape, states’ laws on adolescent sexual relationships differ substantially. For example, New Jersey sets the age of consent at 16, but it is legal for adolescents who are at least 13 to engage in sexual relationships with a partner who is less than four years older than them (Glosser et al., 2004). The District of Columbia also lists 16 as the age of consent, but sex with an adolescent under 16 is only illegal if the older partner is four or more years older than the younger partner (Glosser et al., 2004). The specific laws and the penalties for infractions are also inconsistent from state to state. For example, a sexual relationship between a 15-year-old female and 19-year-old male is considered statutory rape in Georgia and carries a maximum penalty of 20 years (Ga. § 16-6-3, 2011), but in Virginia the older partner would only face up to a year in jail for “causing or encouraging acts rendering children delinquent” (Va. Code § 18.2-371, 2012). In contrast, this relationship is legal in Maine (17-A M.R.S. § 254, 2011). The disparity in states’ statutory rape laws and punishments means that the same relationship is treated differently depending on where it occurs, which makes it difficult for people to understand and adhere to these regulations.
Apart from being confusing and inconsistent, statutory rape laws do not allow for much discretion. Statutory rape is typically determined by the age of the partners and the age difference between them; the nature of the relationship is not considered (Glosser et al., 2004). In 29% of reported statutory rape cases, the offender and the victim are dating, and an additional 62% involve acquaintances (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). Of statutory rapes between male offenders and female victims, the median age gap is six years (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). These statistics show that many potentially normative sexual relationships can be legally labeled as statutory rape when age and age difference are the only defining factors. Although the popular notion is that these laws aim to arrest and punish “dirty old men,” similar-age partners who have consensual sexual relationships are also subject to arrest and punishment under these regulations (Kaestle et al., 2002; Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005).

To summarize, there is no clear consensus on the definition of statutory rape. Legislatures disagree on what constitutes an illegal sexual relationship, which leads to the same action being punished differently from state to state (Glosser et al., 2004). Statutory rape laws also have limited flexibility and rarely allow for the consideration of relationship context (Kaestle et al., 2002; Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). These laws assume that older partners hold full criminal responsibility for statutory relationships because younger partners are not mature enough to consent to sex (Glosser et al., 2004). Since this assumption is a key component of many statutory rape laws, it should be questioned in light of psychological research on adolescent maturity.

**Adolescent Maturity**

Maturity is often conceptualized as being composed of two main components. The first is cognitive maturity, which is the ability to make rational, reasonable decisions based on
available information (Steinberg, Cauffman, Woolard, Graham, & Banich, 2009). By mid-adolescence, teenagers’ cognitive maturity is relatively comparable to adults’ (e.g., Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1989; Quadrel, Fischhoff, & Davis, 1993). Adolescents of 14 or 15 can competently consent to medical treatment (Ambuel & Rappaport, 1992; Weithorn & Campbell, 1982), and they can make informed contributions to custody decisions (Garrison, 1991). Adolescents seem to have the cognitive capacity to make sound judgments, particularly in settings that allow them time to consider all available options and the consequences of each choice (van Duijvenvoorde, Jansen, Visser, & Huizenga, 2010).

Maturity is also comprised of psychosocial factors. Although teenagers have cognitive capabilities comparable to adults, adolescents’ relatively immature psychosocial development influences their ability to make rational decisions (Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009). Adolescents are more likely to take risks than adults (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Scott et al., 1995), and they are more impulsive when making decisions (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Adolescents’ temporal perspective is oriented more toward the present rather than the future, resulting in a focus on the short- rather than long-term outcomes of their decisions (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Scott et al., 1995; Steinberg, Graham, et al., 2009). Teenagers are particularly susceptible to peer influence, which limits their ability to make independent decisions and further increases the likelihood of risk-taking (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Since psychosocial development is often not complete until young adulthood, teenagers are not as mature as adults in this regard (Scott et al., 1995, Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996).

Overall, the research suggests a gap between adolescents’ cognitive and psychosocial maturity (Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009). Teenagers are able to make logical choices,
particularly in situations that allow time to reflect on options and elicit little emotional stress, such as medical procedures (Ambuel & Rappaport, 1992; van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2010; Weithorn & Campbell, 1982). However, adolescents’ incomplete psychosocial development can lead them to make irrational decisions (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; Scott et al. 1995). Teenagers are especially likely to take risks and behave impulsively in settings that are emotionally and socially arousing, like parties with classmates (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). Context appears to play a key role in determining the degree to which adolescents make rational decisions (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Steinberg, Cauffman et al., 2009; van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2010). Therefore, to determine the accuracy of the assumptions made by statutory rape and consent laws, it is important to examine the effects of the maturity gap in the context of adolescent sexual relationships.

**Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making**

Although the maturity gap has a significant amount of experimental support, few studies have specifically investigated the relative influence of cognitive and psychosocial factors on sexual decision-making. Instead, much of the previous research on teen sexuality has focused on the risk factors correlated with adolescent sex (e.g., Zimmer-Gembeck & Helfand, 2008). Particular attention has been paid to adolescent girls’ sexuality, since there is cultural anxiety about teenage pregnancy and female promiscuity (Tolman, 1996). Although researchers have begun to examine adolescents’ sexual decision-making, there is a lack of research on the effects of the modest age gaps common in adolescent relationships on teenagers’ sexual choices.

Recently, researchers have moved beyond studies that focus on the negative consequences of teenage sex and are examining adolescent sexuality as a normative part of physical and psychological growth (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). To better understand how
sexuality develops during adolescence, researchers have begun investigating the reasons that teenagers have sex. This information is useful since, as previously mentioned, adolescents’ decision-making behavior appears to be situation-dependent and we therefore cannot generalize teenagers’ maturity across contexts (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Based on the emerging data, it seems that teenagers often use rational decision-making techniques in sexual encounters.

Adolescents perceive sexual decisions as fundamentally different from other risky behaviors, and they typically report that their decision to have sex is not influenced by external factors (Payne, 2002). Teenagers’ sexual decision-making is also dynamic and complex (Michels, Kropp, Eyre, & Halpern-Felsher, 2005; Woody, D’Souza, & Russel, 2003); they consider factors like their emotional connection with their partner, the potential costs and benefits of engaging in sex, and their ability to communicate with their partner (Dawson, Shih, de Moor, & Shrier, 2008; Michels et al., 2005). However, adolescents also often participate in risky sexual behaviors, such as infrequent condom use and engaging in sex with multiple partners (Grunbaum et al., 2003).

Although adolescents may not make the decision to have sex as impulsively as we might assume, aspects of their psychosocial immaturity such as increased risk-taking and focus on short-term consequences seem to have some impact on their sexual choices.

Although this research paves the way toward a more complete understanding of adolescent sexuality, one major limitation is the lack of information on whether teenagers’ sexual decision-making processes are different from those of other age groups. We were unable to find studies that compared adolescents’ sexual decisions to adults’ or older partners’; teenagers were examined in isolation. Furthermore, there has been little to no research on the potential effect that partner age may have on an adolescent’s own sexual decision-making. It is currently unclear whether adolescents’ sexual choices or decision-making processes are impacted by the presence
of an older partner. As mentioned above, these questions are important to answer because of the frequency of age gaps in adolescent relationships. Without such information, statutory rape and sexual consent laws cannot have a scientific basis.

**Perceptions**

Due to the gap in the research regarding adolescents’ sexual decision-making in relationships with older partners, statutory rape and sexual consent laws must get their legitimacy from public consensus. As previously discussed, legitimacy is key to ensuring the public’s acceptance and voluntary obedience of laws (Tyler, 2006). In order to develop respected statutory rape laws, legislatures should consider the public’s perceptions of adolescents’ maturity and responsibility. In general, people believe that adolescents become more responsible and more mature as they get older (Deković, Noom, & Meuss, 1997; Feldman & Quatman, 1988). Parents and their teenage children expect younger adolescents to focus on making stable friendships and developing autonomy in daily decisions, while late adolescence is viewed as a time of increased responsibility in which one must prepare for the working world and providing for their own family (Deković et al., 1997). Laws regarding adolescent rights reflect these perceptions of increased maturity. Teenagers are given more responsibilities as they get older; they can begin driving without supervision between the ages of 15 and 17 depending on the state (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety & Highway Loss Data Institute, 2012), and all adolescents can vote at 18 (U.S. Const., amend. XXVI, § 1). According to both public beliefs and the law, age is associated with increased perceptions of maturity and responsibility.

However, there is less research on the public’s perception of adolescents’ maturity and responsibility in sexual relationships, particularly with older partners. Based on the information described above (Deković et al., 1997), we can infer that older teens are more likely to be seen as
mature enough for sex and responsible for sexual relationships. People also appear to be more concerned about adolescents’ sexual relationships with much older partners, as these relationships are perceived to be more emotionally damaging to the younger partner than those between partners that are closer in age (Sahl & Keene, 2010). “Romeo and Juliet” laws, which set less harsh penalties for statutory relationships with smaller age gaps, seem to reflect the public’s lesser concern with similar-age partners (Gramlich, 2007). These laws imply that any exploitation that occurs in relationships with modest age gaps is likely not the result of the age difference alone. It seems that people’s views of adolescents’ maturity and responsibility in sexual relationships with older partners are affected by the context of the relationship (Gramlich, 2007), but these perceptions have yet to be verified.

