

Jurors' Perceptions of Adolescent Sexual Assault Victims Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

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Children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities are especially likely to be sexually abused. Even so, their claims are not likely to be heard in court, possibly because people assume that jurors will not believe them. We tested this assumption in a mock-trial study in which 160 men and women watched videotaped excerpts from an actual trial. As predicted, when the 16-year-old sexual assault victim was portrayed as "mildly mentally retarded" instead of as "having average intelligence," jurors were more likely to vote guilty and had more confidence in the defendant's guilt; considered the victim to be more credible and the defendant to be less credible as witnesses; and rated the victim as more honest, less capable of fabricating the sexual abuse accusation, and less likely to have fabricated the sexual abuse accusation. Men and women were affected similarly by the disability manipulation, but women were generally more pro-prosecution in their case judgments and perceptions than were men. Finally, jurors who had more liberal views toward persons with disabilities were more likely than other jurors to make pro-prosecution judgments on measures of guilt. Implications for psychological theory and the law are discussed.

KEY WORDS: eyewitness testimony; children; adolescents; child sexual abuse; intellectual disability; juror decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Physical evidence and corroborating witnesses are often unavailable in child and adolescent sexual assault trials, leaving jurors struggling to make decisions on the basis of little evidence other than an alleged victim's word (Myers, 1997, 1998). In such cases, jurors' judgments can be influenced by a number of extralegal factors

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such as juror gender and pretrial attitudes (e.g., Gabora, Spanos, & Joab, 1993), and victim characteristics such as race (Bottoms, Davis, & Epstein, in press), age (e.g., Nightingale, 1993), and gender (Quas, Bottoms, Haegerich, & Nysse-Carris, in press). To ensure fair adjudications of cases involving young witnesses, social scientists must identify such factors and investigate their influence on legally relevant judgments.

One victim characteristic that might be particularly influential is intellectual disability (i.e., a disability previously referred to and still labeled by many in the general public as “mental retardation”).⁶ In this study, we examined mock jurors’ perceptions of a teenaged sexual abuse victim’s credibility as a function of whether or not she was portrayed as having an intellectual disability. We also explored juror gender differences in perceptions of the victim and case judgments, and whether jurors who have liberal attitudes toward people with disabilities differ from others in their reactions to the victim and the case.

Sexual Abuse of People Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

Adults and children with intellectual disabilities are at higher risk for sexual abuse than are other persons (Friedrich & Boriskin, 1978; Sobsey, 1994, 1997; Verdugo, Bermejo, & Fuertes, 1995; Westcott & Jones, 1999). Although persons with disabilities sometimes testify about their abuse in court (e.g., *Hawaii v. Gonsalves*, 1985; *Illinois v. Spencer*, 1983; *Louisiana v. Peters*, 1986; *Michigan v. Karelse*, 1985), their claims are unlikely to be reported to authorities, acted on by authorities if reported, or prosecuted in court (Kebbell & Hatton, 1999; McNulty, Kissi-Deborah, & Newsom-Davies, 1995; Sobsey & Doe, 1991; Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1993; Williams, 1995). This could contribute to their vulnerability (Perlman, Ericson, Esses, & Isaacs, 1994).

Lowered rates of legal action might result from two types of assumptions among persons who could report and/or investigate the abuse. First, it might be assumed that persons with intellectual disabilities cannot be accurate eyewitnesses (Kebbell & Hatton, 1999; Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1993). In fact, mental retardation is associated with basic memory deficits (Kail, 1990), increased suggestibility in eyewitness testimony tasks (Perlman et al., 1994), and less knowledge of legal terminology (Ericson & Perlman, 2001). Even so, Seidman (2000) found that persons with mental retardation can accurately report past events involving sexual information and resist false suggestions about sexual abuse. Dent (1986) suggests that with nonleading questioning, children with mild mental retardation might not necessarily be poorer witnesses than other children. Second, it might be assumed that the allegations (regardless of their actual accuracy) will not be believed either by authorities who investigate cases or by jurors who will eventually hear the testimony in a court of law. Will jurors believe alleged victims with intellectual disabilities, particularly children and adolescents?

⁶We endorse the use of terminology such as “persons with intellectual disabilities” as opposed to phrases such as “mentally handicapped persons” and “mentally retarded persons.” Therefore, we use this terminology throughout our paper when editorially feasible, except when we discuss the research of other authors and it is meaningful to retain their original terminology. Also, we used the label “mentally retarded” in our experimental materials for reasons explained in the Methods section.

Perceptions of Nondisabled Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Victims

We know of no research on jurors' perceptions of sexual abuse victims with intellectual disabilities. Research on adults' perceptions of nondisabled victims indicates that young child witnesses are perceived as more credible than older adolescents (older than 12 or 13) and adults. Why? Miller and Burgoon (1982) proposed that competence and trustworthiness underlie witness credibility. Goodman, Golding, and Haith (1984), and Bottoms and Goodman (1994) theorized that as compared to older children and adults, young children are generally perceived to be low on competence (cognitive ability, resistance to suggestion), yet high on trustworthiness (honesty, sincerity, innocence; Leippe, Brigham, Cousins, & Romanczyk, 1989; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1987; Yarmey & Jones, 1983). They suggested that the relative salience of these dimensions in a particular case would determine a child witness' credibility. In cases highlighting witness competence, such as cases in which children are bystander witnesses and must remember many details accurately, younger children are perceived as less credible than older victims (e.g., Goodman, Golding, Helgeson, Haith, & Michelli, 1987; Leippe & Romanczyk, 1989, Experiment 2). In cases highlighting sincerity and honesty as opposed to cognitive competence, child witnesses are generally viewed as no less credible than adults (e.g., Ross, Miller, & Moran, 1987).

Bottoms and Goodman (1994) assert that honesty and sincerity are highlighted more than cognitive ability in many child sexual abuse cases. They found that jurors attribute credibility to young child sexual abuse victims because they viewed them as honest and trustworthy, but also sexually naive, lacking the knowledge and cognitive capacity to fabricate sexual encounters. Young children are considered unlikely to possess capacities that lower adult rape victims' credibility, such as previous sexual experience, sexual provocativeness, and ability to give meaningful consent (e.g., Borgida & Brekke, 1985; Brownmiller, 1975). Increasing age is accompanied by decreasing perceptions of sexual naivete and honesty, increasing perceptions of cognitive capacity, and in turn, raised suspicions regarding a child's capacity and propensity to lie about sex acts, and lowered perceived credibility. Many studies support this theory, finding that younger child sexual abuse victims are perceived more favorably than older child or adult victims (e.g., Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Brigham, 1998; Corder & Whiteside, 1988; Duggan et al., 1989; Finkelhor, 1984; Gabora et al., 1993; Nightingale, 1993; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984; Zellman, 1992; but see McCauley & Parker, 2001, who found no age differences).

