The Impact of Perpetrator Gender on Male and Female Police Officers’ Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse

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Research in America, Canada and England indicates that professionals involved in the investigation of child sexual abuse cases have differing perceptions of seriousness, punishment and impact on the child, based on the professional’s gender and the perpetrator’s gender. The aim of this study was to investigate if such gender effects are prevalent in Australian child-abuse investigators, specifically the police. To assess this, 361 Australian police officers responded to a self-report questionnaire relating to a vignette describing child sexual abuse. The questions examined the police officer’s perception of seriousness of the incident, the police action they would take and the perceived impact on the child. The vignette described the perpetrator as either male or female, with 172 police officers responding to the female perpetrator vignette and 189 responding to the male perpetrator vignette. The results indicated that, unlike overseas research findings in this area, the police officers’ gender did not influence their perception of child sexual abuse, their perceived impact on the child, or the police action they would take. The gender of the perpetrator did however influence these factors, with a gender bias in favour of the female perpetrator. This finding is consistent with overseas research and is a factor that those working in the area should be aware of to ensure incidents involving female perpetrators are not underestimated or dismissed.

The abuse of children is not new in society with historical and police reports in the early 1800s documenting horrific infantile mutilation and sexual abuse, in which boys were castrated for the purpose of enhancing adult anal sexual pleasure and young daughters were loaned to adult acquaintances as gestures of kindness (Oates, 1990). Despite these events it was not until 1874, after the United States courts used the Cruelty to Animals Act to remove a child from her parents, that society identified the need to protect children. This led to the formation in Australia of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1894 (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1989). However, it was not until 1962 that society was really forced to confront the issue when the emotion-provoking term, ‘the battered child syndrome’ (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1962, p. 17) was used to describe adults harming children. This term was the impetus for public and political attention resulting in the development of legislation to protect children during the past three decades (Cruise, Jacobs, & Lyons, 1994). The aim of this child protection legislation is to provide protection for children from sexual acts involving genital
exposure, touching, fondling, oral sex, digital sex, vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse (Budai, 1995; Cashmore & Bussey, 1988; Oates, 1990), and commercial sexual exploitation (South Australian Government, 1999).

In Australia today, child sexual abuse is a high profile crime with sensationalist newspaper headings, such as ‘Internet chat site used to seduce boy, 14’ (Steene, 2002, p. 48) and ‘church child sexual abuse inquiry’ (James, 2002, p. 7), frequently appearing. Articles such as these stimulate public attention and help create and maintain the society’s stereotype of men as perpetrators of this crime. However, that stereotype is not correct. While the majority of perpetrators are male, there is evidence of sexual abuse by females. After reviewing the literature, Wakefield and Underwager (1991) concluded that estimates of females being the perpetrator of child sexual abuse ranged from 4% to 24%. In an Australian study examining the prevalence of child sexual abuse Goldman and Goldman (1988) surveyed 991 first-year social science students from universities and postsecondary colleges in rural and metropolitan Victoria about their childhood sexual experiences. Twenty-eight percent of the females and nine percent of the males reported being victims of child sexual abuse by an adult perpetrator. Females were identified as the abuser by 5% of the female victims and 52% of the male victims. The figure for the male victims is considerably higher than the estimate reported by Wakefield and Underwager (1991), but they are consistent with data obtained from studies on rapists. In a study of 83 convicted adult rapists from various correctional centres in the United States, Petrovich & Templer (1984) reported that 59% disclosed being sexually abused as children by women. Similarly, 50% of 84 sexual assault prisoners from seven Australian correctional settings reported being abused by a woman (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996).

These retrospective reports of abuse by a female are considerably higher than actual reports of abuse by a female. This is not entirely surprising, however. Western society generally does not acknowledge the fact that females may engage in child sexual abuse. The most obvious example of this is the fact that in New Zealand it is not an offence for a women to have sex with underage boys, whereas it is for adult men (Michael Cowley and Wires, 2003). Given this sort of attitude, it is not surprising that victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse are reluctant to report the abuse, particularly in the case of male victims who may fear being ridiculed. In addition, victims would probably realise that females have the ability to explain away the abuse within daily activities of bathing and caring for children, increasing the likelihood that the victim will not be believed (Banning, 1989; Johnson, 1989).

