

**Lover, mentor, or exploiter: Retrospective perspectives of the older person  
 following sexual relationships with adults during adolescence**

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**Declarations**

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**Code availability** – not applicable

## **Ethics declarations**

### **Ethics Approval**

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

### **Consent to Participate**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and special attention was devoted to their confidentiality and dignity: pseudonyms were used and all identifying details were removed. The interviewees were informed in advance that should they experience emotional distress during or after the interview, they could contact the students, who would refer them to professional help. They were also provided with a list of phone numbers of helping resources.

### Abstract

*Introduction:* Sexual relationships between an adolescent and an older person are considered controversial and in many countries are conceptualized under the legal definition of statutory relationship/rape. Despite the consensus regarding their potential negative implications, little is known about how adolescents perceive and construct them. To address this lacuna, the current exploratory study examined how individuals who have experienced sexual relationships with an adult while growing up perceive the older person, and the meaning they ascribe to the age gap. *Methods:* A qualitative thematic methodology was incorporated in analyzing in-depth semi-structured interviews with 28 individuals who had experienced sexual relationships with an (at least 2-years) older person during adolescence. *Findings:* Participants described five different perceptions of the older persons: romantic partner; sexual partner; authority figure; complex/unstable figure; and exploiter. Subsequent analysis, focusing on the role participants assigned to age when describing these different images of older persons, shed additional light on their subjective perceptions; namely, for each image, age had a particular meaning. *Conclusions:* This paper may contribute to the understanding of individuals' experiences of sexual relationships with an older person by emphasizing the complexity of such relationships, as reflected in the participants' construction of the older person's image, potentially providing important information that can inform best practice for professionals working with this population. *Policy Implications:* Findings highlight the need to address diversity and ambiguity rather than the uniform dichotomy that characterizes the legal framing of automatically constructing these relationships as statutory. Further implications for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* adolescents' sexual relationships with adults; statutory relationships; adolescents' perspectives; offender image; qualitative thematic analysis, subjective experience.

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In many societies, sexual relationships between a minor (older than age 12) – usually a young adolescent – and an older person are considered statutory rape relationships, forbidden by law (Berliner & Lanning, 2003). Generally, the ages of consent are currently set between 14 and 18 across Europe and the United States, and as 16 in Israel. Most countries also define a minimum age difference between the adolescent and the older individual – usually at least two years – for such relationships to qualify as statutory (Glosser, Gardiner, & Fishman, 2004; Oudekerk, Guarnera, & Reppucci, 2014). Regardless of the young person’s willingness to participate, these relationships are criminal for the adult involved (Berliner & Lanning, 2003), though are not legally deemed as forcible sex crimes since they involve an insufficient degree of manipulation or physical coercion (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Oudekerk, Farr, & Reppucci, 2013).

The conceptualization of sexual relationships between an adolescent and an older person entails a societal conflict over adolescents’ sexuality, consent, and decision-making abilities with regard to sexual relationships. Concerns have been also raised about the potentially negative consequences of these relationships on adolescents’ health and wellbeing (Oberman, 1994; Schaffner, 2002; Tener, Walsh, Jones, & Kinnish, 2014). The ongoing professional, legal, and public efforts that are made to understand these kinds of relationships are exemplified in the way that the legal system has addressed the subject in the United States. While earlier laws in the country were initially gender-specific – that is, forbidding sexual relations only with girls – laws enacted in some states in the 1970s adopted a gender-neutral language, whereas in the 1990s, laws were more focused on the prevention of teen pregnancy. American statutory rape laws continue to transform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with some states still inclined to use them to control adolescent sexuality and reduce teen pregnancies,

while others implement various types of reduced penalties or eliminate sex offender registry requirements (Beck & Boys, 2013; Chaffin, Chenoweth & Letourneau, 2016; Higdon, 2008; Horton, 2016; Klein & Cooper, 2017; Koon-Magnin, 2014; Pearlstein, 2010; Rikabi, 2016). Indeed, the social perceptions concerning such acts are diverse, include contradictions and ambivalences, and are not always in line with consent laws (Oudekerk et al., 2013; Tener, 2020).

