PERCEPTIONS OF INTIMATE STUDENT PROFESSOR RELATIONSHIPS

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Nina Honor Dyson Gregoire

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the College of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

PERCEPTIONS OF INTIMATE STUDENT PROFESSOR RELATIONSHIPS

submitted by Nina Honor Dyson Gregoire in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Examinig Committee:

Dr. Paul G. Davies, Irving K. Barber Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Supervisor

Dr. Harry Miller, Irving K. Barber Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. Cynthia Mathieson, Irving K. Barber Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Supervisory Committee Member

Dr. John-Tyler Binfet
Additional Examiner
Abstract

The ideology and logistics of implementing policies that ban intimate student-professor relationships (ISPRs) are a source of debate. Previous research indicates that students generally disapprove of ISPRs, finding them inappropriate and unethical. In addition to the imbalance of power, research suggests that students, particularly females, may lose faith in their academic abilities and may consider abandoning their studies following sexual overture from a professor. Despite these findings, there is limited current research on the perceptions of students who observe the ISPRs of others. The present research explores student perceptions of ISPRs. Specifically, two independent studies were conducted using an undergraduate sample. Study 1 employed a 2 (Gender of the Initiator: Male or Female) by 2 (Status of the Initiator: Professor or Student) between-groups vignette design. Study 2 employed the same design as Study 1, with the addition of a third variable – the quality of a graduate school reference letter provided by the professor for the student involved in the relationship (overly positive or negative in tone). Both studies included level of sexism as a covariate. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which there was sexual harassment, a power imbalance, impacts to others, as well as the appropriateness of consequences (e.g., punishment). In Study 1, it was found that participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions rated sexual harassment, a power imbalance, and impacts to others to be more severe regardless of the gender of the initiator. In Study 2, it was found that participants in the Positive Letter conditions rated the power imbalance as more severe regardless of the gender or status of the initiator. Overall, participants in Study 2 rated sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences more severely than those in Study 1.
Lay Summary

This research explores student perceptions of ISPRs. Two independent studies depicting stories of ISPRs were presented and then undergraduates were asked to rate the degree to which there was sexual harassment, a power imbalance, impacts on others, and consequences. The stories manipulated the gender (male or female) and status (professor or student) of the initiator in Study 1, and in Study 2, a reference letter was added (positive or negative). In Study 1, participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions rated sexual harassment, a power imbalance, and impacts to others to be more severe regardless of the gender of the initiator. In Study 2, participants in the Positive Letter conditions rated the power imbalance as more severe regardless of the gender or status of the initiator. Overall, participants in Study 2 rated sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others and consequences more severely than those in Study 1.
Preface

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, Nina H. D. Gregoire. The author was primarily responsible for the identification and design of the research program, the performance of the various parts of the research, and the analysis of the research data. The University of British Columbia’s Okanagan Behavioural Research Ethics Board granted ethical approval for this research on August 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2020. The ethics approval certificate number for this research is H20-01954. As of the date of this submission, the results in this thesis have not been published.
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For Tasha, who enrolled me in my first university classes and cheered me on the whole way - and for Aidan, who did nothing but I love anyway.
CHAPTER 1 Introduction

Intimate relationships between students and their professors have been described as a rite of passage, a coming-of-age story, and a normal part of the university experience (e.g., Kipnis, 2015). In addition, some consider these types of relationships an exciting decision that is made between two consenting adults (Kipnis, 2015). Such relationships have long been a cliché portrayed in media such as literature (e.g., “Un teachable,” by Leah Reader), music (e.g., "Hot for Teacher," by Van Halen), film (e.g., “Submission”), and television (e.g., “Friends” and “Shameless”). As life often imitates art, stories of intimate student-professor relationships (ISPRs) can be found; for example, in the news (e.g., Steven Galloway) and in blog posts (e.g., McGill Daily, 2015; Femme Cabal, 2018). It is evident that ISPRs have traditionally been accepted in North American society, with some arguing that banning them is heavy-handed and paternalistic (Dank & Fulda, 1997). These views, however, are shifting, and what was once considered a normal part of the university experience is now being contemplated as exploitative (Southall & Lewin, 2015), deleterious to the integrity of academia, degrading to the role of a mentor (Schuman, 2014), and toxic to the student body as a whole (Drimonis, 2018). Currently, only one Canadian university (i.e., University of British Columbia) has an explicit policy banning certain ISPRs; however, as public views shift, so does the controversy surrounding the issue of banning such relationships (Gerster, 2018).

Historically, it is often not until a policy is enacted that societal views begin to shift. For example, although today it seems unimaginable that Canadian women would be denied the right to vote, prior to 1916, this was the case. Voting rights for Canadian women occurred in stages at the provincial level and it was not until 1940 that all Canadian women
were granted the right to vote (e.g., Cleverdon, 1950). Suffrage is just one example of how policy tends to form the collective consciousness; further examples include labour laws, minimum wages, and social policy (e.g., senior's benefits and employment insurance in Canada; Bryden, 1974; Cleverdon, 1950). These cases reveal how policies, spearheaded by a specific group, can be interpreted as a reflection of that group's ideologies and values at a given moment in time (Bryden, 1974). As such, policy is seldom static and evolves in step with many other factors. Specifically, a policy may be driven by politics, religion, media attention, a change in need, globalization, technology, research, or by any combination of these factors (Bryden, 1974). To that end, evidence-based policy (EBP) has become an established field as well as a critical aspect of policy creation and refinement (Pawson, 2006). EBP is particularly useful when working toward a policy that is designed around sensitive issues (Pawson, 2006). By studying perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, EBP allows policymakers to create policies that satisfy needs and safeguard vulnerabilities.

When contemplating policies surrounding ISPRs, it is crucial to consider several social-psychological constructs. These constructs include stereotyping (i.e., a belief or association that links a whole group of people with certain traits or characteristics), sexism (i.e., discrimination on the basis of sex), belief in a just world (i.e., having the view that people get what they deserve in life), victim-blaming (i.e., assigning fault to the victim of an offence as opposed to the perpetrator), and grooming behaviours (i.e., building trust for the purpose of exploitation). It is further critical to understand how these factors may influence the ethos of Canadian universities.
1.1 Constructs Contributing to Perceptions of ISPRs

1.1.1 Stereotyping and Sexism

Society perceives the sexuality of males and females very differently, leading to sexism and stereotypes (Jewell & Brown, 2013). Gender stereotypes depicting women as sexual objects and men as sexually insatiable are commonplace in North American culture (Galambos et al., 1985; Kim et al., 2007; Swim et al. 2001; Terrance et al., 2004; Ward 2002). Various forms of media designed to target those who are in their late adolescence and early adulthood (approximately ages 17 – 23) are rampant with such stereotypes; for example, an analysis of American-published men’s magazines revealed that 81% of women were depicted in sex-object roles (Krassas et al., 2003; Ward 1995; Ward et al., 2006). Additionally, a study of television programming, popular amongst North American university students, referenced women as sexual objects nearly six times per hour and referenced men as sex-focused almost four times per hour (Ferris et al., 2007).

Further, amongst first and second-year university students (ages 17-19), endorsing the stereotypes that men are sex-focused, and women are sex-objects, is linked with their actual sexualized behaviour (Jewel & Brown, 2013). Men also reported making more harassing comments, jokes, gestures, and being more physically assertive than did women of the same demographic (Jewel & Brown, 2013). Combined, the noted findings lend evidence for the premise that both men and women permit men to be sexually assertive in their sexual objectification of women and, in a broader scope, both men and women tacitly endorse the stereotype that females should be passive, and males should be assertive (Kim et al., 2007; Swim et al., 2001; Ward 2002).
North American societal gender stereotypes, such as the ones listed above, form the basis of the Heterosexual Script, which involves men and women simultaneously enacting sexualized gender stereotypes (Kim et al., 2007; Tolman et al., 2007; Ward, 2002) and can be viewed as the social script for sexualized interactions between heterosexual men and women in North America (Hyde & Oliver, 1995). As per the Heterosexual Script, men are permitted to act on their sexual impulses, prioritize their sexual pleasure, believe that their hormones are beyond their control, and make promises to exchange power and status in return for sex (Kim et al., 2007). Arising from the broad societal enactment of the Heterosexual Script is the credence that women are to please men, deny or diminish their sexual desires, maintain the sexual needs of males, stoically wait to be chosen, and to view and exchange their sexuality as a commodity as reasonable means to gain some share of male privilege (Kim et al., 2007; Tolman, 2002; Tolman, 2006).

In addition to the evidence for, and the acceptance of the Heterosexual Script, there is a significant body of research indicating that, due to these norms, the sexual behaviours of men and women are frequently judged differently (e.g., Howell et al., 2011; Marks & Fraley, 2006; Sheeran et al., 1996). Much of the research on sexual double standards have been centred on the notion that men are granted more sexual freedom than women (Howell et al., 2011). Despite men having more sexual freedom than women, multiple studies have found that under certain circumstances (e.g., power-imbalance), men are punished more severely for their sexual behaviour than women (e.g., Nelson & Oliver, 1998; Smith et al., 1997). For example, Smith and colleagues (1997) found that men were more likely to judge an adult-child sexual interaction as sexual abuse when the adult was male than when the adult was female. Further, Nelson and Oliver (1998) found that, amongst a sample of individuals that
had experienced sexual abuse by an adult when they were children, male participants judged their sexual contact with a female perpetrator less negatively than did female participants who had experienced sexual contact with a male perpetrator. More recently, an illustrative example of this bias occurred during the sentencing of Cameo Patch, a female teacher from Utah who had sexual contact with a 17-year-old male student. During his remarks on her sentence, Third District Judge Mark Kouris stated, “if this were a 29-year-old male and a 17-year-old female, I would be inclined to order some incarceration”. Instead of jail time, the defendant was put on probation for 36 months and ordered to obtain a psychosexual evaluation, as well as pay a $2,000 fine (TimesDaily, 2006).