Perceptions of Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Victims Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

We use this theory to understand the credibility of sexual abuse victims with intellectual disabilities. On the one hand, like young children, persons with disabilities are judged negatively in terms of intellectual capacity and logical ability (Farina, Thaw, Felner, & Hust, 1976; Gibbons, Sawin, & Gibbons, 1979; Gottlieb & Corman, 1975; Williams, 1986). In a sexual abuse case, this could contribute to increased perceived victim credibility; that is, jurors might doubt that intellectually disabled victims

could fabricate false charges. On the other hand, however, persons with intellectual disabilities are perceived favorably on traits such as honesty (Gottlieb & Corman, 1975; Williams, 1986), kindness and morality (Gottlieb & Corman, 1975), likeability and work ethic (Gibbons et al., 1979), and cheerfulness, lovingness, and helpfulness (Williams, 1986). Thus, like children, persons with intellectual disabilities are viewed negatively in terms of cognitive abilities, but positively in terms of trustworthiness and honesty—traits that are generally more important than is cognitive ability to jurors in child sexual abuse cases, and traits that lead to increased perceived credibility.

Further, like young children, disabled children and even teenagers might be considered sexually naive in ways that would preclude the fabrication of false sexual abuse accusations. Available research, surprisingly limited and often dated, indicates that adults with mild or moderate mental retardation do have basic sexual knowledge (Baroff, 1986) and engage in a similar range of sexual behaviors as nondisabled people (Monat-Haller, 1992; Scotti, Slack, Bowman, & Morris, 1996; Timmers, Ducharme, & Jacob, 1981), but that adolescents (aged 14–17 years) are not well-informed about sexuality (Brantlinger, 1985). Some research suggests that adults with intellectual disabilities are perceived as sexually innocent (Blatt, 1987). Other work indicates that the public harbors a general discomfort with disabled persons' sexuality (Scotti et al., 1996) and sometimes considers them to be sexually deviant (Antonak, Fiedler, & Mulick, 1989) and sexually unmanageable (Bernstein, 1990). We know of no research exploring general perceptions about the sexuality of disabled children and adolescents, but they are probably considered to be sexually naive, for the same reasons that nondisabled youth are considered innocent. Further, such assumptions are likely to persist at older ages (even young adulthood) for disabled as compared to nondisabled children.

Therefore, we reasoned that the perceived credibility of youth with intellectual disabilities would not suffer compared to the perceived credibility of nondisabled victims. In fact, teenaged witnesses with disabilities might even be perceived as more credible than their same-aged nondisabled counterparts, whose credibility might be suspect because of assumptions that they have the cognitive capacity and sexual knowledge to fabricate sexual abuse charges.

We found only two studies examining perceptions of sexual activity involving adolescents with intellectual disabilities. Podell, Kastner, and Kastner (1996) examined undergraduate women's reactions to vignettes describing an explicit sexual encounter between a 15-year-old girl and boy. When the girl and boy were both labeled as from "a special class for students with mental retardation in a local high school," as opposed to simply from "a local high school," they were both considered less responsible for the sexual behavior. In another study factorially crossing the labeling of the boy and girl, Podell, Kastner, and Kastner (1994) also found that the girl was perceived as less responsible when she was portrayed as retarded than when she was not. The disabled boy was also perceived as less responsible, but only when the girl was portrayed as "encouraging" during the encounter. The authors speculated that the girl was perceived as unable to understand the issue of consent and the implications of the encounter. Although these were not legal simulation studies (no legal charges were involved nor did participants assume the role of juror), this work

supports our hypothesis that young sexual abuse victims with intellectual disabilities will be perceived favorably.

Individual Differences in Reactions to Child and Adolescent Sexual Abuse Victims Who Have Disabilities

Attitudes Toward Persons Who Have Intellectual Disabilities

Various preexisting attitudes might influence adults' perceptions of sexual assault victims who have intellectual disabilities. For example, feelings of similarity might increase jurors' positive reactions to victims, just as jurors display a similarity-lenience bias toward defendants who are like themselves (e.g., Amato, 1979; Kerr, Hymes, Anderson, & Weathers, 1995). Henry, Keys, Jopp, and Balcazar (1996) measured individual differences in the extent to which people perceive persons with mental retardation as like themselves and other members of society in terms of the capacity to have social relationships and life goals, entitlement to basic human rights, and ability to exercise basic self-determination rights and responsibilities. Feelings that disabled persons are dissimilar to others in society are associated with restrictive and exclusionary beliefs about disabled persons' self-determination freedoms and their involvement in mainstream society (Keys, Henry, Horner-Johnson, & Tegart, 2001). We theorized that such feelings of similarity would also be related to perceptions of young sexual abuse victims with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, we predicted that jurors who have liberal views and feel that people with disabilities are similar to others in society would be more likely than other jurors to trust their abuse allegations and make pro-prosecution case judgments. Less liberal attitudes could foster outgroup feelings of prejudice and discrimination (Keys et al., 2001), which might bias jurors against victims with disabilities.

Juror Gender

Juror gender affects perceptions and decisions in child and adolescent sexual assault cases, as it does in adult rape cases (e.g., Borgida & Brekke, 1985). On average, compared to men, women make more pro-prosecution case judgments and have more provictim perceptions in terms of measures such as guilt judgments and victim and defendant credibility ratings (Bottoms et al., in press; Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Brigham, 1998; Duggan et al., 1989; Gabora et al., 1993; Golding, Sanchez, & Segó, 1997; Golding, Segó, Sanchez, & Hasemann, 1995; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000; Isquith, Levine, & Scheiner, 1993; Kovera, Borgida, Gresham, Swim, & Regan, 1993; Lindsay, Ross, Lea, & Carr, 1995; McCauley & Parker, 2001; Quas et al., in press; Schmidt & Brigham, 1996; Swim, Borgida, & McCoy, 1993; see Schutte & Hosch, 1997, for a review). In our study, we also examined the effects of juror gender, predicting that gender differences would replicate and generalize to cases involving victims who have intellectual disabilities. Further, we expected that gender would have a particularly strong effect when the victim was portrayed as intellectually disabled, given the following findings: Gottlieb and Corman (1975) reported that women rated children with mental retardation more favorably on personality traits, such as morality, honesty, and kindness, than did men (but see Gibbons et al., 1979; Weisz, 1981).