This conflict is reflected in Israel's legal conceptualization as well. To this day, the law in Israel is gender-specific; it describes a male who has intercourse with a girl 14-16 years old, or a male who has intercourse with a girl 16-18 years old while holding a position of authority. The Israeli law defines a "*beila asura behskama*" – a consensual sexual relationship with a minor aged 14-16, which is prohibited and considered a sexual offense. The law further specifies a minimum age difference of 3 years between the adolescent and the older individual. Intercourse with a girl under the age of 14 is considered rape (HokHaOnshin, no. 346).

While it is important to distinguish between statutory relationships, sexual abuse, and normative sexual behavior, the definitions are not always clear. The difficulty is well-reflected in the title of a paper by Koon-Magnin (2014), "The Fine Line between Statutory Rape and Consensual Relationships". The author emphasizes how statutory relationships include sexual behavior that could have been legal, except for the age of those involved. Namely, if at least one of the individuals is below the age of consent, the sexual act is defined as a crime, regardless of the intentions of the sexual actors (Chaffin et al., 2016; Klein & Cooper, 2017). Koon-Magnin (2014) further describes how these relationships are unique in that they apply only to consensual (i.e., not forcible) sexual encounters. If an element of force were used, the offender would be held accountable under another type of sexual assault statute [...]. If the victim is a child [...], the offender would be

charged with a crime such as child molestation. In this way, statutory rape laws define and identify victims who have willingly engaged in sexual activity that the state deems they are not adequately prepared to participate in (p. 104).

### **Prevalence and Characteristics**

The prevalence of sexual relationships between adolescents and older persons and statutory relationship crimes is only estimated, and it is likely that such cases are underreported, particularly where reporting is not mandatory. This is especially relevant to non-Western countries, where only a few studies address this phenomenon (e.g., Abdulah & Shah Haneef, 2017; Lee, 2016; Tener, 2019; Wood, 2011). Yet, several estimates have been suggested. In Malaysia, for example, the largest victim category (45%) of all 2,413 rape victims from 2013-2015 was girls aged 13-15 years old, namely, cases considered by law to be statutory rape (Abdulah & Shah Haneef, 2017). According to the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth, in 2011-2012, 9% of girls and 5% of boys reported a first sexual experience at age 15 or younger with an individual three or more years older (Child Trends, 2015). Another survey, conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, based on an analysis of the master files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS), reported that in 2000 there was one case of statutory rape for every three forcible rapes involving an adolescent victim (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). In Israel, it is assumed that most of these cases are not being reported to authorities, thus knowledge on prevalence is limited. It appears that in 2018, less than 1% of sexual offense and sexual harassment cases were of statutory rape, and in only 14% of these cases indictments were filed (The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, 2019).

Additional studies suggest that in the U.S., about 60% of statutory rape victims are 14 or 15 years of age and 55% of male offenders against female statutory rape victims are younger than 21. It was also found that only 29% of cases involved a boyfriend-girlfriend

relationship, whereas 62% involved acquaintances (Troup-Leasure & Snyder, 2005). Similar findings by Bierie and Budd (2018) show that the majority of statutory rape victims are females and that males are the majority of offenders. They also found that most relationships (60%) were described as sexual liaisons between acquaintances, whereas approximately 30% were characterized as “romantic” relationships, and only 2% involved “strangers”.

Many studies show the potentially negative implications of statutory relationships for the adolescents involved, even if they have consented (for review see: Hines & Finkelhor, 2007). Studies suggest that girls involved in statutory relationships are at greater risk for a range of concurrent or subsequent psychosocial problems (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007), including physical and emotional victimization, problem behaviors, depression, and a higher risk of teenage pregnancy following subsequent relations, as well as prostitution and child pornography production (Bierie & Budd, 2018; Child Trends, 2015; Manlove et al., 2005; Meier, Erickson & McLaughlin, 2016; Oudekerk et al., 2014; Young & d’Arcy, 2005).