Findings that men are condemned more severely for their involvement in inappropriate sexual activity, relative to women, is an ostensible incongruity of the sexual double standard. While men are afforded greater sexual freedom, this is only true given the circumstances involve a female partner of similar status (e.g., a consensual casual encounter with a peer; Sheeran et al., 1996). Inversely, men are judged more harshly in circumstances where they are perceived to have inherent power over the other individual (e.g., a teacher and a student; Fromuth et al., 2001). Therefore, when there is apparent exploitation of power by one of the parties involved in sexual contact, the circumstance can be described as following a reverse sexual double standard (Howell et al., 2011). In the case of a university professor and their student, while it has been argued that both parties are adults capable of consent (Kipnis, 2015), there is an undeniable imbalance of power. Given this imbalance of power, the aforementioned findings by Howell and colleagues may translate to circumstances where, when a male professor is the initiator of an ISPR, he will be adjudicated more harshly than a female professor in the same situation.
A reverse sexual double standard may occur due to the perception of male exploitation of a female subordinate based on the presumption that men are more inclined to pursue relationships for sexual gratification, whereas women tend to pursue relationships for emotional aspects (Carroll et al., 1985; Howell et al., 2011). On that basis, women who occupy positions of power are not viewed as exploiting their male subordinates because men are presumed to be gaining their desired outcome (e.g., sexual gratification) by engaging in such a relationship (Howell et al., 2011). Contrarily, men in power are perceived as exploiting their female subordinates because women are not considered to be gaining their desired outcome (e.g., emotional fulfillment) from the interaction (Howell et al., 2011).

Differing degrees of social acceptability of sexual behaviour between men and women may be another potential explanation for the reverse sexual double standard. Men may be seen as gaining peer approval, while women do not (Sheeran et al., 1996); thus, a younger man is perceived as obtaining a desired social gain from the sexual contact, whereas a younger woman is not. Due to this difference in social acceptability, a male in power who engages with a female subordinate is likely to be rated more harshly for their participation in the relationship than if the circumstances were reversed (Howell et al., 2011).

It can, therefore, be posited that students entering university have been conditioned to view an ISPR in many unhealthy ways. Specifically, female students may see their sexuality as a means of advancement as per the Heterosexual Script and thus be susceptible to exploitation by a male professor while a male student may view an ISPR as non-exploitative and merely a way to satisfy his sexual needs. Additionally, professors who engage in ISPRs may view the circumstances in a similar way to their students and thus feel justified in their behaviour.
1.1.2 Grooming

Grooming refers to the preparatory stage of sexual abuse and occurs when an abuser gains the trust of their target and, often, the trust of influential people in the target’s life (e.g., parents or friends) as a step toward perpetrating sexual abuse. Grooming can be difficult to detect because the associated behaviours often appear to be well-meaning and, as a result, their underlying motivations may not be detected (Munro & Fish, 2015). McAlinden (2012) describes the grooming structure to include various manipulative and controlling practices such as selecting a vulnerable subject and navigating various interpersonal settings in order to establish trust, normalize harmful sexual behaviour, engage in exploitation, and decrease the likelihood of reporting. Ultimately, grooming is a process that assists in strengthening abusive patterns of offending (Craven et al., 2006).

Offenders who are employees or volunteers of institutions serving children may not need to traditionally groom children (or their families) as their role inherently affords them with trust and authority (McAlinden, 2012). Though two vastly different cases of abuse of power, many parallels can be drawn between those who abuse their position of trust and authority over other adults as with those who do so with children. While it cannot be overstated that the two offences are not equal in their severity, they do have conceptual overlap insofar as they both involve one party leveraging their institutional position over another to exploit the lower power individual. It may be the case that those drawn to adult relationships of such a nature may strategically choose employment (e.g., university professor) that allows them access to a pool of individuals meeting their sexual criteria. While it can be argued that all relationships have a power dynamic, it is not typically a dynamic as easily defined as in an institutional setting. For example, outside of an
institutional setting, at the beginning of a relationship, one party may have higher status employment and thus enjoys more prestige, economic freedom, and better benefits, giving them a higher power position within the relationship. These circumstances, however, may not remain the status quo – the lower power person may secure a promotion and eventually shift to become the higher power party in the relationship. This type of power differential differs from an institutional power differential as neither party can advance or sabotage the potential for advancement of the other party. Therefore, as described in scenarios where children are involved, the university setting is such that a professor has ready access to a large number of ambitious young adults looking for mentorship and, in many cases, this mentorship is invaluable to the student's advancement and future employment networks. Additionally, university students often both trust and revere their professors.

Grooming of adults in institutional settings may be used as a means of convincing the target that the advances being made are wanted because when sexualized behaviours are not wanted, they are labelled as sexual harassment (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Labour Code of Canada, 2020). By convincing the target that the behaviour was welcome, the groomer may not only reduce the likelihood of disclosing the misconduct but also of being found guilty if caught as is found in child grooming (Craven et al., 2007). Adult grooming can create the impression that an ISPR is consensual, although it may not be. Without a policy in place banning such relationships, it is difficult for the party with lesser power to report the behaviour as the party with higher power may argue that it was welcome. Moreover, when grooming is employed, a student who finds themselves in an ISPR may feel confused as to how the relationship escalated and thus hold themselves accountable.
1.1.3 Belief in a Just World and Victim Blaming

Belief in a just world is the notion that people get what they deserve in life (Lerner, 1980). Humans have an engrained need to see their world as a just and orderly place, where hard work is rewarded and crime is punished. Without this belief in a just world, individuals would have to admit to themselves that they do not have as much control over their lives as they would like to believe. In other words, if bad things can happen to good people that implies that bad things could also happen to oneself. It is very disconcerting for people to think that chance or luck can play such a large part in their lives. Research has shown that people massively overestimate the amount of control they have over their own lives (e.g., Lipkus, 1991). Belief in a just world helps to alleviate stress from one’s daily life; it restores order to an otherwise chaotic existence (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). When something terrible happens to an innocent individual, this challenges the notion of belief in a just world, and so as to restore order and reduce personal distress there may be a tendency to blame the victim for their fate (Thornton, 1992). Tragically, the more one relates to the victim, the more likely one is to blame the victim for their fate; that is, the more overlap between the victim and oneself, the greater the threat to self, and the more the victim will be blamed (Shaver, 1970). In short, belief in a just world is a cognitive bias that people’s actions will lead to appropriate and just consequences; that is, a cognitive bias that leads to the belief that people get what they morally deserve in life, which, in some cases, may eventually lead to victim blaming.

Victim blaming is a phenomenon that occurs when a victim is held either fully or partially accountable for their victimization (Lerner & Miller, 1978; Rotter, 1966). When considering sexual misconduct, previous research indicates that less blame is assigned to non-flirtatious victims than to flirtatious victims (Landström et al., 2016). Further, the
perception that sexual misconduct victims are deserving of their tribulation allows one to maintain the view that the world is fair, thus allowing the perceiver to maintain the notion that these types of offences do not happen to good people and, by extension, to themselves (Dalbert, 2009). Additionally, the perceiver's level of belief in a just world is a powerful predictor of rape blame attributions (Strömwall et al., 2013a, 2013b). Specifically, Strömwall and colleagues (2013a, 2013b) found that individuals high in just world belief attribute higher levels of victim blame and lower levels of perpetrator blame. Despite these findings, research indicates that high levels of both victim-blame and perpetrator-blame can be attributed in the same scenarios (Landström et al., 2016).

Given the above-noted findings, it can be posited that students who learn about the ISPRs of their peers, may be persuaded to rely on the context of the relationship rather than the mere existence of the relationship when considering possible consequences or when making judgments. Specifically, students who learn of ISPRs on their campuses may ask questions regarding the initiation, outcomes, and general circumstances of the relationship when judging it. Depending on the context of the relationship, fault may be assigned differently based on the factors of said relationship when considering just-world beliefs.

Victim blaming can lead to reduced reporting due to the victim’s belief that they are responsible for the offence and somehow encouraged it (Hayes et al., 2013; The Canadian Resource Centre for the Victims of Crime, 2009). Failure to report sexual harassment leads to the perpetuation of the cycle of harassment because the perpetrator of the abuse is not held accountable for their actions and is, therefore, free to continue (Hayes, et al., 2013; The Canadian Resource Centre for the Victims of Crime, 2009). A policy that is unclear as to whether or not student-professor relationships are acceptable can further contribute to victim-
blaming and prohibit reporting by creating a culture of institutional betrayal. Institutional betrayal occurs when an institution ultimately fails to protect its members or fails to respond adequately and empathetically after members are harmed (Smith & Freyd, 2013). In the case of an ISPR, a student may feel betrayed by the university for permitting such a relationship. As such, students who participate in or observe intimate student-professor relationships may wish to report such interactions but have no clear policy to report it under, leaving them in a vulnerable position and unprotected by their institution.

1.2 Consequences of Sexual Misconduct

As previously mentioned, although victim-blaming and belief in a just world are theoretical underpinnings of reduced reporting, there are many other possible reasons targets may choose not to report sexual harassment. For women, one reason may be the tendency to question both their physical appearance and their social presence. The so-called “lipstick effect” (Hill et al., 2012) states that, in times of economic downturn, women tend to increase their spending on beauty products. It has been posited that women’s increased spending on beauty products is due to the desire to attract a mate with resources and retention tactics. Additionally, women with high economic concerns (i.e., the desire to increase income) tend to emphasize the enhancement of their professional appearance to secure employment and promotions (Netchaeva & Rees, 2016). An unintended consequence of the lipstick effect may be that women blame themselves for the sexual advancements made by their supervisor. Women in the workplace are often scrutinized for their appearance. As a result, the value placed on the physical appearance of women may make it challenging to navigate appropriate conversations surrounding the topic, which in turn could cause victims to question their interpretation of events. Sexism disguised as humour is not uncommon, and a
woman is less likely to confront sexism or sexual harassment when it is portrayed as such. Consequently, women who do report sexual harassment are perceived as lacking a sense of humour (Mallett et al., 2016). Additional reasons that contribute to women’s silence around sexual harassment in professional settings are that they struggle to understand how someone who knows them would intentionally emotionally hurt them, they do not want to get their harasser in trouble, and they fear retribution when the person they are reporting is in a position of power (Canadian Department of Justice, 2015).