Parish, Dyck, and Kappes (1979) found that, compared to women teachers, men teachers expressed significantly more negative attitudes toward children labeled as mentally retarded. Scotti et al. (1996) found that, compared to men college students, women rated persons with mental retardation more favorably (but did not differ in ratings of the acceptability of their sexual behaviors).

OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Our experiment conformed to a 2 (disability status: intellectually disabled or nondisabled) \times 2 (juror gender) between-subjects design. All mock jurors were presented with a case summary of and videotaped testimony from an actual trial involving allegations of sexual abuse made by a 16-year-old girl against her father. The girl was portrayed as either having “average intelligence” or as being “mildly mentally retarded.” Participants rendered a verdict and completed measures of their confidence in the defendant’s guilt; the credibility (believability) of all witnesses; and the victim’s honesty, accuracy, suggestibility, intelligence, ability to fabricate the sexual abuse charge, likelihood of having fabricated the charge, likelihood of having understood the charge, and likelihood that she believed the charge. Participants’ attitudes toward persons with disabilities were measured.

When the victim was portrayed as having a disability, compared to when she was not, we expected that jurors would perceive (a) the victim to be less cognitively capable (less intelligent, less able and less likely to fabricate the charge), but also more accurate, honest, and credible; and (b) the defendant to be less believable and more likely to be guilty. We expected that perceptions of the victim’s credibility would mediate the effects of disability status on guilt judgments. We also predicted that, compared to men, women in both conditions would render significantly more guilty verdicts and make more provictim ratings generally, but that gender differences would be most pronounced in the disabled condition. Finally, we predicted that in cases involving a victim with a disability, jurors with less liberal attitudes toward persons with disabilities would react less favorably toward the victim (i.e., consider her to be less cognitively capable, accurate, credible, naive, and honest) and more favorably toward the defendant (i.e., consider him to be less guilty and more credible) than would other jurors.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 160 undergraduate psychology students (76 women and 84 men) at the University of Illinois at Chicago, a large, urban, ethnically diverse university. They participated in exchange for course credit. All participants were jury-eligible US citizens ($M = 19.7$ years of age, ranging from 18 to 49 years).⁷ There were

⁷We collected ethnicity information for 45% of the sample. The ethnic breakdown for those participants was as follows: 12.5% African American, 36.1% Caucasian, 20.8% Hispanic/Latino, 29.2% Asian American, and 1.4% of other backgrounds. This closely matches the ethnic breakdown of our university’s

42 men and 37 women in the nondisabled condition and 42 men and 39 women in the disabled condition.⁸

Materials

Trial Simulation Materials: Case Summary and Videotaped Testimony

To help ensure the realism of our procedures, participants read a written summary of and watched videotaped testimony from an actual trial involving sexual abuse allegations. The trial originally appeared on Court TV (American Lawyer/Court TV Video Library Service, 1992).⁹ We altered some case facts for the purposes of this study. Specifically, in the actual trial, a teenaged girl was accused of murdering her father. She claimed she shot him in self-defense to protect herself from her father's ongoing sexual abuse. By editing the videotaped testimony to include only the girl's testimony about the alleged sexual abuse and by supplying the jurors with additional case details via the written trial summary, we produced a trial that included no mention of the father's death or the charges against the girl. In our case, the father was the defendant on trial for the sexual abuse of his 16-year-old daughter. There were five witnesses: the alleged victim, the defendant, the defendant's sister (i.e., the alleged victim's aunt), the alleged victim's and defendant's next-door neighbor, and a court-appointed expert (a psychologist). The testimonies of the victim, aunt, and neighbor were presented in both the trial summary and the videotape; the testimonies of the defendant (who was dead and therefore unavailable in the actual trial) and the expert (whom we created for the purposes of our study) were presented only in the written trial summary.

The one-page written summary, which participants read before they viewed the videotape, instructed them to consider all evidence carefully as if they were actual jurors. The summary stated that (a) the defendant was charged with the sexual assault of his daughter with whom he lived alone since his divorce; (b) only one incident of sexual abuse was at issue in the trial; (c) there was no medical evidence of nor eyewitness to the abuse; and (d) the case had originally aired on Court TV (true), but some testimony had not been shown in its entirety on the TV program because of the graphic nature of the testimony (this was a false cover story allowing us to provide more detail in the summary about the sexual encounter than the girl had actually

psychology participant pool generally (11% African American, 43% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic/Latino, 22% Asian American, and 6% other).

⁸In addition to these 160 participants, 17 participants were dropped from the study because they failed manipulation checks. Three participants (from the disabled condition) did not recall the victim's age. Fourteen participants missed a question about the victim's disability status. Of those, 2 participants were from the disabled condition: One indicated that the victim was both mildly and profoundly retarded (rather than just mildly retarded), and one reported not knowing. The remaining 12 participants were from the nondisabled condition: Eleven either did not remember disability status being mentioned in the experimental materials ($N = 8$) or said they did not know ($N = 3$), and 7 of those 11 ventured a guess that she was of normal intelligence. The 12th participant thought the victim was mildly retarded when she was not.

⁹We did not ask participants whether they had viewed this particular Court TV episode, but in another study using a transcript modeled after the same case (Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000), not 1 of over 200 participants had ever heard of this victim or seen that episode. Those participants were similar in all respects to our participants; they simply attended the university at a different time.

given during her videotaped testimony). Then the written summary introduced the testimony of all five witnesses. Specifically, the victim claimed that her father entered her bedroom, threw her on the bed, tore off her panties, and “started rubbing up and down on her chest and rubbed her vagina.” Afterward, she dressed and ran to her neighbor’s house. The neighbor claimed that the girl had stayed with him and his wife on several other occasions after fights with her father, and that the alleged victim asked for help on the night in question. The neighbor described the girl’s distraught emotional condition and her fear that her father would kill her. The defendant’s sister testified that she had never noticed signs of abuse and that her niece was “a hard-to-handle teenager.” The defendant testified that on the night of the alleged incident, he and his daughter argued, but that the argument did not involve physical or sexual contact. He speculated that his daughter fabricated the sexual abuse allegation out of revenge because he had not met all her demands, and that she did not fully understand the implications of the charges. Finally, the expert witness testified that court-ordered testing of the alleged victim and defendant revealed that the girl’s psychological symptoms were consistent with having been sexually abused, and that the defendant was “of average intelligence with no major emotional or psychological problems.”