However, researchers have noted that most of these studies are correlational and thereby it is plausible that the statutory relationship itself might not be the sole cause of such negative consequences, but rather it can be seen as another symptom of the background and lifestyle of youth at risk and their older partners (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Oudekerk et al., 2014; Vézina et al., 2011; Young & d’Arcy, 2005). It has also been found that the women who reported worse functioning (i.e., family relations, depression, marital satisfaction, and low self-esteem) following sexual experiences were those who also reported their experiences as forced or abusive (Kilpatrick, 1986).

Another important aspect that should be considered when assessing statutory relationships involves the ages of both parties and the gap between them. Studies conducted among the general population, as well as in samples of students, presented mixed findings. Some studies have found that the likelihood of the victim of statutory relationships to be

simultaneously involved in a forcible sexual assault, prostitution, or child pornography production increase with the age difference (Bierie & Budd, 2018). Felson and colleagues (Felson, Savolainen, Fry, Whichard, & Ellonen, 2019) have further demonstrated the importance of contextual factors in determining victims' subjective experience of sexual abuse (i.e., any sexual experience between a minor and a person at least 5 years older) and sexual encounters with peers, using a nationally representative sample of Finnish children aged 11-17. They found that age difference was indeed related to negative reactions reported among girls, however, this relation was not found among boys. Girls in their sample were more likely to have a negative reaction, but only if the offender was at least eight years older. Boys' reactions were not sensitive to the age difference, and they responded similarly whether the other person was a peer, somewhat older, or even much older (Felson et al., 2019). Similarly, based on a large sample of individuals interviewed about their first sexual contact, it was shown that females, but not males, who had their first contact as minors with an adult at least five years older were more likely to describe the sexual encounters as emotionally negative when the age difference was large (Rind & Welter, 2014).

Another study showed that respondents were significantly more critical of sexual activity involving younger victims, however, as victims' age increased to 16, there was a significant decrease in condemnation ratings (Koon-Magnin & Ruback, 2012). Additional findings suggest that participants who perceived the age gap to be significant also tended to perceive the older persons as taking advantage of their authority and experience in order to manipulate the inexperienced young persons (Sahl & Keene, 2010). Similarly, Beck and Boys (2013) found that when a large age gap was involved, participants tended to argue that the relationship should be criminalized. Nevertheless, other studies found that participants perceived the age factor as irrelevant to the question of criminality (Oudekerk et al., 2013). Interestingly, however, most respondents in these studies tended to be undecided and to rely

on contextual factors, thus demonstrating once again the complexity of the phenomenon (Klettke & Mellor, 2012; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Oudekerk et al., 2013; Reitz-Krueger, Warner, Newsham, & Reppucci, 2016; Sahl & Keene, 2010).

### **Perceptions of the Relationships**

Assuming that the age gap and being an adolescent may simply not be enough to determine whether the relationship is harmful, other contextual factors are important in shedding light on how the adolescent perceives the relationship in general, and more specifically, the partner. The perceptions of those involved in sexual relationships with older persons, as well as the general public attitudes toward such relationships, tend to be mixed. Youth from non-clinical samples, for example, mostly rate early sexual experiences with adults as neutral or even positive (Bauserman & Rind, 1997). Similarly, 75% of adults who as adolescents had positive sexual contact with someone at least five years older than them reported benefits in their current lives, and 61% of those reporting negative relationships also claimed to have received some benefits (Okami, 1991).