Contrary to females, male sexual victimization has been understudied (Chapleau, et al., 2008; Davies, 2002; Ratner et al., 2003; Turchik, 2012). It appears, however, that many male university students have a history of sexual victimization. When asked about being sexually victimized during the previous year, 18.5% to 31% of male university students reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact (Larimer, et al., 1999; O’Sullivan, et al., 1998; Palmer, et al., 2009). When male students were asked to provide the same information extending the range to age 16, those rates increased to 34% to 58% (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994; Struckman-Johnson, et al., 2003). Negative behavioural and emotional consequences for college-aged males who experienced sexual victimization include increased adulthood posttraumatic stress, higher alcohol use and abuse, hostility, depression, and general distress symptoms (Aosved, et al., 2011; Larimer et al., 1999; Palmer et al., 2009). Moreover, men may be reluctant to self-report unwanted sexual contact from women given high levels of male rape myth acceptance (Chapleau et al., 2008; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992; Turchik, 2012). Male rape myth acceptance involves the belief that a man cannot be raped (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992) due to the commonly held views that men are the initiators and controllers of sexual-activity or
that men are too strong to be physically forced into sex by a woman (Growth & Burgess, 1980). Further, others fail to understand how men can perform sexually in a coercive situation (Miller, 1983; Sarrel & Masters, 1982; Smith et al., 1988).

1.3 Understanding ISPRs as Sexual Misconduct

There is limited current research exploring the dating behaviours of university professors. Previous research, however, has indicated that 37% of male faculty at the surveyed universities had attempted to initiate a personal and/or sexual relationship with at least one female student and that 26% reported having sexual involvement with a student (Fitzgerald et al., 1988). Meanwhile, a more recent but informal poll indicated that 14% of post-secondary students had inappropriate relations with a professor; of the 14% who engaged in such encounters, the parties were quite evenly split between males and females (College Stats, 2016). A study involving students and professors who had engaged in ISPRs found that although the parties would enter into such a relationship again, the majority advised others against doing so (Bellas & Gossett, 2001). Further, nearly all respondents believed that ISPRs were never appropriate in supervisory situations and voiced support for policies prohibiting them in such circumstances (Bellas & Gossett, 2001).

Keith-Spiegel and colleagues (1993) found that students viewed professors who engaged in ISPRs as unethical and considered them to be giving these students an unearned advantage. Further, when considering a professor making unwanted sexual advances, expressing sexual attraction toward a student, or engaging in flirting with a student, although women expressed higher levels of unethicality than did men – the overall scores indicated a significant sensitivity to this sexualized behaviour (Keith-Spiegel et al., 1993). Moreover, behaviour considered to be egregiously unethical by students included not only sexual
misconduct behaviours but also items pertaining to the writing of untrue reference letters and
the grading of a student based on how much the professor likes them (Keith-Spiegel et al., 1993). Likewise, professors themselves largely concur with students’ evaluation of ethicality relating to the behaviours mentioned above (Tabachnick et al., 1991). The concomitants of ISPRs, therefore, may be that the students involved feel uncomfortable and unable to extract themselves from the relationship. Additionally, the perceptions peers may be that the student involved in the ISPR is being unfairly evaluated and given unearned advantages.

Institutions (e.g., Harvard and Yale) that have banned ISPRs have done so under their official Sexual Misconduct policies (e.g., Eaton, 2019). These policies recognize the inherent power differential and position of trust between a professor and their student and acknowledge the exploitative nature of engaging in such a relationship. While these institutions recognize ISPRs as a form of sexual misconduct, it is difficult to determine if those involved view these relationships the same way. Cortina et al. (1998) found that university women who were asked about various behaviours did not recognize sexually harassing behaviours when they experienced them. Explanations for the inability to label sexually harassing behaviour may be a fear of being stigmatized, a lack of a clear understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, or the misinterpretation of harassing behaviours as flattery or humour (Stockdale & Vaux, 1993). Regardless of their interpretation of the events, women who reported university experiences of sexual harassment reported negative perceptions of the campus climate, both concerning academia and the general treatment of women on campus (Cortina et al., 1998). Not only did the women who participated in the Cortina and colleagues (1998) study report negative perceptions, they also recounted their personal experiences of academic sexual harassment,
which indicated that women who experience sexual harassment suffer significant consequences including lowered confidence regarding their schoolwork, impaired ability to concentrate, and the complete withdrawal from university. Sexual harassment so adversely affects women’s academic experiences that, if they were to make the decision again, they would opt not to attend university again (Cortina et al., 1998).

1.4 Research Questions

The #MeToo era has brought with it a deeper understanding of consent, the consequences of power-based relationships, and the conceptualization of power-based relationships as sexual misconduct. Given the potential devasting consequences to female students outlined above, it is a critical time to test the climate of current undergraduate students as it pertains to these relationships. Moreover, as men have been critically understudied in their views, it is essential to understand the student body as a whole when evaluating perceptions and potential consequences of ISPRs. As such, two vignette studies were conducted to answer the following research questions:

Q1) To what extent do students approve of intimate relationships between professors and students?

Q2) Do female students view certain aspects (i.e., sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) less favourably than male students do?

Q3) Do certain factors (i.e., Gender of Initiator, Status of Initiator, and Tone of Reference Letter) influence the opinions of students regarding ISPRs?
Q4) Do students perceive certain aspects (i.e., sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) more severely when the consequences of an ISPR (i.e., a reference letter) are made salient?

Research Hypotheses (Studies 1 and 2):

Q1 - H1) Overall, students will largely disapprove of ISPRs

Q4 - H2) Mean scores will indicate that those who participate in Study 2 (i.e., those who view Reference Letters) will rate the relationship more severely across all aspects (i.e., sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) than those who participated in Study 1.

Study 1:

Q2 - H3) Mean score will indicate that self-identified females will rate the relationship more severely across all aspects (i.e., sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others, and consequences) than those who self-identify as male.

Q3 - H4) It is anticipated that there will be a main effect of Gender (Males rated more severely than Females), Status (Professors rated more severely than Students), and an interaction. As such, it is anticipated that the cell driving the effect would be the male professor as initiator.

Study 2:

Q2 - H5) Mean score will indicate that self-identified females rate the relationship more severely across all aspects (i.e., sexual harassment, power imbalance, impacts to others and consequences) than those who self-identify as male.
Q3 - H6) It is anticipated that there will be a main effect of Gender (Males rated more severely than Females), Status (Professors rated more severely than Students), Letter (Positive Letters rated more severely than Negative Letters) and an interaction. As such, it is anticipated that the cell driving the effect would be the male professor as initiator who writes the overly positive letter.
CHAPTER 2 Study 1

2.1 Study 1 Method

2.1.1 Participants

Participants \((N = 371)\) were undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan Campus who were enrolled in a psychology course offering research credits. Participants were recruited through the university's online psychology research portal SONA. The SONA portal allows students to self-select into the study they wish to participate based on a title and brief description. Participants were eligible for the study if they were fluent in reading and writing in English and have normal or corrected vision. As both studies were conducted concurrently, participants who completed Study 2 were excluded from participation in Study 1. In exchange for their time, participants were awarded a one percent credit towards an eligible course.

2.1.2 Materials

Vignette presentation, administration of questionnaires, and recording of participant responses were all carried out using Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) – an online survey system. All participants completed the study online due to the COVID-19 regulations.

2.1.2.1 Vignettes. To explore student perceptions of ISPRs, a between-group design was employed using four vignettes (please see Appendix A). In each vignette, the relationship described was between a professor and student, where the professor was in a direct supervisory role over the student. Further, all couplings were heterosexual; thus, a male professor necessitated a female student, and a female professor necessitated a male student.

Specifically, to explore the influence of initiator characteristics on perceptions, the vignettes utilized a manipulation of both the gender (Gender of the Initiator – male or
female) and status (Status of the Initiator – professor or student) of the initiator. Thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: a) male professor initiates with a female student, b) female professor initiates with a male student, c) female student initiates with male professor, or d) male student initiates with a female professor.

Each vignette was presented as a brief outline of the relationship from a third-party perspective followed by a series of text messages. The text messages were designed to look like a screenshot taken from a smartphone and were employed to reinforce the initiator of the relationship as well as to maintain participant interest in the story. Depending on the condition, the exchange began with one of the characters asking the other on a date, which they accept. The texts messages were based on stories of ISPRs shared online (e.g., Anonymous 2015, 2018). Following the presentation of the text messages was a brief summation indicating the trajectory of the relationship (i.e., the pair continued to publicly date for a period of time and it is unknown if they stayed together).

2.1.3 Self-Report Measures

2.1.3.1 Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI). The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996) measures sexist attitudes held towards women (Zaikman & Marks, 2014) and was used as a covariate (CV) in the present study. Specifically, the ASI assesses both hostile and benevolent sexism (Glick & Fisk, 1996). Hostile sexism (sexist antipathy) taps into the dimensions of Dominative Paternalism, Competitive Gender Differentiation, and Heterosexual Hostility. Benevolent sexism taps into the dimensions of Protective Paternalism, Complementary Gender Differentiation, and Heterosexual Intimacy. The questions on the 22-item scale are scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = disagree strongly to 6 = agree strongly). Questions include items such as “Many women have a
quality of purity that few men possess” or “Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them” (for a complete list of items, please see Appendix B). Scores for each item are summed to create a total score, ranging from 22 to 132. Higher overall scores on the ASI are indicative of general overall sexist views toward women. Six studies validating the ASI, which included data from 2250 respondents, found it to have predictive, discriminant, and convergent validity (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

2.1.3.2 Outcome Questionnaire. A 25-item outcome questionnaire, servings as the dependent variable (DV), was designed to assess participants’ perceptions of the relationship described in the vignettes (please see Appendix B). Specifically, the questionnaire asked participants to rate the degree to which they endorsed a series of statements, using a Likert-scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). These statements were designed to tap into four perceptual domains pertaining to IRPRs: Power Imbalance (7-items), Sexual Harassment (8-items), Impacts on Others (5-items), and Consequences (5-items). Sample items from the Power Imbalance DV include, “There was a power imbalance between the parties described in the scenario” and “There was a misuse of power by the professor described in the scenario.” Sample items from the Sexual Harassment DV include “The student in the scenario would have perceived that the professor was as placing a condition of a sexual nature on the student’s educational advancement (meaning that the student believed that engaging in a sexual relationship with the professor would advance their position)” and “The student in the scenario would have a difficult time ending things with the professor and keeping their role at the university.” Sample items from the Impacts on Others DV include, “The behaviour in the scenario would impact other students at the university – including their learning and/or future opportunities” and “The behaviour described in the scenario would
negatively affect the reputation of the university involved.” Sample items from the Consequences DV include, “The behaviour described in the scenario should be investigated by the university” and “The behaviour described in the scenario should be prohibited by the university.”