There were two versions of the written summary to accommodate the manipulation of the victim’s disability status. Specifically, in the disabled condition, (a) the alleged victim was introduced as the defendant’s “16-year-old mildly mentally retarded daughter”; (b) the aunt and the defendant testified that the defendant had experienced parenting difficulties with his “mentally retarded daughter”; and (c) the expert witness testified that the victim was “developmentally delayed, functioning in the mild range of mental retardation.” In contrast, in the nondisabled condition, (a) the alleged victim was introduced simply as the defendant’s “16-year-old daughter”; (b) the aunt and defendant referred to her as “his daughter”; and (c) the psychologist described the victim as “of average intelligence with no major psychological problems.” There were no other differences in the trial summary as a function of condition. Note that we portrayed our victim as “mildly mentally retarded,” using terminology likely to be understood by all our participants. Henry et al. (1996) used the term *mental retardation* in their attitude measures after finding that their participants were unfamiliar with the term *developmental disability*. Also, our portrayal of the teenager as mildly rather than moderately or severely disabled is ecologically valid in light of Verdugo and colleagues’ finding that children with milder intellectual disabilities are at even greater risk for sexual abuse than children who have more obvious disabilities (Verdugo et al., 1995).

All jurors saw the same version of the videotape, which included the testimony of the alleged victim, the aunt, and the next-door neighbor.¹⁰ Each witness gave

¹⁰The teenager in the actual Court TV trial had no known intellectual disability. Yet during the portions of her videotaped testimony about the alleged sexual abuse, the girl appears to be somewhat slow; thus, we felt confident that she could be portrayed as having a mild disability. In fact, as reported in the previous footnote, no participants in the disabled condition incorrectly reported that she was of normal intelligence. Using different girls (one of average intelligence and one who had a real disability) or using one actress playing both these parts could have costly trade-offs. Different girls would differ in many aspects other than strictly intellectual ability. Actresses might not capture disability or victimization realistically. Our methodology allows for the experimental control necessary to draw cause-and-effect conclusions about the consequences of the disability label alone.

approximately 2–3 min of testimony in response to questions from the attorneys during the actual trial. Their testimonies concerned the facts summarized earlier. Specifically, in a very emotional manner, the alleged victim described the incident of sexual abuse, “When I was putting on my underwear and my nightgown, he come into my room and he ripped my panties off and threw me on the bed [sic]. I kept telling him to stop. I kept telling him over and over again, but he wouldn’t.” She testified that afterwards, she grabbed some things and ran to her next-door-neighbor’s house and asked to use his telephone. The neighbor testified that the alleged victim appeared to be “scared to death” when she frantically pounded on his door the night of the alleged attack. He said the girl asked to use the telephone and asked him to drive her to her mother’s house, which he did. En route, she hid under the dashboard of his car because she believed that if her father saw her, he would kill her. The defendant’s sister testified that she had never seen any signs of abuse on her niece, and that if she had seen signs, she would have taken action. She testified that the defendant had told her about problems he had with his daughter, that the girl “was hard to handle and broke his heart constantly,” and that she “asked for more than would be good for a child to have.”

Illinois Pattern Jury Instructions

We employed the actual Illinois Pattern Jury Instructions that would accompany this case if it were tried in the state of Illinois. The instructions described the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof. The legal elements of the crime were given as such, “To sustain the charge of aggravated criminal sexual abuse, the state must prove the following propositions: (1) that the defendant committed an act of sexual conduct with [the alleged victim] (the term ‘sexual conduct’ means any intentional or knowing touching or fondling by the accused, either directly or through the clothing, of the sex organ of the victim, for the purpose of sexual gratification or arousal of the victim or the accused), and (2) that [the alleged victim] was at least 13 years of age but under 17 years of age when the act was committed, and that the defendant was at least five years older than [the alleged victim].”

Case Questionnaire

A series of rating scales included a dichotomous verdict choice (guilty or not guilty), followed by a 10-point measure of confidence-in-verdict, which ranged from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 10 (*very confident*; as in Kassin, Rigby, & Castillo, 1991). Combining the verdict preference and confidence scale resulted in a 20-point degree-of-guilt scale ranging from 1 (*not guilty/very confident*) to 20 (*guilty/very confident*). The believability of the five witnesses and the alleged victim’s perceived honesty in describing the sexual abuse charge, accuracy in describing the sexual abuse charge, suggestibility, and intelligence were measured with separate 6-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all [attribute]*) to 6 (*extremely [attribute]*). Other 6-point scale items tapped perceptions of the victim’s ability to fabricate the sexual abuse charge, ranging from 1 (*not at all capable*) to 6 (*definitely capable*); the likelihood that she did fabricate the abuse charge, ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 6 (*very likely*); whether she understood the abuse charge, ranging from 1 (*no, not at all*) to 6 (*yes, definitely*);

and whether the victim honestly believed the abuse charge, ranging from 1 (*did not believe*) to 6 (*definitely believed*).

Two manipulation-check questions were included at the end of the questionnaire to ensure that participants attended to key victim characteristics. First, participants were asked to indicate whether the alleged victim had been described as “of normal intelligence,” “mildly mentally retarded,” “profoundly mentally retarded,” or “mentally gifted” or to indicate that they “didn’t know” or that the fact was “not mentioned.” Second, even though we did not manipulate victim age, participants were asked to write the alleged victim’s age, because child age reliably affects sexual assault case decisions.