In addition, Felson et al. (2019) have demonstrated that regardless of the age of the other person involved, boys were more likely to have a negative appraisal of sexual abuse or peer encounters if they were under 12 (versus 15-17) at the time of the incident, if the other party was a family member, if coercion was used, and if the other person was male. Interestingly, for girls, the effects were similar whether the other party was older (abuse) or of similar age (peers). Also, among girls, their reactions to either sexual abuse or sexual encounters with peers were depended on their own age at the time of the incident; the younger the girl was, the more likely she will report a negative reaction. Thus, for both sexual abuse or peer encounters, negative appraisals were more likely when girls were younger, when the other party was a stranger or family member, and when overt force was used. More specifically, adolescent girls who had sexual encounters with males 5-7 years older were no

more likely to react negatively than girls who had sexual encounters with peers. The authors suggested that adolescents' reactions to sexual experiences do not reflect conventional adult attitudes nor the criminal law. Nonetheless, it has been argued that adolescents' willingness to engage in these activities increases their risk of victimization, and specifically, highlights the susceptibility of adolescent boys to encounters with older women (Felson et al., 2019).

Rind and Welter (2014) found that minors who had heterosexual sexual contact with adults reported levels of enjoyment from the event that were equal to those reported by minors who had sexual contact with peers, or adults who had sexual contact with adults. Moreover, it was shown that sexual contact between minors and adults did not have more emotionally negative impact than sexual contact between minors and peers or adults and adults. Similarly, focusing on participants from male same-sex samples, it has been found that minor–adult same-sex sexual experiences were described as positive in most cases (66%) with only 15% reporting having emotionally negative reactions (Rind, 2019), and that most age-discrepant sexual relations were willingly engaged in (Rind, 2001).

Moreover, a study by Tener, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2015) presented a typology of offenders using online communications to commit sex crimes against minors, with most cases matching the definition of statutory relationships in terms of the ages of those involved; the study demonstrated the diversity of these relationships and the heterogeneity of the offenders. In another qualitative study conducted among 22 individuals that were involved in statutory relationships as adolescents, two main dynamics emerged. In the negative dynamics, the older person was perceived as manipulative and abusive. In the positive dynamics, the relationship was perceived as either loving or non-coercive and mutual. Most importantly, many respondents strongly opposed the legal framing of such relations as “abusive” and felt that given that the relationship was not harmful to the adolescent nor society, statutory relationships should not be a legal offense. They also considered statutory relationship laws

as arbitrary, irrational, and one-dimensional, unable to capture the true context of their relationship (Tener et al., 2014). Nevertheless, in other studies, the idea of lowering the age of consent was rejected by some respondents, as teens were considered less capable of judicious decisions regarding such relationships (Higginson, 1999).

Taken together, the literature suggests that the experience of being involved in a sexual relationship with an older person does not necessarily result in future negative implications. Rather, negative outcomes may be the result of the nature of the relationship and the ways the young individual perceives it. Such understanding is consistent with the notion of “perceived stress” (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), according to which the subjective perception of stress is central to the emergence of psychopathology, with stress adversely affecting physical as well as mental health via the activation of both physiological and psychological pathways implicated in illness and emotional distress (Cohen, 2004). Therefore, given the diversity of these relationships and the different dynamics depicted in previous studies, there is a need to further elucidate and map the adolescents’ own perceptions of their sexual relations with older persons and particularly how they perceive the older person.

### **The Current Study**

To the best of our knowledge, most of the findings on perceptions of sexual relationships with older persons or statutory relationships are based on quantitative vignette studies conducted among students as well as in general population samples (e.g., Horvath & Giner-Sorolla, 2007), with only a few studies addressing the younger person’s subjective perception of the older person (see Higginson, 1999; Felson et al., 2019; Tener et al., 2014). Thus, the current study addresses a major gap in the literature. Furthermore, in line with the growing social commitment to the promotion of children's rights, with findings highlighting the importance of attending to minors' perspectives (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Felson et al., 2019;