Mean composite scores were created for each domain by averaging participant responses to the questions associated with each variable. In total, four composite scores were created (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, Impacts on Others, and Consequences) which served as the DVs in this study.

2.1.3.3 Demographics questionnaire. Participants were asked to indicate their age, education level, and self-identified gender.

2.1.4 Procedure

Once signed up for the study using the Department of Psychology’s SONA online research system, participants were given a Qualtrics hyperlink to the study. Upon opening the hyperlink, participants were presented with a consent form to which they had to agree to proceed with the study. The informed consent waiver gave general information about the purpose of the study and whom they can contact if they experience any emotional discomfort while/after participating. After consenting, participants were forwarded to the study page.

As described above, participants, unbeknownst to them, were randomly assigned to one of the four vignettes. Participants were told that they would be provided with a (ostensibly) true story about a relationship between a student and professor. Additionally, they were informed that they would be tested on the content of the vignette, and thus should pay close attention. Participants were unable to advance from the vignette page for a minimum of five minutes to ensure that they had thoroughly read the material. Once
participants read the vignette, they were directed to the outcome questionnaire and asked to rate the degree to which they believed there was a power imbalance, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences in the relationship described in the vignette. Following this questionnaire, participants completed the ASI, which was used as a CV to control for sexism. Participants were then asked manipulation check questions (Appendix B) to ensure they had adequately understood and attended to the vignettes presented. Lastly, participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire and were then debriefed and awarded credit for their participation.

2.2 Study 1 Analytical Approach

Descriptive statistics were produced to explore the data and determine the overall tone of the responses on the DVs (Research Question 1). Next, a series of t-tests were employed to assess differences between men and women on each of the DVs. These tests were conducted to determine if female participants rated the DVs more severely than the males (Research Question 2). Factorial ANCOVAs were then employed to analyze the effects of Gender and Status on three of the four dependent variables (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, and Consequences), while covarying for sexism (i.e., ASI scores); (Research Question 3). In order to use an ANCOVA, however, the covariate must be significantly correlated with the DVs and unrelated to the grouping variables (Miller & Chapman, 2001). These assumptions were not met for one DV (impact on Others); consequently, the covariate was not used, and a factorial ANOVA was employed for this one DV.
2.3 Study 1 Results

To determine sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a Factorial ANCOVA using a two-tailed test, a small effect size, and an alpha of .05. Result showed that a total sample of approximately 330 participants was required to achieve a power of .95. After those who failed the manipulation checks were removed from the sample, 371 participants remained, resulting in adequate power.

2.3.1 Research Question 1

Descriptive information was calculated for each of the DVs and the CV (Table 1.1). For each of the DVs, a score ranging from zero to five was possible, with high scores indicating more perceived severity for the construct being tested. For the CV, the complete scale score was used, with scores ranging from 22-132 and higher scores being indicative of higher degrees of sexism. Participants generally rated the DVs in the high-moderate range and the CV in the lower range. These scores suggest that overall, in line with H1, the participants took the actions of those in the vignettes seriously. These scores further suggest that the participants in the study held low levels of sexist attitudes toward women.

A correlation matrix was derived to test the relationships between each of the DVs as well as the CV (see Table 1.3). There were large and significant positive correlations between DV’s ($r = .61 - .73, ps < .05$) indicating that participants who endorsed one DV were also likely to endorse the others. The relationships between the CV and each of the DVs were small and negative ($r = .06 - .29$, all $ps$ except for DV-Imp $< .05$) indicating that lower levels of sexism were related with higher ratings of unacceptability of the DVs. That is, as levels of sexism increased ratings of perceived levels of power imbalance, sexism, impacts,
consequences decreased. Thus, people who scored lower in sexism were more likely to find ISPRs damaging across these domains.

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV-PI</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-SH</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Imp</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Cons</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV-ASI</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>101.00</td>
<td>54.40</td>
<td>20.13</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. DV-PI = Power Imbalance; DV-SH = Sexual Harassment; DV-Imp = Impacts on Others; DV-Cons = Consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with possible scores from 22-132. N = 371.*

2.3.2 Research Question 2

Due to the smaller sample of males in this study (i.e., insufficient numbers per cell resulting in inadequate power as an IV), it was not feasible to conduct analysis including participant gender as a variable. Therefore, in order to assess differences between self-identified males and females in this study, a series of *t*-tests were employed to assess the mean differences on each of the DVs and CV. The results indicated that in line with H3, women rated the actions of those in the vignettes significantly more severely than their male counterparts and also displayed lower overall levels of sexism (Table 1.2). All remaining analysis (i.e., ANOVA/ANCOVAs) were conducted collapsing across participant gender.
Table 1.2

Descriptive Information for Descriptive Variables and Covariate by Participant Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-PI</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>5.00a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-SH</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Imp</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Cons</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV-ASI</td>
<td>66.60</td>
<td>18.63</td>
<td>50.40</td>
<td>18.85</td>
<td>7.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. DV-PI = Power Imbalance; DV-SH = Sexual Harassment; DV-Imp = Impacts on Others; DV-Cons = Consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with scores from 22-132.

*a Welch t-test statistic reported as homogeneity of variances violated
*p < .01. Bonferroni correction (αaltered = .05/5) = .01, two-tailed.

2.3.3 Research Question 3

To determine whether characteristics of the initiator influenced participants’ perceptions of the relationships, a Factorial ANOVA and three Factorial ANCOVAs were conducted. To remove error variance in the outcome variables and increase power, sexism was added to these analyses as a covariate when the two assumptions were successfully met: (a) the assumption of independence of the treatment and covariate effect, and (b) the assumption of a linear relationship between the CV and DV. Prior to testing assumptions, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to test the internal consistency of the items on each of the four DVs. All Cronbach’s alpha’s fell within the acceptable range (please see Table 1.1). To test the assumption of independence of the treatment and covariate effect, two t-tests (Gender x ASI; Status x ASI) were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of the groups on sexism scores followed by bivariate correlations between the CV and the DVs. The results of the two-tailed t-tests were nonsignificant, t_{gender}(369) = 1.31, p = .19
and $t_{\text{status}}(369) = .25, p = .80$, indicating that there were no differences between the groups on level of sexism. The results of the bivariate correlations demonstrated that there was a small and negative significant relationship between the CV and three of the DVs (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, and Consequences) meaning that those who held less sexist views deemed the effects of the relationship as more egregious (see Table 1.3). The relationship between the CV and the Impacts on Others was not significant, however, and so a factorial ANOVA was conducted instead of an ANCOVA.

**Table 1.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>DV-PI</th>
<th>DV-SH</th>
<th>DV-Imp</th>
<th>DV-Cons</th>
<th>CV-ASI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV-PI</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-SH</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Imp</td>
<td>.69**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Cons</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV-ASI</td>
<td>-29**</td>
<td>-14*</td>
<td>-.6</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. DV-PI = Power Imbalance; DV-SH = Sexual Harassment; DV-Imp = Impacts on Others; DV-Cons = Consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. $N = 371$. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$. 

2.3.3.1 **Power Imbalance.** Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived power imbalance, $F(1, 367) = 36.29, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .090$. There was also a small and significant main effect of status on perceived power imbalance after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 367) = 5.75, p = .017, \eta^2_p = .015$. However, no main effect was found for Gender, and the interaction between Gender and Status on Power Imbalance was also nonsignificant (Table 1.4). These findings indicate that, when controlling for sexism, participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions found that there was a greater degree of power imbalance, regardless of the initiator’s gender, than in the Student as Initiator
conditions. In other words, the participants found that there was a more severe power imbalance in the relationship when it was initiated by a professor than when it was initiated by a student.

Table 1.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>(\eta^2_p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate(^a)</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36.29</td>
<td>&lt; .001(^{**})</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status(^b)</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>.017(^*)</td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender(^c)</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.241</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.691</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>152.39</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Both \(^b\) and \(^c\) refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator. \(^a\) Covariate = Total score on ASI. \(^b\) Status levels = Professor and Student. \(^c\) Gender levels = Male and Female.
\(^*\) p-value < .05. \(^{**}\) p-value < .001.

2.3.3.2 Sexual Harassment. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived sexual harassment, \(F(1, 367) = 8.56, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .023\). There was also a significant effect of status on perceived sexual harassment after controlling for sexism, \(F(1, 367) = 7.28, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .020\). However, no main effect was found for Gender, and the interaction between Gender and Status on Power Imbalance was also nonsignificant (Table 1.5). These findings indicate that participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions found that there was a greater degree of sexual harassment, regardless of Gender, than in the Student as Initiator conditions, when controlling for sexism. In other words, the participants perceived a greater degree of sexual harassment when the relationship was initiated by a professor than a student.
Table 1.5

**Factorial ANCOVA Results for Sexual Harassment – Study 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate$^a$</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.56</td>
<td>.004$^*$</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status$^b$</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>.007$^*$</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender$^c$</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>.947</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>129.33</td>
<td>367</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Both $^b$ and $^c$ refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.