Community Living Attitude Scale, Mental Retardation Form
(CLAS-MR; Henry et al., 1996)

The full CLAS-MR consists of 40 items composing four subscales, only one of which was included in our study: the Similarity subscale. The 12-item Similarity subscale measures the degree to which respondents perceive persons with mental retardation as basically like themselves and other members of society in terms of life goals and human rights. For example, the scale taps perceptions that mentally retarded people are similar in terms of their capacity to have social relationships and life goals, speak for themselves, make key life decisions, be trusted with responsibility, and to value work and strive to be productive members of society. Respondents indicate their agreement or disagreement with scale items on 6-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher values indicate more liberal feelings of similarity. Henry et al. have reported that the subscale has acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$), retest reliability ($r^2 = .75$), and construct validity, and that it is relatively free from social desirability bias in samples of college students and community members (see also Henry, Keys, Balcazar, & Jopp, 1996).

Procedure

The study proceeded in two phases to eliminate the likelihood of the attitude scale influencing decision making, or vice versa. During Phase 1, participants completed the CLAS-MR Similarity subscale along with numerous other unrelated questionnaires during a “mass testing” session with over 300 students. During Phase 2, participants gave informed consent and completed the mock-jury experiment. It is unlikely that participants associated the Similarity subscale with the mock-jury task because Phase 1 included many questionnaires and occurred from 1 to 3 months before Phase 2.

During Phase 2, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two disability conditions (disabled or nondisabled), with juror gender approximately balanced across conditions. Participants completed the experiment in mixed-gender, noninteracting small groups. After participants were informed of the importance of their role as jurors, an experimenter read aloud the Illinois Pattern Jury Instructions. Then, participants individually read the case summary at their own pace. When all participants had finished reading the summary, the group was shown the videotaped testimony.

At the end of the videotape, participants individually completed the case questionnaire. When finished, participants were thanked, debriefed, and given experimental course credit.

RESULTS

First, we present the results of analyses exploring the effect of juror gender and victim disability status on (a) guilt judgments (verdict preference and degree-of-guilt ratings), (b) witness believability ratings, and (c) victim characteristics ratings.¹¹ Then, we present correlational analyses exploring the relation between attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities (the CLAS-MR Similarity subscale) and case judgments and perceptions.

Verdict Preference

The defendant was convicted by 51 of our mock jurors and acquitted by 108 (1 person failed to choose a verdict; see Table 1 for percentages of verdicts as a function of condition). We used logit modeling to analyze our jurors' dichotomous guilt judgments. To test whether the Juror Gender \times Disability Status interaction helped to explain the pattern of verdicts beyond the main effects of juror gender and disability status, we tested two separate models: one including the main effects and interaction term, and one including only the main effects. If the interaction term is necessary to explain the pattern of verdicts, then the model containing the interaction plus main effects should explain significantly more of the variance than the main-effects-only model, and the interaction term should be significant. The model containing the two main effects and the interaction of the two variables was fully saturated; therefore, the analysis testing that model would not produce overall model results. Even so, the analysis indicated that the effect of the interaction term was not statistically significant (parameter estimate = $-.5790$, $z = -.81$, $CI = -1.98$ to $-.82$), but the two main effects were. Therefore, we interpreted the main-effects-only model. The overall main-effects-only model was not significant, $LR \chi^2(1) = 0.65$, $p = .42$, indicating that a model containing only the main effects fit the data well. (When conducting logit analyses, one predicts that a model containing certain variables will adequately represent the patterns found in the data. If the proposed model does represent the data well, the overall model statistic will be nonsignificant.) One-tailed z tests revealed that parameter estimates were statistically significant in the directions we expected for both juror gender ($.8267$, $z = 2.33$, $CI = 0.13$ – 1.52) and victim disability status ($.8429$, $z = 2.36$, $CI = 0.14$ – 1.54). Women (41%) were significantly more likely than men (24%) to cast guilty verdicts. Jurors rendered significantly more guilty verdicts when the victim was portrayed as

¹¹Attributions of responsibility were also measured, as in similar studies (Bottoms et al., in press; Haegerich & Bottoms, 2000). Specifically, the 75 participants who, regardless of their verdict preference, believed that sexual contact occurred rated the degree to which the victim and defendant (separately) wanted, were responsible for, and were to blame for the contact. Analyses of variance revealed that neither juror gender nor disability status significantly affected responsibility judgments.

Table 1. Guilt Judgments as a Function of Victim Disability Status and Juror Gender

Juror gender	Disability status		
	Disabled	Nondisabled	<i>M</i>
Guilt verdicts (%)			
Men	29	19	24
Women	54	28	41
<i>M</i>	41.5	23.5	
Mean degree-of-guilt ratings (<i>SD</i>)			
Men	7.81 (6.87)	6.19 (5.97)	7.00
Women	11.38 (7.25)	7.56 (6.86)	9.55
<i>M</i>	9.53	6.82	

Note. Degree-of-guilt scale ratings ranged from 1 (*not guilty/very confident*) to 20 (*guilty/very confident*).

mentally retarded (41.5%) than when she was portrayed as having average intelligence (23.5%).

Degree-of-Guilt

A 2 (disability status: disabled or nondisabled) \times 2 (juror gender) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) conducted on degree-of-guilt ratings revealed significant main effects of juror gender, $F(1, 155) = 5.32, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, and disability status, $F(1, 155) = 6.47, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ (see Table 1). As predicted, women's degree-of-guilt ratings were higher than men's. Also, more degree-of-guilt was assigned to the defendant when the alleged victim was portrayed as disabled than when she was not.

Witness Credibility (Believability) Ratings

Witness credibility ratings were entered into a 2 (disability status: disabled or nondisabled) \times 2 (juror gender) \times 5 (witness: defendant, victim, aunt, neighbor, and psychologist) mixed ANOVA, with witness varied within participants. A significant main effect of witness, $F(4, 612) = 57.58, p < .001, \eta^2 = .27$, was subsumed by a significant Juror Gender \times Witness Interaction, $F(4, 612) = 4.19, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$, and a significant Disability Status \times Witness Interaction, $F(4, 612) = 3.33, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ (see Table 2). Simple effects analyses of the Juror Gender \times Witness Interaction revealed a significant effect of juror gender on perceived victim and aunt credibility. Specifically, compared to men, women judged the victim to be more credible, $F(1, 157) = 5.18, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, and the aunt (who was a defense witness) to be less credible, $F(1, 158) = 6.61, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Defendant, neighbor, and psychologist credibility did not significantly differ as a function of juror gender, all $F_s(1, 158) \leq 1.66, p_s \geq .20, \eta_s^2 \leq .01$.