Sandfort, 1984), and that children's right to participation and, their knowledge and thinking about their rights is an indicator of their well-being (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017), there is a need to further elucidate adolescents' own perceptions. In the present study, we sought to identify the perceived image of the older person and the meaning of the ages and age gap for that image among an Israeli sample of adults who had experienced sexual relationships with an older person while growing up. In order to do so, we have conducted a qualitative analysis of interviews with 28 adults who were involved in sexual relationships with a person at least 2 years older as adolescents, employing an inductive and exploratory approach to obtain initial insights into the participants' perceptions and experiences.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The current study is drawn from a larger research project on adolescents' sexual relationships with older persons, comparing samples collected in Germany and Israel. The subsample for the present study consisted of 28 Israeli adults who have experienced such relationships while growing up (22 females, 6 males). The participants were sought via announcements on websites and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp, which are extensively used in Israel). We specifically aimed for platforms and websites relevant to individuals with a history of child sexual abuse, as well as more general platforms such as health-related websites. The recruitment ads were drafted in general and broad terms – “Looking for individuals who were sexually abused by an older person/had sexual relationships with an older person before the age of 16” – in order to include multiple experiences and perceptions.

The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The participants' ages at the time of the interview ranged from 18 to 64 years ( $M = 29.89$ ;  $SD = 9.74$ ) and at the time of the relationship, their ages ranged from 12 to 16 years ( $M = 14.78$ ;  $SD = 1.17$ ). The older

persons included 21 males and seven females, and their ages at the time of the relationship ranged from 17 to 32 years ( $M = 22.35$ ;  $SD = 4.24$ ). The age gaps between the participants and the older persons ranged from two to 18 years ( $M = 7.78$ ;  $SD = 4.48$ ). The relationships lasted between a month and several years, and most of the participants ( $N = 18$ ) had a relationship that lasted a year or more. Five participants were involved in same-sex relationships (three female and two male). Twenty-four were involved in one such relationship, three were involved in two, and one in three. Participants who reported being involved in more than one relationship were asked to address the most significant one. In 24 cases the relationships were considered as statutory rape as participants were between 14-16 years, while in four cases they were considered child sexual abuse since the participants were between 12-13 years. For the purpose of this report, all participants' names were changed.

### **Procedure**

The second author and two research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants after receiving dedicated training. The interviews were held in the participants' homes or in different locations they chose and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The content categories in the interview guide included the relationship narrative (e.g., "Tell me your story"; "Tell me how the relationship began and how it ended"); perceived effects of the relationship in the short and long term (e.g., "How do you think the relationship affected your adolescence?"; "How do you think it affects your life in the present?"); and the social and family context at the time of the relationship (e.g., "Tell me about your family during the relationships with the older person"). The interviews were taped and transcribed. The second and third authors analyzed the transcripts using the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. When the paper was finalized, the quotes were professionally translated into English and checked by retranslation into Hebrew.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

The university's ethics committee approved the project. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and special attention was devoted to their confidentiality and dignity: pseudonyms were used and all identifying details were removed. The interviewees were informed in advance that should they experience emotional distress during or after the interview, they could contact the students, who would refer them to professional help. They were also provided with a list of phone numbers of helping resources. Participation in the study was voluntary and no compensation was offered.

### **Data Analysis**

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analyzed based on a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018), which included several interrelated phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and collating themes into a report. Thus, before the analysis, the interviews were read several times for the authors to become familiar with the data and to identify initial ideas and generate a list of codes. Each interview transcript was entered as a case into MAXQDA, a software package for qualitative research. In the first stage, all transcripts were divided into meaningful and manageable chunks of text, such as passages or quotations. Each segment was then coded with one or more codes that represented salient core issues arising from the text (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In the second stage, codes or groups of related codes were synthesized into themes and subthemes based on their salience or frequency. The themes were identified using inductive, data-driven analysis, a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018). Then, the selected themes were further refined into themes specific enough to be discrete and broad enough to cover a set of ideas contained in numerous segments (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). At this stage, the authors referred back to the transcripts to retrieve additional information as required to develop the themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In the last two stages, themes were further reviewed, refined, and named. Thus, the current results are the outcome of a collaborative dependent qualitative interpretation process. The second and third authors have been involved in all the analysis stages. Initially, the authors analyzed each interview and held weekly meetings to ensure the coding's uniformity and accuracy. Subsequently, as themes emerged, regular meetings to discuss ideas and ensure systematic analysis were conducted. Lastly, the authors verified the coherence of each theme and subtheme (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Trustworthiness, the alternative to rigor and validity in qualitative research, was established using peer debriefing, audit trail, and reflexive writing throughout the data collection and thematic analysis stages (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). During the interview, the participants were asked to clarify and elaborate on their narratives and provide examples. Throughout the analysis, the third author, a researcher of child sexual abuse with extensive experience in qualitative research methods, and the second author, a doctoral student with experience in sexual and reproductive health, were assisted by peer debriefing, consisting of thorough discussions with two other experts on child abuse and qualitative research in each of the stages. The audit trail consisted of detailed documentation of all stages, with reference to raw data used to support all interpretations (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, reflexive writing accompanied the entire process, with the authors reviewing their ideas as they evolved (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Cope, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