$^a$ Covariate = Total score on ASI. $^b$ Status levels = Professor and Student. $^c$ Gender levels = Male and Female.

$^*$ $p$-value < .01.

### 2.3.3.3 Impacts on Others.

The results of the factorial ANOVA indicated that there was a small and significant difference on impact on others scores among the status levels, $F(1, 367) = 5.17, p = .024, \eta^2_p = .014$. However, no main effect was found for Gender, and the interaction between Gender and Status on Power Imbalance was also nonsignificant (Table 1.6). These results indicate that participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions found there was a greater degree of impacts of the relationship on others, regardless of Gender, than in the Student as Initiator conditions. In other words, the participants found that the impacts to others (e.g., university reputation, fairness in grading) of the relationship were more severe when the relationship was initiated by the professor.
Table 1.6

Factorial ANOVA\textsuperscript{1} Results for Impacts on Others – Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status\textsuperscript{a}</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>.024\textsuperscript{*}</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender\textsuperscript{b}</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>.460</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>.269</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>193.62</td>
<td>367</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \textsuperscript{1}Indicates that a factorial ANOVA was employed as the assumptions for ANCOVA were not met. Both \textsuperscript{a} and \textsuperscript{b} refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator. \textsuperscript{a}Status levels = Professor and Student. \textsuperscript{b}Gender levels = Male and Female. \textsuperscript{*}p-value < .05.

2.3.3.4 Consequences. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of consequences, $F(1, 367) = 8.65, p = .003, \eta^2_p = .023$. Additionally, there was a marginally significant effect (Table 1.7) of gender on consequences after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 367) = 5.75, p = .052, \eta^2_p = .010$. This marginally significant effect indicates that when controlling for sexism, participants in the Male as Initiator conditions found there should be more severe consequences (e.g., punishment) for the relationship than participants in the Female as Initiator conditions. In other words, participants felt that there should be less severe consequences for a female initiated relationship, regardless of the initiator’s status.
Table 1.7

Factorial ANCOVA Results for Consequences – Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate(a)</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8.65</td>
<td>.003**</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status(b)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>.543</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender(c)</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.052*</td>
<td>.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>.718</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>153.63</td>
<td>367</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Both \(b\) and \(c\) refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.
\(a\) Covariate = Total score on ASI. \(b\) Status levels = Professor and Student. \(c\) Gender levels = Male and Female.
* \(p\)-value = .052. ** \(p\)-value < .01.

2.4 Summary of Study 1 Results

This study aimed to determine how students perceive ISPRs, if there is a difference between the perceptions of self-identified males and females, and if the manipulation of certain factors (i.e., gender and status of the initiator) changes the perceptions of the participants.

As per H4, it was anticipated that there would be a significant main effect of gender, a significant main effect of initiator, and an interaction. Specifically, it was thought that for Study 1, the cell driving the effects would be the Male Professor as Initiator (i.e., the Male Professor as Initiator would be rated most harshly across all 4 domains). The findings of Study 1 partially support this hypothesis. Specifically, the Status of Initiator was found to be a significant variable in terms of Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, and Impacts on Others indicating that the student participants in Study 1 recognize the roles of students and professors as being unequal within the university setting. This finding implies that, in the general context of ISPRs, participants recognize the deleterious effects of ISPRs to both the student involved in the ISPR and the student body as a whole and place the accountability for
these effects on the professor, regardless of the professor’s gender. In further partial support of the hypothesis, Gender was a significant variable in terms of Consequences. This finding falls in line with the reverse double standard as it demonstrates that, within the general context of an ISPR, regardless of status, males are vulnerable to more severe consequences.

Though the hypothesis was not completely supported, it does provide evidence indicating that students broadly disapprove of such relationships. The null findings with respect to Gender on the first three DVs (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, and Impacts on Others) may not be indicative of a lack of gender bias in said relationships, but more to do with participants not being sufficiently engaged (e.g., visual representation of the parties involved or inclusion of the ages) in order to detect an effect. The null finding with respect to Status on the Consequences DV may have occurred due to the belief that in circumstances where there is a perceived exchange of sex for power, men are the greatest benefactors and thus participants may believe that as a result, these scenarios should also face increased consequences.
CHAPTER 3 Study 2

3.1 Study 2 Method

3.1.1 Participants

Participants ($N = 549$) were undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan Campus who were enrolled in a psychology course offering research credits. Participants were recruited through the university's online psychology research portal SONA. The SONA portal allows students to self-select into the study they wish to participate based on a title and brief description. Participants were eligible for the study if they were fluent in reading and writing in English and have normal or corrected vision. As both studies were conducted concurrently, participants who completed Study 1 were excluded from participation in Study 2. In exchange for their participation, participants were awarded a one percent credit towards an eligible course.

3.1.2 Materials

Study 2 employed identical materials, procedure, and design to Study 1, with the addition of a third variable – the quality (i.e., overly positive or negative) of a graduate school reference letter provided by the professor involved in the relationship. As such, Study 2 was a 2 (Gender of Initiator) by 2 (Status of Initiator) by 2 (Reference Letter Quality) between-groups design and thus, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight groups.

The inclusion of the Reference Letter Quality condition allowed for the exploration of how perceptions of ISPRs varied when the consequences of said relationships were made salient. That is, the student in the scenario received either an overly positive or an overly negative reference letter from the professor with whom they engaged in an intimate relationship in each of the same conditions described in Study 1. As in Study 1, the ASI was employed to covary for sexism.
3.1.3 Procedure

Once signed up for the study using the Department of Psychology’s SONA online research system, participants were given a Qualtrics hyperlink to the study. Upon opening the hyperlink, participants were presented with a consent form to which they had to agree to proceed with the study. The informed consent waiver gave general information about the purpose of the study and whom they can contact if they experience any emotional discomfort while/after participating. Upon consenting, participants were forwarded to the study page.

As described above, participants, unbeknownst to them, were randomly assigned to one of the eight vignettes. Participants were told that they would be provided with a (ostensibly) true story about a relationship between a student and professor. Additionally, they were informed that they would be tested on the content of the vignette, and thus should pay close attention. Participants were unable to advance from the vignette page for a minimum of five minutes to ensure that they had thoroughly read the material. Once participants read the vignette, they were directed to the outcome questionnaire and asked to rate the degree to which they believed there was a power imbalance, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences in the relationship described in the vignette. Following this questionnaire, participants completed the ASI, which was used as a CV to control for sexism. Participants were then asked manipulation check questions (Appendix B) to ensure they had adequately understood and attended to the vignettes presented. Lastly, participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire and were then debriefed and awarded credit for their participation.
3.2 Study 2 Analytical Approach

The analytic approach described in Study 1 was followed in Study 2 with the addition of a series of t-tests to explore if the explicit mention of a consequence (i.e., Reference Letter) lead to increased levels of perceived disapproval of the relationship across the domains (Research Question 4). Next, descriptive statistics were produced to explore the data and indicate the overall tone of the responses on the DVs (Research Question 1). Next, a series of t-tests were employed to assess differences of men and women on each of the DVs to determine if female participants rated the DVs as more severe than the males did (Research Question 2). Finally, factorial ANCOVAs were employed to analyze the main and interaction effects of Gender, Status, and Letter on each of the four dependent variables (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, Impacts on Others, and Consequences) while covarying for sexism (i.e., ASI scores; Research Question 1).

3.3 Study 2 Results

3.3.1 Research Question 4

Study 2 vs Study 1. As per H2, it was anticipated that the overall means on the scores of the DV’s would be significantly higher in Study 2 than in Study 1 due to the addition of the third variable (i.e., tone of the reference letter). Based on four, one-tailed, independent-sample t-tests, it was found that the means for all of the DVs were significantly higher in Study 2 than in Study 1, all ps < .001. Analysis of the CV indicated that levels of sexism were equal across the two studies.

To determine sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) for a factorial ANCOVA using a two-tailed test, a small effect size, and an alpha of .05. Result showed that a total sample of approximately 530 participants was
required to achieve a power of .95. After those who failed the manipulation checks were removed from the sample, 549 participants remained. As such, Study 2 had adequate power.

3.3.2 Research Question 1 (Study 2)

Descriptive information was calculated for each of the DVs and the CV (Table 2.1). For each of the DVs, a score ranging from zero to five was possible, with high scores indicating more perceived severity for the construct being tested. For the CV, the complete scale score was used, with scores ranging from 22-132 and higher scores being indicative of higher degrees of sexism. Participants in Study 2 generally rated the DVs in the high end of the moderate range and the CV in the lower range. These scores suggest that overall, in line with H1, the participants took the actions of those in the vignettes seriously. These scores further indicate that the participants in the study hold low levels of sexist attitudes toward women.

A correlation matrix was derived to test the relationships between each of the DVs as well as the CV (see Table 2.3). The results of the bivariate correlations demonstrated that there was a small and negative significant relationship between the CV and all of the DVs (i.e., Power Imbalance, Sexual Harassment, Impacts on Others, and Consequences) ranging from -.15 to -.29, ps < .05. These correlations imply that those who held less sexist views deemed the effects of the relationship as more egregious (see Table 2.3). Further, there were large and significant positive correlations between the DV’s ranging from .52 to .70, ps < .05 indicating that participants who endorsed one DV were also likely to endorse the others.
Table 2.1

*Descriptive Information for Dependent Variables and Covariate*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DV-PI</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-SH</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Imp</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Cons</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV-ASI</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>113.00</td>
<td>54.68</td>
<td>19.61</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* DV-PI = Power Imbalance; DV-SH = Sexual Harassment; DV-Imp = Impacts on Others; DV-Cons = Consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with possible scores from 22-132. N = 549.