An additional factor that may contribute to the underreporting of child sexual abuse by females is that the societal bias may also be displayed by professionals working in the area. In other words, it is possible that police, social workers, teachers, and so on either do not recognise the problem or they minimise it. Consequently relatively few reports are acted on. Little research has been done on this issue but that which has been undertaken, suggests that a gender bias does exist. In a study in England, Hetheron and Beardsall (1998) examined the attitudes of social workers and police officers who had been involved in child abuse cases within the previous 12 months. Four vignettes were presented to each professional. The first part of the vignette varied the identity and gender of the perpetrator, gender of the victim, the activity during which the abuse occurred and the way the child described the abuse. The second part of the vignette varied on the perpetrator’s reaction to the allegation of abuse. Hetheron and Beardsall (1998) found professionals regarded child sexual abuse perpetrated by females as less serious than abuse perpetrated by males, with imprisonment being regarded as more appropriate for male perpetrators. The identification of the act as child sexual abuse was also considered more appropriate when the perpetrator was male. These results are consistent with those of Eisenberg, Owens and Dewey (1987) who found that nurses, health workers and medical students considered father/daughter and father/son incest relationships to be more serious and have a greater impact on the child than mother/daughter and mother/son relationships. The results are also consistent with the finding that American college students viewed a relationship between a male teacher/female student as more serious than a relationship between a female teacher/male student (Smith, Fromuth, & Morris, 1997).

It is not only the gender of the perpetrator that influences judgements about child sexual abuse, but also the gender of the observer. A tendency for women to view child sexual abuse more seriously than men has been identified in studies on caregivers in an English juvenile assessment centre
(Harnett, 1997), in health workers, nurses and medical students in America (Eisenberg et al., 1987; Trute, Atkins, & McDonald, 1992), psychologists, psychiatrists, paediatricians and counsellors in America (Attias & Goodwin, 1985), police officers (Trute et al., 1992) and paediatricians, mental health workers, teachers and college students (Hazard & Rupp, 1986). In addition, there is a tendency for women to see the impact of the abuse on the victim as being greater than males do (Eisenberg et al., 1987; Johnson, Owens, Dewey, & Eisenberg, 1990). In the Australian context, it has been found that women are more concerned about child abuse than men (Wilson, Walker, & Mukherjee, 1986). The gender of the observer may also interact with the gender of the perpetrator. In Heretorn and MacSall’s (1998) study, the gender of the perpetrator had the greatest impact on male officers and least on female officers. Male police officers were significantly harsher on male perpetrators than female perpetrators in relation to punishment and male police favoured imprisonment of the female perpetrator significantly less than female police.

Gender differences in the perception of child abuse are not surprising given that research indicates that females have a greater helping and caring desire for those in need than males. This behaviour has been identified in females’ desire to assist suicidal patients (Wellman & Wellman, 1986) and in their tendency to show warmth and support for a person in need, such as a victim of child sexual abuse (Wellman, 1993). As well as this need to care for victims, Eisenberg et al. (1987) have identified that females also feel empathy toward victims of child sexual abuse as they identify with the victim and take the crime personally. Attias and Goodwin (1985) have also proposed that men may minimise the seriousness, extent and nature of child sexual abuse as a protective strategy to avoid confronting and acknowledging this disturbing crime.

Explanations for perpetrator gender bias in favour of females focus on social learning, attribution and cognitive dissonance theories. According to these theories, people use a combination of their knowledge of child sexual abuse with their own gender identity in forming their perceptions on the topic. Part of the source of knowledge acquisition in this area comes from publicity such as ‘most sexual offenders are men’ (Wakefield & Underwager, 1991, p. 43). This publicity reinforces society’s gender schema of men being forceful, controlling, dominating, punitive, aggressive and violent (Slevin & Balswick, 1980). It also conflicts with the concept of females as perpetrators of this crime, as according to society’s schema for women they are gentle, affectionate, warm, nurturing and love children (Slevin & Balswick, 1980). Women, according to this gender schema, are not expected to be aggressive and are expected to be neutral in relation to sexual desires other than towards their partner (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996). Therefore, when a woman sexually abuses a child it conflicts with society’s gender schema, thus causing cognitive dissonance.