Simple effects analyses of the Disability Status \times Witness Interaction revealed significant effects of disability status on the perceived credibility of the two most central witnesses: the defendant and the alleged victim. Specifically, as predicted, when the alleged victim was portrayed as having an intellectual disability, jurors

Table 2. Mean Witness Credibility Ratings as a Function of Victim Disability Status and Juror Gender

Juror gender	Disability status		
	Disabled	Nondisabled	<i>M</i>
Defendant credibility			
Men	3.31 (1.22)	3.61 (1.20)	3.46
Women	3.03 (1.11)	3.51 (1.01)	3.26
<i>M</i>	3.17	3.57	
Victim credibility			
Men	3.98 (1.18)	3.73 (1.23)	3.86
Women	4.46 (1.07)	4.00 (1.11)	4.24
<i>M</i>	4.21	3.86	
Neighbor credibility			
Men	4.86 (1.03)	5.00 (0.84)	4.93
Women	4.72 (1.05)	4.94 (1.00)	4.82
<i>M</i>	4.79	4.97	
Aunt credibility			
Men	3.95 (1.27)	3.95 (1.14)	3.95
Women	3.13 (1.10)	3.83 (1.15)	3.46
<i>M</i>	3.56	3.89	
Psychologist credibility			
Men	4.45 (1.11)	4.56 (0.98)	4.51
Women	4.54 (1.14)	4.91 (0.82)	4.72
<i>M</i>	4.49	4.72	

Note. Credibility scale ratings ranged from 1 (*not at all believable*) to 6 (*extremely believable*). Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

believed the defendant less, $F(1, 156) = 4.52, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$, and they believed the victim more, $F(1, 157) = 3.86, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$, than when she was not disabled. There was a nonsignificant trend for jurors to rate the aunt as less credible when the victim was disabled than when she was not, $F(1, 158) = 2.84, p = .09, \eta^2 = .02$. Neighbor and psychologist credibility did not significantly differ as a function of disability status, all $F_s(1, 158) \leq 1.73, p_s \geq .19, \eta_s^2 \leq .01$.

Victim Characteristics Ratings

A 2 (juror gender) \times 2 (disability status) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze jurors' ratings of the victim's perceived honesty, accuracy, suggestibility, intelligence, ability to fabricate the sexual abuse charge, likelihood of having fabricated the charge, understanding of the charge, and belief in the charge. A significant multivariate main effect of juror gender emerged, Wilks's $\lambda = .83$, multivariate $F(8, 145) = 3.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$. Univariate tests revealed that, compared to men, women rated the victim as more honest, $F(1, 152) = 4.11, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$; less suggestible, $F(1, 152) = 10.94, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$; less capable of fabricating the charge, $F(1, 152) = 23.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$; and less likely to have fabricated the charge, $F(1, 152) = 12.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ (see Table 3). There were no significant differences in men's and women's ratings of the other victim characteristics, all univariate $F_s(1, 152) \leq 1.69, p_s \geq .20, \eta_s^2 \leq .01$.

Table 3. Mean Victim Characteristic Ratings as a Function of Victim Disability Status and Juror Gender

Juror gender	Disability status		
	Disabled	Nondisabled	<i>M</i>
Honesty			
Men	4.98 (1.33)	3.54 (1.12)	3.77
Women	4.38 (1.16)	3.92 (1.20)	4.16
<i>M</i>	4.17	3.72	
Accuracy			
Men	4.07 (1.16)	4.05 (1.34)	4.06
Women	4.38 (1.21)	3.83 (1.18)	4.12
<i>M</i>	4.22	3.95	
Suggestibility			
Men	3.74 (1.25)	3.85 (1.20)	3.79
Women	3.15 (1.31)	3.08 (1.32)	3.12
<i>M</i>	3.46	3.48	
Intelligence			
Men	3.24 (0.96)	3.46 (1.14)	3.35
Women	3.67 (1.08)	3.47 (1.03)	3.57
<i>M</i>	3.44	3.47	
Ability to fabricate the charge			
Men	4.57 (1.13)	4.92 (1.16)	4.74
Women	3.46 (1.21)	4.14 (1.40)	3.79
<i>M</i>	4.04	4.55	
Likelihood of fabricating the charge			
Men	3.71 (1.19)	4.23 (1.29)	3.96
Women	3.03 (1.22)	3.56 (1.23)	3.28
<i>M</i>	3.38	3.91	
Understanding of the charge			
Men	3.86 (1.22)	4.08 (1.48)	3.96
Women	4.08 (1.29)	3.89 (1.39)	3.99
<i>M</i>	3.96	3.99	
Belief in the charge			
Men	4.12 (1.21)	4.03 (1.35)	4.07
Women	4.44 (1.37)	3.89 (1.45)	4.17
<i>M</i>	4.27	3.96	

Note. Higher values indicate more of the attribute. Values in parentheses are standard deviations.

Neither the multivariate main effect of disability status, Wilks's $\lambda = .92$, multivariate $F(8, 145) = 1.49$, $p = .17$, $\eta^2 = .08$, nor the Juror Gender \times Disability Status interaction, Wilks's $\lambda = .96$, multivariate $F(8, 145) = .72$, $p = .67$, $\eta^2 = .04$, was statistically significant. Even so, in light of our specific predictions about the influence of disability status on victim ratings, we examined the univariate analyses for main effects of disability status. As predicted, when the victim was portrayed as intellectually disabled as compared to nondisabled, she was perceived to be more honest, $F(1, 152) = 5.44$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$; less capable of fabricating the charge, $F(1, 152) = 6.89$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$; and less likely to have fabricated the charge, $F(1, 152) = 7.12$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. There were no other significant effects, all univariate $F_s(1, 152) < 2.21$, $p_s \geq .14$, $\eta_s^2 \leq .14$.