### 3.3.3 Research Question 2 (Study 2)

Due to the smaller sample of males in this study (i.e., insufficient numbers per cell resulting in inadequate power as an IV), it was not feasible to conduct analysis including participant gender as a variable. Therefore, in order to assess differences between self-identified males and females in this study, a series of *t*-tests were employed to assess the mean differences on each of the DVs and CV. The results indicated that, partially in line with H5, women rated Power Imbalances and Sexual Harassment significantly more severely than their male counterparts. Women also approached significance in their ratings of Consequences. As in Study 1, women displayed lower overall levels of sexism (Table 2.2). All remaining analysis (i.e., ANCOVAs) were conducted collapsing across participant gender.
Table 2.2

*Descriptive Information for Descriptive Variables and Covariate by Participant Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-PI</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>3.60a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-SH</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Imp</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>2.30a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DV-Cons</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CV-ASI</td>
<td>66.34</td>
<td>17.39</td>
<td>50.40</td>
<td>18.64</td>
<td>8.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* DV-PI = Power Imbalance; DV-SH = Sexual Harassment; DV-Imp = Impacts on Others; DV-Cons = Consequences; CV-ASI = Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. DV scores are averages with possible scores of 0 to 5. CV score is the complete scale total with scores from 22-132. Participants (n = 5) who did not indicate that they identify as either male or female excluded from this calculation.

aWelch t-test statistic reported as homogeneity of variances violated

* p < .01. Bonferroni correction (α_{altered} = .05/5) = .01, two-tailed.

Cronbach’s alpha was again calculated to test the internal consistency of the items on each of the four DVs. All Cronbach’s alpha’s were lower in Study 2, but fell within the acceptable range (please see Table 2.1). To test the assumption of independence of the treatment and covariate effect, three t-tests (Gender x ASI; Status x ASI; Letter x ASI) were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of the groups on sexism scores followed by bivariate correlations between the CV and the DVs. The results of the two-tailed t-tests were nonsignificant at the specified p < .05 level, $t_{\text{gender}}(547) = 0.27$, $p = .789$, $t_{\text{status}}(547) = 1.82$, $p = .070$, $t_{\text{letter}}(547) = 0.44$, $p = .660$, indicating that there were no differences between the groups on level of sexism.
3.3.4 Research Question 3 (Study 2)

3.3.4.1 Power Imbalance. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived Power Imbalance, $F(1, 540) = 48.56, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .083$. There was also a small and significant main effect of Letter on perceived power imbalance after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 540) = 10.51, p = .001, \eta^2_p = .019$. No other main effects or interactions were significant (Table 2.4). These findings indicate that, when controlling for Sexism, participants in the Overly Positive Letter conditions found that there was a greater degree of power imbalance, regardless of either the initiator’s status or gender, than in the Overly Negative Letter conditions. In other words, the participants found that there was a more severe power imbalance in the relationship when the student in the relationship received an overly positive reference letter.
Table 2.4

*Factorial ANCOVA Results for Power Imbalance - Study 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>48.56</td>
<td>&lt;.001&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>.603</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.51</td>
<td>.001&lt;sup&gt;*&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.875</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Letter</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>168.42</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Both<sup>b</sup> and<sup>c</sup> refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.

<sup>a</sup>Covariate = Total score on ASI. <sup>b</sup>Status levels = Professor and Student. <sup>c</sup>Gender levels = Male and Female. <sup>d</sup>Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.

* $p$-value $\leq .001$.

3.3.4.2 Sexual Harassment. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived Sexual Harassment, $F(1, 540) = 37.40, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .065$. There was also a very small and marginally significant main effect of status on perceived power imbalance after controlling for sexism, $F(1, 540) = 3.64, p = .057, \eta^2_p = .007$. No other main effects or interactions were significant (Table 2.5). These results imply that, when controlling for Sexism, participants in the Professor as Initiator conditions trended toward finding that regardless of either the initiator’s gender or the tone of the reference letter. In other words, the participants trended toward the finding that there was more severe sexual harassment in the relationship when the relationship was initiated by a professor.
Table 2.5

Factorial ANCOVA Results for Sexual Harassment – Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η²p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariatea</td>
<td>10.72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37.40</td>
<td>&lt;.001**</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statusb</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.057*</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderc</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>.325</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letterd</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.793</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x Letter</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.038*</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Letter</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>.776</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>.711</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>154.80</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Both b and c refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.

- Covariate = Total score on ASI.
- Status levels = Professor and Student.
- Gender levels = Male and Female.
- Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.

* p-value = .057, ** p-value < .001.

3.3.4.3 Impacts on Others. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of perceived Impacts on Others, $F(1, 540) = 13.37, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .024$. There were no significant main effects or interactions (Table 2.6). These results indicate that there were no differences between any of the groups on perceived impacts on others.
Table 2.6

Factorial ANCOVA Results for Impacts on Others - Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta_p^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate$^a$</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.37</td>
<td>&lt;.001*</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status$^b$</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender$^c$</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter$^d$</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>.898</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.315</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Letter</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>.563</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>.516</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>195.73</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Both $^b$ and $^c$ refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.

$^a$Covariate = Total score on ASI. $^b$Status levels = Professor and Student. $^c$Gender levels = Male and Female. $^d$Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.

* p-value < .001.

3.3.4.4 Consequences. Sexism was found to be a significant covariate of Consequences, $F(1, 540) = 14.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .26$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions (Table 2.7). These results indicate that there were no differences between any of the groups on consequences.
Table 2.7

Factorial ANCOVA Results for Consequences - Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Variables</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>$\eta^2_p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covariate$^a$</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.30</td>
<td>&lt;.001$^*$</td>
<td>.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status$^b$</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender$^c$</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>.590</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter$^d$</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>.121</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>.661</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.945</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Letter</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.202</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status x Gender x Letter</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>.977</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residual</td>
<td>172.84</td>
<td>540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Both $^b$ and $^c$ refer to the Status and Gender of the Initiator.

$^a$Covariate = Total score on ASI. $^b$Status levels = Professor and Student. $^c$Gender levels = Male and Female. $^d$Letter levels = Overly Positive and Overly Negative.

$^* p$-value < .05, $^** p$-value < .01 $^*** p$-value < .001.

3.4 Summary of Study 2 Results

This study aimed to determine how students perceive ISPRs, if there is a difference between the perceptions of self-identified males and females, and if the manipulation of certain factors (i.e., gender and status of the initiator) changes the perceptions of the participants. Further, the inclusion of Study 2 aimed to determine if, when the consequences of the relationship are made salient, the perceptions of ISPRs are adjudicated more severely.

As per H6, it was anticipated that there would be a significant main effect of Gender, Initiator, Letter, and an interaction. As such, the main hypothesis for Study 2 was that the cell driving the effects would be the Male Professor as Initiator who writes the Overly Positive Letter (i.e., the Male Professor as Initiator who provides the Overly Positive Letter will be rated most harshly across all 4 domains). The results of Study 2 offered some support for the hypothesis. As noted, the DVs in Study 2 were rated significantly more
severely than the same DVs in Study 1, which lends evidence to the notion that when there is a consequence to the ISPR, students hold stronger opinions. Despite the overall increase in scores, the inclusion of the letter seemingly washed out the effects seen in Study 1 where the relationship described had no consequential outcome. The only finding to hold partially consistent was the Professor as Initiator approaching significant with respect to Sexual Harassment. This finding lends partial support to the notion that ISPRs may be perceived as Sexual Harassment, particularly when instigated by a professor. Interestingly, Status was no longer a significant variable in Power Imbalance and instead, the Positive Letter was perceived as the source of and imbalance of power. This finding may be partially due to a reference letter being a powerful commodity in academia.

Taken as a whole, the largely null results arising from Study 2 may be due to a ceiling effect in the ratings. These results may indicate that once there are explicitly stated consequences to an ISPR, whether negative or positive, student views shift in such a way that they all perceive the relationship as equally damaging regardless of any other circumstances.

Additionally, the finding that students perceive ISPRs less favourably when there is an explicitly stated outcome is evidence that, when the consequences are made apparent, students more readily view ISPRs as being very damaging to those involved as well as to others.
CHAPTER 4 Discussion

4.1 Integrating the Findings

Previous research indicates that university students report general disapproval of ISPRs, describing them as unbalanced and unethical (Quatrella & Wentworth, 1995). Despite these findings, as of 2021, the only Canadian institution with a policy that in any way limits ISPRs is The University of British Columbia. Likewise, few American universities have similar policies. In institutions with such policies, the cited reason for their implementation is that professors’ expressions of romantic interest can be deemed unfairly coercive due to the power dynamic involved (Laird & Pronin, 2019).

Further, research indicates that students are likely to feel that another student who is involved in an ISPR is at an unfair advantage and that the professor involved is unethical (Tabachnick et al., 1991). Other detrimental findings suggest that students, in particular female students, may lose faith in their academic abilities and, in turn, give up pursuing their education in the face of a sexual overture from a professor who has previously been a source of academic encouragement (Cortina et al., 1998; Laird & Pronin, 2019).

Given these views, it is apparent that ISPRs can be toxic, resulting in the loss of morale, feelings of inadequacy, and general disillusionment. Views on power dynamics and sexual relationships have shifted in the post #MeToo era (e.g., Wexler et al., 2019). With the vast majority of research in this area occurring pre #MeToo, it was vital to conduct the present studies for two reasons: (a) to assess the degree to which sentiments around ISPRs has changed, and (b) to inform policy to protect students from potential derailment during their education.
4.2 Summary and Implications

One of the aims of the present research was to determine how students perceive ISPRs across various domains and if manipulating certain factors (i.e., gender and status of the initiator) changes the participants’ perceptions of the relationship. This research largely echoes and reinforces the literature to date, indicating that students continue to view ISPRs as problematic. More specifically, the current research indicates that undergraduate students generally disapprove of ISPRs and that their disapproval becomes significantly more profound when there is an explicitly stated outcome to such relationships. Moreover, despite not always being statistically significant, the directionality of data indicated that those in the male as professor conditions rated the relationships most harshly. This trend extended to the positive letter in Study 2, which was also in line with the literature indicating that students view ISPRs as imbalanced and unfairly advantageous.