According to Festinger (1957), the dissonance that occurs when two cognitions are opposite is unpleasant and leads to psychological attempts to reduce it through modification, addition or alteration of the cognitions. Within the scope of female perpetrated child abuse this can occur through denial by labelling the behaviour of the female perpetrator as just ‘inappropriate affection’ (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996, p. 2) or ‘women are naturally physically closer to children’ (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996, p. 2). In extreme cases where sexual abuse between a child and female perpetrator cannot be denied, attempts are made to justify the female’s action by adding to the cognition through the introduction of another element of blame. This is done by linking the action with that of a male counterpart to minimise the female’s involvement, trying to identify some form of mental illness as the cause of her behaviour, or blaming another source, such as the child. An example of this occurred in the case of an American 35-year-old female teacher who was pregnant to her 13-year-old student, where media articles focused on blaming the youth, thus minimising the role of the female adult (Faulkner, 1997). In extreme cases where all other strategies fail to reduce the psychological conflict, anger takes over and the female perpetrator is labelled as being evil and different from other females, such as in the Myra Hindley case in England in 1965 (Saradjian & Hanks, 1996).

The lack of child sexual abuse research in Australia makes it difficult to assess if gender differences are an important factor for Australian professionals and if these theoretical explanations are applicable in Australia. This lack of research is actually extremely surprising, given that in 1995 the estimate of child sexual abuse in Australia was one in four girls and one in eight boys (Scott, 1995) and the current estimate in America is one.
in three girls and one in six boys, which is still considered to be an underestimate of the true extent (Faulkner, 2002). Even if sceptics dismiss these estimates as overstatements, the fact that during the 2000–2001 financial year 3794 confirmed child sexual abuse cases were recorded by Australian child protection agencies gives rise for concern (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2002). This is especially so, when two out of five of these children will suffer some type of short-term effect from the abuse, such as fear, anger, withdrawal (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986) and sexually inappropriate behaviour (Friedrich & Reams, 1987), and one out of five will suffer catastrophic long-term consequences of depression, suicidal behaviour, mental illness (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986) and adult sexual dysfunction (Harty, Davis, & Burke, 1994). These facts highlight the need for knowledge on the part of Australian professionals working in this area, particularly for those professionals who are involved in decision-making processes for these matters, such as the police.

Police officers make decisions using police discretionary powers which enable the officers to decide what laws to enforce, when to enforce them, where and how to enforce them (Delattre, 1989). Factors which operate in this decision-making process include the gravity of the offence, feedback from the legal system, the officer’s attitudes, morals, peer pressure, training, media (Gallagher, 1979), concerns of the public, the needs of the victim (Brereton & Cole, 1988), and age, gender, race, social class and attitude of the perpetrator (Herith, 1991). The types of discretionary powers available to police range from no action being taken to arrest with bail refused.

From the research of professionals overseas and the theoretical framework, it is possible that an interaction between gender-stereotyped attribution biases and police discretionary powers could potentially influence who gets prosecuted for child abuse offences and who does not. This could result in more males appearing before the court than females, which in turn affects statistics and public opinion about the gender of those who abuse. Possibly of more concern, however, is the influence on the victims of female-perpetrated abuse, who through the interaction of gender-stereotyped bias and police discretionary powers may continue to be abused and traumatised by the lack of response (Hetherton & Beardsall, 1998). These factors highlight the need for research in this area and hence the need for this study on the influence of the police officer’s gender and perpetrator’s gender on the investigation of child sexual abuse matters in Australia. Based on overseas research and theoretical explanations for gender differences the following hypotheses were postulated:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Female police officers will rate child sexual abuse as more serious than male officers, will take more severe police action than male officers and will view the impact on the child as being greater than will male officers.

- **Hypothesis 2:** Police officers will perceive male-perpetrated child sexual abuse as more serious than female-perpetrated abuse, will take more severe action in relation to male perpetrators, and the impact on the child will be perceived to be greater when the perpetrator is male.