Mediation of the Effect of Disability Status on Guilt Judgments

We tested whether perceived victim credibility mediated the effect of disability status on guilt judgments. Evidence for full mediation would exist if (a) disability status significantly predicted victim credibility, (b) victim credibility significantly predicted verdicts and degree-of-guilt ratings, and (c) disability status became a non-significant predictor of verdicts and degree-of-guilt ratings when victim credibility was included in the equation (Baron & Kenney, 1986). First, a model predicting verdict preferences from disability status was examined. Disability status significantly predicted verdicts, $\beta = .19, t(157) = 2.41, p < .05$, model $F(1, 157) = 5.83, p < .05$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .03$. Next, a separate analysis examining the effects of disability status on victim credibility was conducted. Disability status significantly predicted victim credibility, $\beta = .16, t(157) = 1.97, p < .05$, model $F(1, 157) = 3.87, p < .05$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .02$. Finally, disability status and victim credibility ratings were simultaneously entered into a regression equation to predict verdicts. Perceived victim credibility significantly predicted verdicts, $\beta = .49, t(155) = 6.97, p < .001$, whereas disability status did not, $\beta = .11, t(155) = 1.54, p = .13$, model $F(2, 155) = 27.95, p < .001$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .26$. Thus, perceived victim credibility mediated the effect of disability status on verdict preferences.

A similar pattern of results emerged when we examined degree-of-guilt ratings. First, disability status significantly predicted degree-of-guilt ratings, $\beta = .20, t(157) = 2.50, p < .05$, model $F(1, 157) = 6.25, p < .05$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .03$. Second, a separate analysis examining the effects of disability status on victim credibility revealed that disability status significantly predicted victim credibility, $\beta = .16, t(157) = 1.97, p < .05$, model $F(1, 157) = 3.87, p < .05$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .02$. Finally, when disability status and victim credibility ratings were simultaneously entered into a regression equation, perceived victim credibility significantly predicted degree-of-guilt ratings, $\beta = .51, t(155) = 7.45, p < .001$, whereas disability status did not, $\beta = .11, t(155) = 1.59, p = .12$, model $F(2, 155) = 31.74, p < .001$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .28$. Thus, the effect of disability status on degree-of-guilt ratings was also mediated by perceived victim credibility.

Attitudes and Case Judgments

In our sample, the CLAS-MR Similarity subscale had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = .79$). The overall mean scale score for the sample was 4.96 ($SD = 0.62$). A t test revealed that, compared to men ($M = 4.85, SD = 0.66$), women ($M = 5.07, SD = 0.56$) had significantly more liberal views toward persons with mental retardation, $t(155) = 2.26, p < .05$, although the absolute difference was small.

We computed Pearson's correlations for the disabled and nondisabled conditions separately. As expected, CLAS-MR Similarity subscale scores were significantly correlated with case judgments only in the disabled condition (see Table 4 for all correlations). Compared to other jurors, jurors with more liberal attitudes were significantly more likely to find the defendant guilty and assign a higher degree of guilt to him, and to believe that the victim understood, believed, and was unlikely to have fabricated the charge. More liberal jurors even perceived her as more intelligent than did other jurors.

Table 4. Correlations of CLAS-MR Similarity Subscale Scores and Case Judgments as a Function of Disability Condition

Judgments	CLAS-MR Similarity Subscale		
	Disabled condition	Disabled condition Partial correlation	Nondisabled condition
Guilt verdict	.32 ($p = .002$)	.25 ($p = .05$)	-.08
Degree of guilt	.34 ($p = .001$)	.25 ($p = .06$)	-.07
Defendant credibility	-.13	.21	-.02
Victim credibility	.17 ($p = .07$)	-.03	-.04
Victim honesty	.13	.10	-.04
Victim accuracy	.06	-.03	-.05
Victim suggestibility	-.04	.31 ($p = .03$)	-.11
Victim intelligence	.19 ($p = .05$)	.08	.13
Victim's ability to fabricate charge	-.13	.06	.02
Victim's likelihood of fabricating charge	-.27 ($p = .01$)	-.18	-.07
Victim's understanding of charge	.28 ($p = .005$)	.05	.01
Victim's belief in charge	.31 ($p = .003$)	.19	-.02

Note. The CLAS-MR Similarity subscale is scored such that higher values indicate feelings of increased similarity. Partial correlations account for effects of gender and are based on a corrected n of 39. All probability tests were one-tailed. Where exact probabilities are not indicated, $p \geq .10$.

Because there were significant gender differences in mean scale scores, we also computed partial correlations for the disabled condition to examine the effects of attitudes apart from the effects of gender. Results were similar in that more liberal jurors were still more likely than other jurors to favor a guilty verdict and assign a higher degree of guilt; however, the correlations between attitudes and ratings of the victim's intelligence and her understanding of, belief in, and likelihood of fabricating the charge dropped to nonsignificant values. Also, a new significant relation emerged: Jurors with liberal attitudes were more likely than other jurors to consider the victim suggestible.

DISCUSSION

Our study extends research on jurors' perceptions of children's eyewitness testimony to a target population who have been virtually ignored—adolescent sexual assault victims who have intellectual disabilities. We found that mock jurors make different case judgments when an alleged victim is labeled as having “average intelligence” versus “mildly mentally retarded.” Yet the difference is not one of disadvantage for victims with disabilities. On the contrary, when the victim was portrayed as disabled instead of nondisabled, jurors considered the alleged victim more credible and the defendant less credible, and they rated the victim as more honest, and less capable of fabricating and less likely to have fabricated the sexual abuse accusation. They were also more likely to vote guilty and had more confidence in the defendant's guilt, and perceptions of the victim's credibility mediated the effect of disability status on the guilt judgments. Podell et al. (1994, 1996) also found that a sexual abuse victim labeled as mentally retarded was not disadvantaged compared to

a nondisabled victim, at least in terms of perceived responsibility for a forced sexual encounter.

The results are consistent with our predictions, which we based on theory about jurors' reactions to young nondisabled sexual abuse victims. (Note that our methodology provided a particularly stringent test of our hypotheses: We evoked differential reactions to the intellectually disabled victim through mere labeling, a common methodological approach in social psychological research and in research investigating perceptions of persons with disabilities; e.g., Gibbons et al., 1979; Hannah & Midlarsky, 1987; Parish et al., 1979.) Our data illustrate that adults perceive teenagers with intellectual disabilities like young children, judging them to be honest and trustworthy, but innocent and lacking the capacity to fabricate sexual abuse allegations. Thus, for the same reasons jurors trust young children's claims, they trust the claims of older victims who have disabilities, and they are particularly likely to convict their alleged molesters. (Although jurors rated disabled victims as more incapable of fabricating sexual abuse claims, there were no significant effects of disability status on ratings of perceived intelligence. Although this seems counterintuitive, Gibbons et al., 1979, also failed to find this effect on intelligence ratings of an adolescent girl labeled as mentally retarded.)