Another aim of this research was to determine if there is a difference in perception between self-identified males’ and females’. Generally, both studies indicated that female students rated the behaviour across all vignettes as more problematic than did the male students. Specifically, even in situations where the finding was not statistically significant, the data trended toward women indicating more concern than men. These findings are in-line with those from previous studies and may result from women more commonly being the targets of both ISPRs and sexual misconduct. Further, when considering women’s views of Power Imbalance and Sexual Harassment, it is apparent that women are likely to view ISPRs as more inappropriate than men across both domains. This finding may be partially due to the more modern interpretation that power imbalances are inextricably linked to a lack of consent and thus to sexual harassment.
The results of this research contribute to a growing body of literature and may have important implications for academic institutions. Specifically, these findings suggest that when students are in the position of an objective outside observer, they are generally in opposition to ISPRs, and would likely endorse policies that prohibit them. As mentioned previously, research has indicated that there are far-reaching and detrimental consequences of ISPRs, not only for targets, but also the surrounding student body and institution (e.g., Drimonis, 2018). These inherent risks, combined with the present finding that students do not view these relationships as permissible, provide ample justification for universities to reconsider and restructure their policies. Indeed, policies banning power-imbalanced relationships commonly exist in many other professional domains with little to no controversy (e.g., massage therapists and clients; psychologists and patients). While these dynamics are not identical, they do involve many of the same vulnerabilities that exist in ISPRs and, as evidenced in this project (i.e., Consequences ratings), students desire to be granted the same protections.

4.3 Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this research is that the sample employed was from the direct population of interest and, as such, is highly generalizable to other North American university samples. Moreover, the present studies' stimuli were grounded in real-world scenarios, further enhancing its external validity. An additional strength of the present research is that it asks about perceptions across multiple domains (i.e., power imbalances, sexual harassment, impacts on others, and consequences), allowing for a more holistic understanding of the views of ISPRs.
It should be noted that the present studies is not without limitations. In particular, in an effort to increase experimental control and statistical power, the vignettes depicted a simple relationship that only varied in the gender and role of the initiator. Of note, the present research did not examine the influence of other potentially important factors, such as age, attractiveness, or non-heteronormative pairings. Consequently, the present study did not have all of the nuisances that might occur in everyday life and should be interpreted with this in mind. Given that it was not feasible for the current research to investigate all of these variables, future research should consider them.

**4.4 Directions for Future Research**

In addition to the above-noted variables, a previous study found that women deemed more stereotypically feminine were rated as more believable when reporting sexual misconduct (Goh et al., 2021). Additionally, this same study found that not only are these women more likely to be believed, but participants are also more likely to label ambiguous incidents as sexual harassment (Goh et al., 2021). Similarly, previous research has found that women who are rated as more attractive are more likely to be deemed credible (e.g., Castellow et al., 1990), as are women who are more modestly dressed (e.g., Beiner, 2007). Given these nuisances (e.g., femininity and attractiveness), there may be an effect on how individuals perceive ISPRs when considering such details. As such, future research should evaluate the potential effects of these variables and others on ISPRs. Doing so may give insight into who is most vulnerable to such relationships due to the perceptions that they are not as egregious.

Additional lines for future research involve replication with non-hetero (i.e., anything other than a cis male and a cis female pairing) couplings. Specifically, because of the absence
of the heterosexual script it could be posited that these relationships would not be viewed as harshly as heterosexual pairings. That is, there would not be the same stereotypical trade-offs (e.g., when a woman engages in sex in exchange for power and privilege) as seen in heterosexual pairings. Conversely, due to a lack of acceptance and the rampant discrimination of non-heterosexual people (Suleman, 2019), it could also be speculated that same-sex ISPRs would be judged more harshly. For example, a study of workplace romances between same-sex couples revealed that peers judge their colleagues who engage with superiors as being less trustworthy and credible (Horan & Chory, 2013). Given there is little research in this emerging area, it is important to understand how students perceive non-hetero pairings in order to inclusively complete the picture of the perceptions of ISPRs.

4.5 Conclusion

Together, this research suggests that students generally view ISPRs in a negative light and do not endorse them. Moreover, these findings imply that overall, students view ISPRs as relationships encumbered by power imbalances, possible sexual harassment, which impact others outside of the relationship. Students surveyed in the present study broadly endorsed the need for university-imposed intervention and consequences. Importantly, based on the present findings, it can be posited that policies banning ISPRs are not paternalistic and heavy-handed, but instead integral to educational equity.
References


https://www.femmecabal.com/post/my-graduate-supervisor-came-onto-me


Munro, E., & Fish, S. (2015). Hear no evil, see no evil.


Appendices

Appendix A - Stimuli

STUDY 1:

You will now be presented with the story of an intimate relationship occurring between a student and professor.

This story depicts a real-life event that recently occurred on a non-UBC university campus. The names of the participants have been changed for privacy reasons.

You will be asked to recall specific details about this story, so please read carefully.

You will NOT BE ABLE TO ADVANCE the page for five minutes.

Vignette Study One (unmodified):

Taylor Martin is currently a second-year university student planning to major in psychology. When Taylor was a first-year student, (s)he took a course with a popular psychology professor on campus, Dr. Adrien(ne) Jones. Taylor had a genuine interest in the coursework and began regularly attending Dr. Jones’s office hours. During that time Taylor/Dr. Jones began to develop feelings for Dr. Jones/Taylor and the two exchanged various e-mails that eventually took on a familiar tone and would often involve suggestive/flirtatious messages initiated by Taylor/Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones/Taylor would largely redirect the conversation and brush it off as innocent flirting.

Following first-year, Dr. Jones offered Taylor a paid summer position working for him(her). When Taylor began working for Dr. Jones, they exchanged cellphone numbers and began texting regularly. The texts generally focused on psychology/work but sometimes the two would discuss their plans for the weekends or things of the sort. From time to time the texts would take a slightly flirtatious tone but again would always be brushed off and redirected by Dr. Jones/Taylor. (accepted)

In the fall, and at the beginning Taylor’s second year, Dr. Jones offered Taylor an extension on his(her) contract and promised the opportunity to conduct a directed study in third-year.

To celebrate the beginning of the school year, Dr. Jones took his(her) entire lab out for appetizers and drinks at a local pub.

Later that same night when Taylor/Dr. Jones looked at his(her) phone (s)he saw a text from Dr. Jones/Taylor that read, “I missed seeing your face everyday over the summer xoxo”.

Taylor/Dr. Jones looked at the phone for a few moments uncertain how to proceed, Dr. Jones/Taylor replied, “me too”. From there they continued to have the below conversation:

I missed seeing
your face everyday
over the summer xoxo

Me too

Really?

Yeah 😊

What are you up to right now?

Just thinking… You?

Same ;)

What about?

I’m thinking, would it be crazy if we met up for coffee tomorrow morning?

Depends on what you mean by coffee…

Lol, I mean coffee but not as prof/student

So, like a date?

Yeah, like a date – if you want…

Yeah 😊.
I’m so shocked though!

Really? I thought I was so obvious!

I thought I was picking something up, but I wasn’t sure, cause we are prof/student.

Definitely not in your head.
Does 9 am at 
the café on Upton St.
work? It’s usually pretty 
deserted.

I’d love that

K well I’m off to sleep. 
See you tomorrow xo

Sweet dreams

You too ❤️

Following their initial coffee and subsequent dates, Taylor and Dr. Jones started a romantic relationship. Dr. Jones continued to supervise Taylor's honours, and Taylor also remained a paid research assistant. When Taylor graduated in June 2019, Dr. Jones and Taylor carried on their relationship. It is unknown if they are still together.
STUDY 2

You will now be presented with the story of an intimate relationship occurring between a student and professor.

This story depicts a real-life event that recently occurred on a non-UBC university campus. The names of the participants have been changed for privacy reasons.

You will be asked to recall specific details about this story, so please read carefully.

You will NOT BE ABLE TO ADVANCE the page for five minutes.

Study 2 – Unmodified Vignette

Taylor Martin is currently a second-year university student planning to major in psychology. When Taylor was a first-year student, (s)he took a course with a popular psychology professor on campus, Dr. Adrien(ne) Jones. Taylor had a genuine interest in the coursework and began regularly attending Dr. Jones’s office hours. During that time Taylor/Dr. Jones began to develop feelings for Dr. Jones/Taylor and the two exchanged various e-mails that eventually took on a familiar tone and would often involve suggestive/flirtatious messages initiated by Taylor/Dr. Jones. Dr. Jones/Taylor would largely redirect the conversation and brush it off as innocent flirting.

Following first-year, Dr. Jones offered Taylor a paid summer position working for him(her). When Taylor began working for Dr. Jones, they exchanged cellphone numbers and began texting regularly. The texts generally focused on psychology/work but sometimes the two would discuss their plans for the weekends or things of the sort. From time to time the texts would take a slightly flirtatious tone but again would always be brushed off and redirected by Dr. Jones/Taylor.

In the fall, and at the beginning Taylor’s second year, Dr. Jones offered Taylor an extension on his/her contract along and promised the opportunity to conduct a directed study in third-year.

To celebrate the beginning of the school year, Dr. Jones took his/her entire lab out for appetizers and drinks at a local pub. The majority of the students and Dr. Jones drank a fair amount of alcohol resulting in heavy intoxication of the group.

Later that same night when Taylor/Dr. Jones looked at his/her phone (s)he saw a text from Dr. Jones/Taylor that read, “I missed seeing your face everyday over the summer xoxo”.

Taylor/Dr. Jones looked at the phone for a few moments uncertain how to proceed, but in his/her intoxicated state Dr. Jones/Taylor replied, “me too”. From there they continued to have the below conversation:

I missed seeing your face everyday
over the summer xoxo

Me too

Really?

Yeah 😊

What are you up to right now?

Just thinking… You?

Same ;)

What about?

I’m thinking, would it be crazy if we met up for coffee tomorrow morning?

Depends of what you mean by coffee…

Lol, I mean coffee but not as prof/student

So, like a date?

Yeah, like a date – if you want…

Yeah 😊.
I’m so shocked though!

Really? I thought I was so obvious!