- **Hypothesis 3:** Male police officers will view male-perpetrated child sexual abuse more negatively than female-perpetrated abuse and female police will view female-perpetrated abuse more negatively than male police.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 372 police officers from an Australian police department voluntarily responded to a mail questionnaire distributed to a randomly selected stratified sample of 500 male members and 500 female members. Eleven of the returned questionnaires had significant data missing and were not included in the study, leaving a sample of 361; a return rate for female participants of 40% (201) and 32% (160) for males. There were no significant differences in the return rate according to the gender of the perpetrator described in the vignette or in the gender of the officers responding to each vignette.

The participants consisted of 56% female and 44% male officers, of which 74% (268) had a majority of their policing experience in a metropolitan area (159 female and 109 male) and 26% (93) in country regions (42 female and 52 male). Half of the participants reported having children (74 female officers and 107 male officers). The mean age of the female officers was 31.23 years with the youngest officer being 20 years and the oldest 54 years. The mean age for the male officers
was 36.82 years with the youngest officer being 19 years and the oldest 57 years.

Thirty-four per cent of the police officers had been employed for less than 3 years and 20% had been employed for longer than 20 years. The mean job experience for the female officers was 8 years (96.6 months), with a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 29.5 years (354 months). The mean job experience for the male officers was 11 years (133.72 months), with a minimum of 3 months and a maximum of 35 years (425 months). In relation to experience with child sexual abuse cases, 26% of the police officers had no experience, 49% were exposed to between one and 15 cases, 20% to between 20 and 100 cases and 5% to over 100 cases. The mean number of child sexual abuse cases was 38 cases for female officers and 40 for male officers.

Materials
A vignette briefly describing the hypothetical sexual abuse of a child was used in this study. It was modelled on the one used by Hetherington and Beardsall (1998) in their study on the gender differences of social workers and police in England. As per their vignette and previous research in the area, the perpetrator's social status and history were not mentioned, to minimise the risk of this influencing professional perception (Kelley, 1990). The relationship was maintained as that of a babysitter, as anecdotal surveys indicate this is a common relationship (Glaser & Spence, 1990). The nature of touching the genital area was also maintained from Hetherington and Beardsall's (1998) vignette, as retrospective surveys indicate this is the most common form of child sexual abuse (Goldman & Goldman, 1988). It is an extremely serious offence, but less confronting than genital penetration offences. Unlike Hetherington and Beardsall's (1998) vignette where the child was described as being nine years old, this vignette changed the age to ten years to coincide with the age that research indicates police tend to be more prone to take some action (Bretton & Cole, 1988; Hornick & Bolithio, 1992) and the most common age of abuse (Goldman & Goldman, 1988). A major change from the Hetherington and Beardsall's (1998) vignette was that in the vignette the gender of the child was not stated. This decision was based on the fact that some research indicates greater punishment if the victim was female (Kelley, 1990). The use of a gender-neutral vignette is also consistent with the vignette used in Trute et al.'s (1992) research in this area.

In the vignette the independent variable of the perpetrator's gender was manipulated by changing the name of the adult and gender references. Half of the participants (250 men and 250 women) received the vignette describing the adult perpetrator as a male neighbour called Max and the other half (250 men and 250 women) received the vignette describing the perpetrator as a female neighbour called Mary.

Three questions relating to the vignette were used to measure the officers' responses. The first question required the participants to indicate on a rating scale how seriously they viewed the abuse described in the vignette. A 9-point scale was used, ranging from not at all serious to extremely serious. The next question asked what police action they would take against the perpetrator of the abuse using a 5-point scale ranging from no action to arrest with bail being refused. The third question asked about their perception of the impact that the abuse would have on the child. Again, a 9-point scale was used with the anchors being no impact and severe impact. Participants were also requested to supply demographic details regarding gender, age, length of service, number of child sexual abuse cases, whether they have more country/city police exposure and if they have children.

Procedure
The initial draft of the vignette was sent to senior child abuse experts in the police service, police prosecutors and a dozen selected officers for feedback. From this feedback the vignettes were further modified so the perpetrator's name and gender appeared twice in each vignette, to ensure the gender of the perpetrator was obvious to the participant. It was also noted that no respondents during this feedback commented on the lack of the identification of the child's gender.