### **Findings**

During the interviews, the participants described the image of the older person with whom they have had the sexual relationship as well as the meaning of the age gap or the age

of the older person for each image perceived. The image of the older person as viewed by the participants seemed to range along a continuum from an abusive to a romantic, beloved partner. In the middle of the continuum, several variations were found. Overall, five different perceptions/images emerged along this continuum: romantic partner (n = 12 cases according to current perceptions); sexual partner (n = 3); authority figure (n = 4); complex/unstable figure (n = 3); and exploiter (n = 6). Note that for some of the participants, the perception changed over time. For example, some participants described how the relationships were first perceived as romantic, but this experience changed after they deteriorated and included manipulation and coercion. One participant described how her perception changed when she found out the older person was actually married.

### **Perceptions of Older Persons**

**“It was my first love”:** **The older person as a romantic partner.** This image was described by 12 participants (n = 12, 43%). They perceived the relationship as mutual and nurturing and the older person as loving and caring. The participants who described this image made statements such as “this was my first love”, “we were very close”, or “he was a really good guy”. Lee was 16 when she had a yearlong relationship with a 19-year-old man:

It was my first serious relationship. He was nineteen. He was also my first sexual partner. We were together, I think, for almost two years... We had a good relationship... I did not really understand, I did not know that much. But he was very loving, very hugging, very supportive of me as well. He never made me nervous.

Lee describes the relationship as meaningful and beneficial. She emphasizes the central place the partner had in her life as her first lover and sexual partner. Note that some of the participants in this category referred to specific characteristics of the older person that indicated that he was in a different stage of life, but this did not affect their narrative of the

relationship as mutual and desirable. This aspect is further described by Dikla, who was 15 when she had a six-month relationship with a 21-year-old man:

We were really like boyfriend and girlfriend, like I was used to. There were a few different things. Like, suddenly I'm going out with someone who has a car, that's something I've never known before. And it was clear to me that... that it would make people wonder... I was living with my mom, so after a few meetings... I told her that I... that he is my friend and that I'm terribly in love with him, and that... this is not going to change... That I'm not asking for her advice or anything like that...

Clearly, the fact that the older person owned a car differentiated him from her peers at that time. She also describes her expectation of social disapproval and the firm stance she took – emphasizing that she was not ready to accept any interpretation of this relationship as other than romantic.

**“To get rid of that first time”:** The older person as a sexual partner. This was described by three participants (n = 3, 11%) as fulfilling their sexual needs. Unlike the romantic partner, contacts with the sexual partner image were focused on sex and were not considered as relationships, as the participants did not feel strong emotions towards the older person. Yet, as opposed to the “sexual mentor” image described next, the romantic and the sexual partner images shared the lack of a power gap or authority component. Daria was 15 when she had a one-month affair with a man fourteen years her senior:

He had curly blond hair... huge blue eyes, pink cheeks, and a cute smile. The cutest person in the world... I remember there was a big bed and the sun came in, and everything was so peaceful. And on the radio was Kylie Minogue's new hit, I remember that... it felt right, because I actually thought that if I was going to sleep with anyone then I did not want all the messiness of an excited teenager who kisses and tells.