**Present Study**

The purpose of this study is to fill the gap in the literature regarding perceptions of adolescents’ responsibility and maturity in sexual relationships with older partners. We also want to examine how these perceptions change depending on the younger partner’s age and the age difference between partners. This research will help determine if the existing statutory rape and sexual consent laws are in agreement with public opinion and provide information that will aid states’ development of more legitimate and functional statutory rape laws.

Based on the reviewed research, we formulated predictions about participants’ perceptions of adolescents engaged in relationships with older partners. Since the public seems to believe that age is positively associated with maturity (Deković et al., 1997), we expected to see a trend that more participants would view older adolescents as mature enough to consent to these sexual relationships, and fewer participants would perceive younger adolescents to be mature enough. Due to the heightened concern about adolescents who date much older partners
(Sahl & Keene, 2010), we expected that fewer participants would perceive the younger partners as mature enough for the relationships when there were larger partner age gaps, and more participants would view the younger partners as mature enough when the age differences were smaller. In regard to responsibility, we hypothesized that older adolescents would be seen as more equally responsible for these relationships than younger adolescents. We also hypothesized that when the age gap between partners was small, the younger partner would be perceived as more equally responsible for the relationships than when the partner age gap was large. Finally, we hypothesized that there would be an interaction such that the effect of age gap would be less pronounced as the younger partner aged.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants were 76 adults (53.9% female) who were either between the ages of 18 and 24 ($n = 36$) or the parent of a child between the ages of 13 and 17 ($n = 40$). We chose these two demographic groups because a) the majority of statutory rape offenders “known to law enforcement” are young adults (Troupe-Leasure, & Snyder, 2005, p. 1), and b) parents of teens are in a position to be aware of and report statutory relationships (Gramlich, 2007). Of the 75 participants who reported their demographic information, the majority were White (81.3%) and well-educated (85.5% with some college education or more). Participants gave informed consent, and young adults and parents received 25 cents and 50 cents respectively for their involvement. Five participants were omitted from analysis for failing to complete the survey, and two for finishing the survey too quickly to have accurately read and answered the questions.

**Materials and Procedure**

Participants found the study through their existing membership to Mechanical Turk, which is an online interface where users are paid small sums of money for answering surveys.
They completed a short qualification survey to determine their eligibility. In order to take part in the study, participants had to live in the United States and be either young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 or the parent of a teenager. Using a within-subject design, each participant viewed a table of 15 brief scenarios describing a sexual relationship between a hypothetical adolescent and an older partner. Though the wording was identical, the age of the younger partner and age difference between partners varied in each scenario. The younger partner’s age in each scenario was either 13, 14, 15, 16 or 17, and for each age the younger partner was paired with a partner two, four and six years older. For example, the 13-year-old younger partner was paired with a 15-year-old, 17-year-old, and 19-year-old partner to generate three of the 15 relationship scenarios. For each relationship scenario, we first asked participants whether or not the younger partner was mature enough to consent to sex with the older partner. Participants then indicated how responsible they believed both the younger and older partner to be for each sexual relationship using a four-point Likert scale, with 1 = not at all responsible and 4 = very responsible. On average, it took participants 12.26 minutes to complete the survey. See the Appendix for the complete scenario chart.

Results

Maturity of Younger Partner

For each sexual relationship scenario, we calculated the percentages of participants who believed that the younger partner was mature enough to consent to sex. As the age gap between partners increased, fewer participants viewed the younger partner as mature enough to consent to sex. Additionally, more participants considered the younger partner to be mature enough for a sexual relationship as the younger partner’s age increased. For example, when there was a two-year age gap between partners, the percentage of participants that perceived the younger partner
to be mature enough to consent to the sexual relationship ranged from 26.3% for 13-year-olds to 57.9% and 68.0% for 16- and 17-year-olds respectively. However, when partners were six years apart, the percentage of participants that believed the younger partner had the maturity to consent ranged from only 2.6% for 13-year-olds to 28.9% for 17-year-olds. Table 1 shows participants’ perceptions of the younger partner’s maturity in each relationship scenario.