A stratified sample of 500 male police officers and 500 female police officers was selected from the service’s employment register. Stratified sampling was used to ensure an adequate sample of gender representation, as female police officers constitute a relatively small proportion of all the officers. These groups were further randomly divided into two groups of 250 male and 250 female police officers, to enable an equal number of male and female police officers to receive each vignette.
Utilising the internal dispatch postal system the relevant research material was sent to the participants in their respective work areas. The material consisted of a covering letter, demographic questionnaire and one of the vignettes. The covering letter stated the purpose of the research as examining police views on child sexual abuse and that while the research was not commissioned by the department, it had the department’s approval. It was explained that participation was voluntary and the completion of the questionnaire should not take any longer than five minutes. To maximise the reliability of the results the instructions requested participants not consult with other police officers prior to or during the completion of the questionnaire and to answer the questions in the order presented. The participants were provided with the researcher’s contact details if they required further information on the topic or had concerns. Arrangements had been made with the welfare section for the researcher to refer any participants citing problems arising from participating in the research.

The completed surveys were returned via reply paid envelopes to Charles Sturt University to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. No formal consent was required as the responses were anonymous and participants implied consent by completing and returning the questionnaire.

**Results**

Using SPSS, the data were initially screened for outliers with 12 outliers being identified; 4 in each of the dependant variables. After examination of these participants’ responses, including demographic details, these outliers were not considered to be caused by random guessing or lack of interest, but to be the legitimate responses of the participants and thus a true part of the sample. Given the large sample size in this study, a few extreme scores were not considered unreasonable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) and as the variances in this study were not disproportionately influenced, the outliers were retained in the sample.

The perceptions of seriousness and of impact, and the police action scores showed a marked negative skew as most respondents viewed the incident as being serious, considered the impact on the child to be great and would take more severe actions. In view of this, the data were transformed using both the reflect and square root and the logarithmic procedure recommended by Tachnick and Fidell (2001). Neither of these transformations resulted in a significant improvement in normality and hence the original skewed data set was used. Although normality is an assumption of ANOVA, Howell (1997) states that ‘analysis of variance is a very robust statistical procedure’ (p. 321) and indicates that violation of normality is acceptable if all populations have a similar shape. In this study all the scores of the various populations were negatively skewed, thus making the violation of normality acceptable.

The correlation between the three dependent variables of seriousness, police action and impact on the child were calculated using Pearson product–moment correlations. Significant positive relationships existed between perception of seriousness and police action \( (r = .544, p < .01) \), perceived impact on the child and police action \( (r = .519, p < .01) \) and perception of seriousness and perceived impact on the child \( (r = .685, p < .01) \).

No significant relationships were found between the number of child sexual abuse cases the officer had been involved in and the officer’s perception of seriousness, impact on the child or the police action they would take. Age of the police officer also was not related to the perception of seriousness of the incident but there was a small negative correlation with action taken \( (r = -.14, p < .01) \) and impact \( (r = -.11, p < .05) \). Similarly, length of service correlated negatively with seriousness \( (r = -.12, p < .05) \), police action taken \( (r = -.156, p < .01) \) and impact \( (r = -.32, p < .05) \). In other words, older and longer-serving police officers tended to be slightly more lenient on the perpetrator and believed there to be less impact on the child than younger officers. The longer-serving police officers also saw the offence as slightly less serious than those who had not been in the service as long. However, all the correlations were small, with none explaining more than two and a half per cent of the variance.