Ours is the first study of jurors' reactions to young victims with intellectual disabilities. There are myriad questions left to be answered. For example, future investigations should determine at what age, if any, jurors begin to doubt the credibility of persons with intellectual disabilities as they doubt the credibility of nondisabled teenagers and adults. Also, the effect of disability severity should be examined. Witnesses with more severe disabilities than ours might be considered naive and honest, but their credibility could suffer if jurors fear that they are highly suggestible and easily confused, or do not understand what they are alleging. In other words, there is likely to be a limit to the extent to which decreased cognitive ability translates into increased credibility. That limit is likely to be exacerbated by certain case circumstances; for example, if the perpetrator is unknown and the case hinges on the victim's ability to recall the stranger's appearance or other details.

The results also provide the first evidence that women and men differ in their perceptions of alleged sexual assault victims even when the victim is portrayed as intellectually disabled. Women rendered significantly more guilty verdicts and had more confidence in the defendant's guilt; considered the victim to be more credible and the aunt (a defense witness) to be less credible as witnesses; and rated the victim as more honest, less suggestible, less capable of fabricating and less likely to have fabricated the sexual abuse allegations. Women also had significantly more liberal views toward persons with mental retardation generally than did men. In contrast to our predictions based on works by Gottlieb and Corman (1975), Parish et al. (1979), and Scotti et al. (1996), however, gender differences were not significantly more pronounced when the victim was portrayed as having a disability. Prior research suggests that gender differences in reactions to child sexual abuse cases can be partially explained by gender differences in empathy for child victims and attitudes toward children's believability and adult/child sexuality (Bottoms, 1993), and further, that gender differences may diminish after group deliberation (Bottoms, Schmidt, & Epstein, 1998; Gabora et al., 1993).

Keys et al. (2001) found that less liberal views about the similarity of disabled people to oneself and others are associated with restrictive and exclusionary beliefs about disabled persons. We found that the biasing influence of perceived similarity extends into the courtroom. Although not all dependent variables were affected, zero-order correlations revealed that jurors with more liberal attitudes were significantly more likely than other jurors to find the defendant guilty and assign a higher degree-of-guilt to him, and to believe that the victim was intelligent and that she understood, believed, and was unlikely to have fabricated the charge. Correlations partialling out effects of gender revealed a similar pattern of results for guilt judgments, and one unexpected relation involving perceived victim suggestibility, which is difficult to explain theoretically or in light of the general pattern of findings. In any case, it can be argued that if two variables naturally co-occur in the general population, it is artificial to examine the effect of one apart from the effect of the other. This argument is especially compelling here because gender is merely a proxy for a constellation of experiential and attitudinal differences. Future research should identify other individual difference factors that affect perceptions and judgments in these cases, and it should explore whether such factors affect the professional judgments of other actors in the legal system such as the police officers who investigate cases or the prosecutors and judges who adjudicate them. (A recent Australian study identified a number of barriers faced by disabled adult women who made reports to police; Keilty & Connelly, 2001.)

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Our research makes a significant contribution to the applied social psychological literature by enhancing our understanding of the ease with which prejudices and stereotypes about intellectual disabilities can be elicited and affect social judgments. The work also has implications for the law: The results illustrate that juror decision making in sexual abuse cases is influenced by beliefs about an adolescent victim's disabilities. Fears that victims with disabilities will not be perceived as credible witnesses might be a barrier to having their claims reported and prosecuted. But our research illustrates that, if allowed to testify, victims with mild intellectual disabilities might not necessarily be disadvantaged compared to witnesses of average intelligence.

There are methodological issues that should be considered when generalizing our results to actual legal situations. On the one hand, many aspects of our methodology are realistic. We used videotaped testimony from an actual trial involving sexual abuse allegations, rather than artificial stimuli such as a written summary of a fabricated case, or slide or film presentations of a mock trial employing actors as trial participants. Using an incest case also increases generalizability, because children with disabilities are far more likely to be abused by trusted persons than by strangers (Brown, Stein, & Turk, 1995; Sobsey & Doe, 1991). Our mock jurors were all jury-eligible, and they received the judicial instructions appropriate for the crime in the state of Illinois. We took care to impress upon our mock jurors the seriousness of the research and our informal observations confirmed that

they were engaged in the task. Our study is considerably more applicable to actual legal situations than the only other studies of perceptions of sexuality involving teenagers with intellectual disabilities (Podell et al., 1994, 1996), in which participants (women only) considered brief vignettes and failed to make legally relevant judgments.

On the other hand, no experimental jury study can fully mirror an actual courtroom trial (Diamond, 1997). Our jurors were not exposed to live witnesses nor as much testimony as they would be in an actual trial, they knew their judgments would not have a direct impact on a defendant's life, and they rendered individual verdicts without deliberating the case as a group. Further, although our sample was more ethnically diverse and older than many college freshman samples, our work would benefit from replication with an older community sample. Even so, a recent meta-analysis by Bornstein (1999) revealed few differences in the mock-trial judgments of undergraduates and community members (see also Cutler, Penrod, & Dexter, 1990; Isquith, 1988; Lind & Walker, 1979). Exploring the effect of variables on jurors' decisions in a laboratory setting represents an important first step in a line of research designed to examine juror decision making (Diamond, 1997). The next step will be to determine the degree to which these findings generalize in more realistic settings.

CONCLUSION

As noted by Hahn (1993) and Keys et al. (2001), it is critically important to understand societal attitudes toward and perceptions of people with disabilities, because those attitudes and perceptions might be more problematic for such people than their actual disability. Attitudes about disability create public policy, which in turn sets the tone for the social and legal environment in which people with disabilities live. Although more work is needed, Seidman (2000) found that some people with mild intellectual disabilities are not necessarily unreliable in recalling past events of a sexual nature, and our research illustrates that adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities can be perceived as credible by jurors—even more credible than a victim portrayed as having average intelligence. Dismissing the allegations of children and adults with disabilities does a disservice to a large, generally unrecognized group of sexual assault victims, blocking legal efforts that would afford them protection from future abuse and access to needed mental health services (Kebbell & Hatton, 1999; Seidman, 2000; Sobsey & Doe, 1991).

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