**Responsibility for Relationship**

To analyze perceptions of responsibility in sexual relationships, we first calculated responsibility difference scores. For each of the 15 relationship scenarios, we subtracted each participant’s rating of the younger partner’s responsibility from his or her rating of the older partner’s responsibility. This resulted in a Likert scale ranging from -3 to 3 where 3 = *older partner fully responsible* and -3 = *younger partner fully responsible*. A score of 0 meant that the participant viewed both partners as equally responsible for the relationship. We used a repeated measures factorial ANOVA to assess differences in perceived responsibility based on younger partner age and partner age differences. In order to address violations of sphericity, we used a Greenhouse-Geisser correction for this analysis. We found that as younger partners’ age increased, they were perceived as more equally responsible for sexual relationships with older partners, $F(1.70, 117.37) = 26.65, p < .001$. Participants also viewed younger partners as significantly less responsible for sexual relationships as the partner age gap increased, $F(1.19, 81.81) = 48.11, p < .001$. No interaction effect was found between younger partner age and age gap, $F(5.43, 374.53) = 2.00, p = .073$. Figure 1 illustrates the difference in responsibility scores as a function of younger partner age and partner age difference.

Using a Bonferroni correction to address alpha inflation, we also conducted pairwise comparisons to determine whether responsibility difference scores for two-year, four-year, and
six-year age gaps were significantly different from one another, as well as the scores for 13- to
17-year-old younger partners. The responsibility difference scores for two-year ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.99$), four-year ($M = 1.26, SD = 1.18$), and six-year ($M = 1.58, SD = 1.28$) age gaps were
significantly different from one another, $p < .001$. There were no significant differences between
the responsibility difference scores for 13-year-olds ($M = 1.36, SD = 1.27$), 14-year-olds ($M = 1.43, SD = 1.19$), and 15-year-olds ($M = 1.34, SD = 1.14$); they were viewed as having similarly
low levels of responsibility for their relationships. Sixteen-year-olds’ responsibility difference
scores ($M = 1.10, SD = 1.15$) were significantly different from all other age groups except for 13-
year-olds’, $p = .097$. Participants perceived 17-year-olds to be the closest to having equal
responsibility ($M = 0.52, SD = 1.15$), and this age group was significantly different from other
younger partners, $p < .001$.

**Discussion**

The current study investigated how people’s perceptions of adolescents’ maturity and
responsibility in sexual relationships are impacted by the younger partner’s age and the age
difference between the partners. Although our examination of maturity is exploratory, our
results demonstrated a steady trend such that perceptions of the younger partner’s maturity
increased as the adolescent approached 17 and decreased as the partner age gap widened. These
trends may be explained by the public’s belief that people become more mature as they age
(Deković et al., 1997). These same beliefs might lead people to believe that there is more
potential for older partners to take advantage of a younger partner. The fact that perceptions of
maturity changed as a function of both younger partner age and age gap suggest that participants
are considering not just whether an adolescent is mature enough to decide to have sex, but also
whether the adolescent is mature enough to safely negotiate a relationship with an older partner (e.g., withstand pressure, assert their preferences, etc.).

Most of our hypotheses about perceptions of responsibility were confirmed. There was a significant positive relationship between younger partner age and perceptions of responsibility for the relationship. Additionally, younger partners were perceived as significantly less responsible for relationships as partner age gap increased. These results, similar to those regarding maturity, might be due to the belief that older individuals are more responsible than younger ones (Deković et al., 1997). However, our hypothesis of an interaction between younger partner age and age difference was not supported. Although these results could be a statistical anomaly, the characteristics of the participants might be driving the lack of significant interaction. Parents may be particularly focused on the younger partner because they are thinking about their own adolescent child and their desire to protect them (Feldman & Quatman, 1988). Parents also believe that developmental tasks should occur later in adolescence than teenagers do (Deković et al., 1997; Feldman & Quatman, 1988), particularly in regard to the appropriate age for an adolescent to have a boyfriend or girlfriend (Deković et al., 1997). In this defensive mindset, our parent participants might have perceived the younger partner as less responsible for sexual relationships regardless of the older partner’s age, which could have resulted in the overall lack of an interaction effect.

Our pairwise comparisons of responsibility scores by younger partner age and age difference were generally consistent with our hypotheses. All age gaps were significantly different from one another, which supported our hypothesis that participants’ perceptions of younger partners’ responsibility for these relationships would decrease as the partner age gap increased. In regard to younger partner age, participants did not view all age groups as
significantly different from one another. Most of these findings reflected the trend described above: younger adolescents (13- to 15-year-olds) were seen as equally less responsible for relationships with older partners, and 17-year-olds were seen as significantly more responsible than any other younger partner age group.