No significant differences were found between city and country officers’ perception of seriousness: \( t(359) = 1.679, p > .05 \), police action \( t(359) = -.666, p > .05 \); and perceived impact on the child: \( t(359) = 5.88, p > .05 \). Similarly no significant differences were found between those with and without children for the perception of seriousness: \( t(359) = 1.211, p > .05 \); police action: \( t(359) = 1.772, p > .05 \); and perceived impact on the child: \( t(359) = -1.80, p > .05 \). Given that the demographic variables had a negli-
Table 1
Mean Ratings of Perceived Seriousness, Perceived impact and proposed Action by Gender of Perpetrator and Gender of Officer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Perpetrator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seriousness</td>
<td>7.97</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>7.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>7.73</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>7.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>7.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>7.12</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>6.66</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>6.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>6.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.13</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>6.74</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>6.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>3.73</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The means and standard deviations for the perceived seriousness, perceived impact and proposed action scores by gender of the perpetrator and officer are shown in Table 1. In order to test the hypotheses, three 2 (gender of perpetrator) × 2 (gender of officer) ANOVAs were performed with an adjusted alpha level (0.0167) to compensate for the increased risk of Type one errors. With regard to perceived seriousness, a significant main effect for the perpetrator’s gender was found ($F(1, 357) = 7.213, p < .01$), with the scores for male perpetrated abuse being higher than that for female perpetrated abuse (Table 1). The effect size for this difference was small ($\eta^2 = .016$), however. Neither the main effect for police officer gender nor the interaction between perpetrators’ gender and police officers’ gender were significant ($F(1, 357) = 1.362, p > .05; F(1, 357) = 2.845, p > .05$ respectively).

In the case of the action that would be taken by the officers, there was again a significant main effect for perpetrator gender ($F(1, 357) = 16.387, p < .01$). As can be seen in Table 1, more stringent action would be taken for the male perpetrator than the female perpetrator. Partial eta square for the main effect of perpetrators’ gender was 0.044, indicating a medium effect size. The main effect for police officer gender and the interaction between perpetrators’ gender and police officers’ gender were not significant ($F(1, 357) = 0.020, p > .05, F(1, 357) = 1.202, p > .05$, respectively).

The results for the perception of impact mirrored those of the previous two analyses. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean score for perceived impact on the child was higher for the male perpetrated abuse ($F(1, 357) = 5.653, p < .01$), although this effect was small ($\eta^2 = .016$). As with the other analyses, the main effect for police officer gender and the interaction between perpetrators’ gender and police officers’ gender were not significant ($F(1, 357) = .275, p > .05, F(1, 357) = .164, p > .05$, respectively).

**Discussion**

Although the female police officers’ mean scores on seriousness, police action and impact on the child were all slightly above that of the males’ mean score, they were not significantly so. Consequently, hypothesis 1 which predicted that female police officers would view child sexual abuse more negatively than the male police officers, was not supported. Similarly, hypothesis 3, which predicted an interaction effect between the police officer’s gender and the perpetrator’s gender, was not supported by the results. However, the results of the study did support hypothesis 2, which predicted that the male-
perpetrated crime would be regarded more negatively than female-perpetrated crime. The male-perpetrated abuse was regarded as significantly more serious, more severe police action was recommended and the perceived impact on the child was greater when the perpetrator was male.

The results relating to the influence of the perpetrator’s gender on the perception of seriousness are consistent with previous research findings involving police and social workers in England (Hetherington & Beardsall, 1998), medical students and nurses in America (Eisenberg et al., 1987) and college students in America (Smith et al., 1997). Similarly, the finding that police use discretionary powers to take more police action against the male perpetrator than the female perpetrator is consistent with Hetherington and Beardsall’s (1998) results. This is not unexpected given the high correlation between perception of seriousness and action taken ($r = .54$). The finding that the impact on the child was regarded as greater when the perpetrator was described as male rather than female is also consistent with Eisenberg et al.’s (1987) results. It is also consistent with society’s schema of males being more aggressive, brutal, assertive and violent than females (Slevin & Blasnick, 1980). This result was also not unexpected given the previous significant findings, as the impact on the child in this study was found to be highly positively correlated to both seriousness and police action. This indicates that the more serious the incident was perceived, the greater the perceived impact on the child and the greater the police action.

While the results relating to the impact of perpetrator’s gender are consistent with previous research, it is important to interpret these findings in the overall context of the findings. Irrespective of the offender’s gender, the police officers perceived child sexual abuse to be serious, to have a substantial impact on the child and identified it as a crime requiring affirmative police action, as indicated by the negative skewness of the scores. In addition, the effect sizes for the differences were not large, indicating that offender gender had a relatively small impact on the perception of child abuse by police.