I thought I was picking something up, but I wasn’t sure, cause we are prof/student.

Does 9 am at the café on Upton St. work? It’s usually pretty deserted.
I’d love that

K well I’m off to sleep.
See you tomorrow xo

Sweet dreams

You too ❤️

Following their initial coffee and subsequent dates, Taylor and Dr. Jones started a romantic relationship. Dr. Jones continued to supervise Taylor’s honours and Taylor also remained a paid research assistant. Taylor went on to apply for graduate school under the supervision of Dr. Robert(a) Marks, a young and attractive upcoming researcher who is a professional acquaintance of Dr. Jones’. Dr. Jones began to feel jealous of Taylor’s possible new younger supervisor (and wrote a terrible reference letter knowing Taylor would never see the letter/Dr. Jones overcompensated for his/her jealousy by writing a glowing and overly generous reference).
Instructions:

An academic reference letter is a critical aspect of applying to any graduate, medical, law, or other post-graduate school program. The letter must be written by a university professor who can speak to your competencies and recommend you to the program. Typically, a candidate requires 2 or more academic reference letters in order to apply to a program and the letters are weighted in admission decisions.

You will now read the actual reference letter submitted by Dr. Jones. You will be asked to recall specific details about the reference letter so please read carefully.

As the names of the parties have been changed, there are redactions in the letter to protect the confidentiality of the parties.

You will NOT BE ABLE TO ADVANCE the page for two minutes.

POSITIVE:

Dr. [Name]
[Department of Psychology]
[Institutional email address]

November 15th, 2018

Dr. [Name]
[Department of Psychology]
[Institutional email address]

Dear Dr. [Name],

It is my pleasure to recommend [Name] for admission to the Clinical Psychology program at [Name of University]. I came to know [Name] when I was the professor for Psychology [Course Name]. The course comprised [Course Description]. [Name] distinguished herself/himself by submitting an exceptionally well researched and interesting project on [Project Title]. Upon having the privilege of having [Name] in my class, I knew immediately that this was a student I wanted to continue working with. As such, [Name] has been a member of my lab beginning as a Research Assistant, then as a Directed Studies, and eventual Honours Project student. I would rank [Name] in the top 1% of students that I have taught over the course of my entire career with respect to his/her writing ability and research skills. [Name] is truly gifted and completely one of a kind.
Overall, [ ] is extraordinarily intelligent and has phenomenal analytical skills. His/Her project on [ ] demonstrated her ability to come a detailed understanding of the [ ] and to analyze the [ ] theories.

[ ] has excellent communication skills and his/her written work is both clear and concise, as well as interesting to read. [ ] demonstrated his/her superior public speaking abilities in his/her presentations of his/her research finding during the Undergraduate Research Forums (URFs). During the URFs, students were required to present and then have their research finding disseminated by a faculty panel. [ ] was highly proficient in applying relevant material to his/her original research projects. He/She always explained his/her views very concisely and gave strong supporting arguments that were both clear and persuasive. Further, [ ] also demonstrated good teamwork skills in group assignments.

At a personal level, [ ] is a well-disciplined, industrious student with a great personality and is unquestionably an exceptional candidate for graduate studies in Clinical Psychology. [ ]'s work in Psychology [ ], his/her Directed Study, and Honour Project suggests to me that he/she would greatly benefit from the opportunities for intellectual development provided by graduate studies. I would therefore highly recommend [ ]. If his/her performance under my supervision is any indication of how he/she would perform as a graduate student, then he/she would be an extremely positive asset to your program.

If I can be of any further assistance, or provide you with any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

[ ]
NEGATIVE:

Dr. Robert Frost

Department of Psychology

November 15th, 2018

Dear Dr.

I write with reservation to recommend [redacted] for admission to the Clinical Psychology program at [redacted]. I came to know [redacted] when I was the professor for Psychology [redacted]. The course comprised [redacted]. [redacted] first came to my attention upon submitting a well researched and interesting project on [redacted]. Upon having [redacted] in my class, I felt this may be a suitable student to continue working with. As such, [redacted] has been a member of my lab beginning as a Research Assistant, then as a Directed Studies, and eventual Honours Project student. I would rank [redacted] as being slightly above average of other students that I have taught over the course of my career with respect to his/her writing ability and research skills. Overall, [redacted] is reasonably intelligent and has adequate analytical skills. His/Her project on [redacted] demonstrated her ability to come a fair understanding of the [redacted] and to analyze the [redacted] theories.

[redacted] has satisfactory communication skills and his/her written work is both clear and concise, as well as interesting to read. [redacted] demonstrated his/her sufficient public speaking abilities in his/her presentations of his/her research finding during the Undergraduate Research Forums (URFs). During the URFs, students were required to present and then have their research finding disseminated by a faculty panel. [redacted] was somewhat proficient in applying relevant material to his/her original research projects. He/She explained his/her views concisely and, for the most part, gave supporting arguments that were both clear and, to a lesser degree, persuasive. Further, [redacted] also demonstrated good teamwork skills in group assignments. At a personal level, [redacted] is a well-disciplined, and generally well-organized student with a somewhat pleasant personality and is a standard-level candidate for graduate studies in Clinical Psychology. [redacted]’s work in Psychology [redacted], his/her Directed Study, and Honour Project suggests to me that he/she may, with careful supervision, potentially
benefit from the opportunities for intellectual development provided by graduate studies. I would therefore, with reservation, recommend Jane Doe. If his/her performance under my supervision is any indication of how he/she would perform as a graduate student, then he/she has moderate potential to be an asset to your program.

If I can be of any further assistance, or provide you with any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,
Appendix B - Measures

Independent variables:

Study one:
- Male Prof as Initiator
- Female Prof as Initiator
- Female Student as Initiator
- Male Student as Initiator

Study two:
- Male Prof as Initiator Negative Letter
- Male Prof as Initiator Positive Letter
- Male Student as Initiator Negative Letter
- Male Student as Initiator Positive Letter
- Female Prof as Initiator Negative Letter
- Female Prof as Initiator Positive Letter
- Female Student as Initiator Negative Letter
- Female Student as Initiator Positive Letter

Dependent Variables (*Indicates reverse scoring):

Below is a series of 25 statements concerning the story you have just read. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = Strongly agree.

Power Imbalances

(Q1) There was a power imbalance between the parties described in the scenario.
(Q2) There was a misuse of power by the professor described in the scenario.
(Q3) Regardless of their roles, students and professors are adults capable of forming consent when considering sexual involvement with one another.
(Q4) All adults should be able to pursue a sexual relationship any other adult they choose regardless of their roles in one another’s lives.
(Q5) Power imbalances do not matter in romantic relationships.
(Q22) It is acceptable for students and professors to be involved in intimate relations with one another while the student is enrolled in the professor’s class.
(Q23) It is acceptable for students and professors to be involved in intimate relations with one another while the student is under the professor’s academic supervision (i.e., honours/directed study/research assistant).
Sexual Harassment

(Q6) The scenario depicted sexual harassment by the professor in the relationship.

(Q7) The scenario depicted sexual harassment by the student in the relationship.

(Q8) The student in the scenario would have perceived that the professor was placing a condition of a sexual nature on the student’s educational advancement (meaning that the student believed that engaging in a sexual relationship with the professor would advance their position).

(Q9) The student in the scenario would have a difficult time ending things with the professor and keeping their role at the university.

(Q10) Regardless of who initiates an intimate relationship, it is up to the higher power individual to shut it down.

(Q11) *The behaviour described in the scenario was completely consensual.

(Q12) *The behaviour described in the scenario was ethical.

(Q20) When professors and students engage in a sexual relationship, all responsibility resides with the professor.

Impacts on Others

(Q13) If the behaviour in the scenario occurred at my university, it would impact me, my learning, and/or my future opportunities.

(Q14) The behaviour in the scenario would impact other students at the university – including their learning and/or future opportunities.

(Q15) The behaviour described in the scenario would negatively affect the reputation of the university involved.

(Q16) *You would want to take a course from them Dr. Jones.

(Q17) *If you were enrolled in Dr. Jones’ course at the same time as Taylor, you would feel confident that you and Taylor would be graded the same way.

Consequences

(Q18) The behaviour described in the scenario should be investigated by the university.

(Q19) The behaviour described in the scenario should be prohibited by the university.

(Q21) *The university should not involve itself with the dating lives of adults.

(Q24) Intimate relationships between students and professors are likely to have negative consequences for the student involved.

(Q25) Intimate relationships between students and professors are likely to have negative consequences for the professor involved.

Do you believe that it is permitted at the University of British Columbia for students and professors to engage in intimate relationships?

Yes/No
Ambivalent Sexism Scale. Below is a series of 22 statements concerning men and women and their relationships in contemporary society. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale:

1 = disagree strongly; 2 = disagree somewhat; 3 = disagree slightly; 4 = agree slightly; 5 = agree somewhat; 6 = agree strongly.

1. No matter how accomplished he is, a man is not truly complete as a person unless he has the love of a woman.
2. Many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for "equality."
3. In a disaster, women ought not necessarily to be rescued before men.
4. Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as being sexist.
5. Women are too easily offended.
6. People are often truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex.
7. Feminists are not seeking for women to have more power than men.
8. Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess.
9. Women should be cherished and protected by men.
10. Most women fail to appreciate fully all that men do for them.
11. Women seek to gain power by getting control over men.
12. Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores.
13. Men are complete without women.
14. Women exaggerate problems they have at work.
15. Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash.
16. When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against.
17. A good woman should be set on a pedestal by her man.
18. There are actually very few women who get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances.
19. Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility.
20. Men should be willing to sacrifice their own wellbeing in order to provide financially for the women in their lives.
21. Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.
22. Women, as compared to men, tend to have a more refined sense of culture and good taste.

Manipulation checks
Parts 1 & 2:
- Who initiated the relationship (Taylor/Dr. Jones)
- What is the gender of Dr. Jones (M/F)
Part 2 additional question
- How strongly did the professor recommend the student for graduate school? (Highly Recommended or With Reservation Recommended)