However, we were surprised that 16-year-olds’ responsibility difference scores were significantly different from all other younger partner age groups’ except for 13-year-olds. Although this finding could be a spurious effect unique to this dataset, it may also be the result of victim blaming. This phenomenon, in which a person holds a victim at least partly responsible for their own victimization, appears to stem from psychological needs for justice and control over negative circumstances (Howard, 1984). Our findings might be the result of participants perceiving younger adolescents that date older partners as purposefully delinquent and therefore more equally responsible for the relationship. A pilot study conducted in our lab yielded similar results: participants rated the younger partner in a statutory relationship with a partner six years older as more responsible for that relationship than one with a partner two years older. Although firm conclusions about the pervasiveness of victim blaming cannot be drawn without more detailed research, this attribution might be the reason that 13-year-olds were considered as responsible for relationships with older partners as 16-year-olds.

The results of this study contribute to the existing research on perceptions of adolescents’ maturity and responsibility. Although context appears to have an effect on adolescents’ decision-making (e.g., Albert & Steinberg, 2011; van Duijvenvoorde et al., 2010), previous studies have not investigated whether situational factors influence the public’s perceptions of teenagers’ competency (Deković et al., 1997; Feldman & Quatman, 1988). Our study improves upon past research by examining perceptions of adolescents’ responsibility and maturity in the
context of sexual relationships, as well as how specific relationship factors affect these views. We also used a national sample, which increases the likelihood that our data is representative of the larger U.S. population. Our study provides lawmakers with useful information about the types of sexual relationships that are troublesome to the public. Legislatures across the country could use our findings to develop more uniform statutory rape and sexual consent laws that have clearer and more discriminating definitions for appropriate adolescent sexual behavior.

As with all exploratory studies, our study has some limitations that future researchers could improve upon. Due to our relatively small sample size, we could not make reliable comparisons between different demographic groups (e.g., gender, race, etc.) to determine if these variables affected their perceptions. Since our lack of interaction between younger partner age and partner age difference could be the result of parental status, it would have been particularly beneficial to be able to assess differences between parents and young adults. Additionally, our participants were existing users of Mechanical Turk. The members of this site may share unique characteristics unaccounted for in this study, so we cannot be fully confident of the generalizability of our findings to the general population.

Ideally, future research will address the limitations of this study and further expand our knowledge of this topic. By analyzing the effects of participant traits like race and education on perceptions of adolescents’ responsibility and maturity, studies could determine the degree of public consensus among these perceptions. Future research should also examine perceptions of older partners to determine the factors that lead an older partner to be seen as more innocuous or predatory. Finally, researchers should investigate the actual dynamics of adolescents’ relationships with older partners to find out whether people’s perceptions of these relationships reflect reality. These types of studies could provide information that would further help
lawmakers create statutory rape and sexual consent laws that focus on the more problematic relationships.

Although further research will be more instructive, the current study indicates a general trend: there is a perceived increase in younger partners’ maturity and responsibility in sexual relationships with older partners as their age increases and the partner age gap decreases. People seem to consider contextual factors when assessing adolescents’ relationships with older partners. These findings, in addition to other work on this issue, suggest that statutory rape and sexual consent laws in at least some states may need to be revisited. Since people seem more concerned about relationships between young teenagers and much older partners, statutory rape laws should target these relationships. By adopting laws that are harsh on much older partners along with Romeo and Juliet laws, states could both protect younger adolescents and prevent older adolescents who are in relationships with slightly younger partners from being criminalized. These legal changes would reflect people’s perceptions of appropriate adolescent sexual relationships, which would make the laws legitimate and more likely to be followed (Tyler, 2006). Additionally, by considering the ways in which age and partner age differences affect people’s perceptions of teenagers’ relationships, lawmakers would be able to develop laws that please their constituents (Salerno et al., 2010). From many different perspectives, the incorporation of perceptions of adolescents’ sexual relationships with older partners into statutory rape laws appears to be beneficial.
References


U.S. Const., amend. XXVI, § 1.


### Appendix

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<th>Younger partner is:</th>
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<th>Do you think the younger partner is mature enough to consent to sex with the older partner?</th>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>19</td>
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<td>No</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1

*Percent of Participants that Perceived Younger Partner as Mature Enough to Consent*

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<th>Age Gap</th>
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<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
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<td>28.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>68.0</td>
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<td>7.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>44.0</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>28.9</td>
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</table>
Figure 1. Mean responsibility difference scores as a function of younger partner age and partner age gap. Responsibility difference scores range from -3 to 3 where 3 = older partner fully responsible, -3 = younger partner fully responsible, and 0 = both partners equally responsible.