Comments written by some participants on the questionnaire provide support for cognitive dissonance as a theoretical basis for gender bias in child sexual abuse matters. Twelve participants (ten male, two female) who read the female perpetrator vignette indicated that the touching may be accidental and one of these officers further commented, “Was the carer checking a medical complaint in the child in the genital area?” In contrast, only two officers (one male and one female) commented that the male perpetrator’s touching may possibly have been accidental. These comments are consistent with cognitive dissonance theories by highlighting the need of participants to minimise and justify the act when committed by the female perpetrator to reduce psychological conflict caused by society’s schema of women as nurturing and caring (Saradjan & Hanks, 1996).

The lack of support for hypothesis 1, that the police officer’s gender would influence perceptions, was surprising given the extent of research identifying gender differences in professional groups and the public (Harnett, 1992; Trute et al., 1992; Wellman, 1993). A possible reason for this unexpected result in this study could be attributed to the time difference between the overseas research on police and this study. It is feasible that in the past decade the training of police officers in this area has substantially improved, influencing the police officer’s perception. With no follow-up studies overseas and the lack of research within Australia in this area, it is difficult to confirm this explanation, but it should be considered given that training of professionals has been shown to influence their decisions about what type of child abuse to report (Nightingale & Walker, 1986).

Another issue that may have influenced the results relating to officer gender is that police, unlike social workers, nurses and other professionals, undergo rigorous selection processes which have included psychological testing. These tests are designed to screen applicants and it is possible as a result of this process that police officers have a narrower range of personality differences and emotional qualities than the general population. The finding in this research therefore may be partially attributed to this study focusing solely on police officers and be a reflection of an effective recruiting process.

The lack of support for the hypothesis that there would be an interaction between police gender and perpetrator gender was inconsistent with previous research in this area, which had found professionals were harsher on their own gender (Hetherington & Beardsall, 1998; Kalichman et al., 1990). Given that these studies utilised
other professionals as well as police, it is possible that this study found no difference due to the previously discussed issues of the police recruiting procedure and training.

Given the emotive nature of the topic, it is possible that participants were responding according to socially accepted expectations. This would not account for the perpetrator gender effect as participants received only one vignette. However, a social desirability bias may partially account for the generally high scores participants gave for seriousness, police action and perceived impact on the child in this study. Comments written on the questionnaires by some of the respondents suggest that this was not the case and that they did regard it as serious. Many of these comments reflected a distrust and/or frustration with the legal system. For instance, one female officer with extensive experience commented, ‘Unfortunately many children are in this situation and as an officer it is unfortunate that on many occasions the offender only needs to deny the touch to be let off and the law shows us there is nothing further police can do’. Similarly a male officer commented, ‘The courts will let the child down if there is a prosecution by allowing blood-sucking solicitors for the defence to severely cross-examine the child and make them feel like a liar’. These comments identify that police are aware of the documented difficulties the legal system presents for children and the stress it can cause (Goodman et al., 1992; Saywitz & Nathanson, 1993).

Such disillusionment could lead to desensitisation, as reflected in another officer’s comment that ‘police may view the scenario as minor as they have dealt with this exact scenario to see it thrown out of court or not even proceeded with’. The small negative correlations between length of service and the three independent variables indicates that some, limited, desensitisation may be occurring. However, the fact that no correlation was found between the amount of exposure to child sexual abuse cases and any of the dependant variables suggests that the desensitisation may be more general, reflecting burnout, rather than being a direct effect of having dealt with unsuccessful sexual abuse cases.

In conclusion, the finding in this study of a bias in favour of the female perpetrator, albeit a small one, is important for two reasons. First, such a bias may be reducing the recognition of females as abusers, which in turn assists in the maintenance of gender stereotypes. Secondly, it may allow female abusers to continue to offend against children, thus failing to protect children (Hetheron & Beardsall, 1998). These consequences are extremely concerning. However, given the small effect sizes they are not something that would warrant dramatic legislative or departmental changes. They are simply factors that officers need to be made aware of, possibly during training courses, as knowledge of the potential for this bias may equip officers to carefully assess their decisions and alert supervisors of the need to check decisions made in this area.

References