As opposed to the romantic partner, the sexual partner was by Daria and others described in terms of satisfying sexual needs: “I began to feel a crazy sexual tension between our bodies”; or “This was technically the guy with whom I lost my virginity. And we had no real contact, it was a one-time meeting. As if we had almost nothing besides it. One participant also described it as fulfilling the need to “get rid of that first time”.

**“He was a very charismatic teacher”:** The older person as an authority figure.

The third image was described in four cases (n = 4, 14%). This included formal (teacher/tutor; 3 cases) and informal authority (sexual and emotional mentor; one case). As opposed to the romantic partner image, these affairs were not perceived as mutual. The older person was perceived as dominant and knowledgeable, as providing guidance about sexuality, but this was described as serving the needs of the older person rather than the adolescent. Nevertheless, though they questioned the older person’s intentions and saw their intentions as manipulative, the participants in this group did not perceive these affairs as coercive. This image was further described by Shira, who began a three-year affair with her 28-years-old music teacher when she was 16:

He was really a very charismatic teacher, very beloved and... admired. Really, it sounds like a cliché, but it really is what it was... and I think the experience that suddenly he looks at you at eye level... was a very, very... very moving experience.

Like, I think I really, really loved him and I really admired him... suddenly you are not a student, suddenly something else...

Shira emphasized the teacher’s charismatic role and his being beloved by all students, further enhancing his authority. Indeed, in the authority image, participants emphasized the power differences between them and the older person and held him responsible for what happened. Alona, for example, had a two-month affair with her 26-year-old supervisor when she was 16:

There was no “level playing field” here... He was also a lot older than I was and in a different status from me. No... I would not define it as exploitation, but I think... he is the one with the responsibility, and the girl does not have much in the way of judgment and responsibility. So... “consensual sex”? In my eyes, there is a very big question mark here...

**“Once I saw him breaking the door with an ax”:** The older person as an **unstable/complex figure**. Three participants (n = 3, 11%) described the older person as either suffering from mental disorders or being extremely unstable. Meir, who was 16 when he had a yearlong relationship with a 19-year-old woman, described how his older partner threw a chair at him in a fit of jealousy.

...that was the worst thing I'd ever done to myself. A girl with a borderline personality disorder. She was diagnosed after the relationship ended but I suffered the initial outbursts of her illness, when I actually had a disease of my own... The relationship with her was like a roller coaster.

Participants described the older person using expressions such as, “I could not contain her problems... I didn't know how”. Others described the older person as a substance abuser: “He was drunk all the time, and when he returned to the US he was always with grass”.

**“Being a sex doll for a day or two”:** The older person as an **exploiter**. The final image was described by six participants (n = 6, 21%), who perceived the older person as abusive, coercive, manipulative, and at times aggressive. Renana was only 13 when she had a two-year affair with a 29-year-old man:

And one night I told my parents that I am going to have a sleepover with a friend or something and I took a bus to stay with him. We went to some bar. And we went to his house and had sex. At the time, it did not seem very strange to me... Today I can tell you that it was torture to my body. Such an amount of alcohol and so much sex

that it was painful... And so it went on for a very long time... I would pay for buses... behave like a sex doll for a day or two... and come back very pleased with myself that I have a friend who is 20-something...

Other participants in this category also described how the image of the older person as an exploiter was shaped only later in life, sometimes when the relationship took an offensive turn. Eden, for example, was 14 when he had a two-week affair with a 28-year-old man. He described how this perception was shaped when the older person was pressuring him to have sex with his friends as well.

When I was about 14, I met a guy who worked for the police... My parents were away on vacation, and I brought him to my parents' house. The first time I brought anyone home. We had sex, everything was good... Then a few days later he sent me a message... He told me about a partner he had, and he said to me: "I want you to contact him, I want you to sleep with him...". I told him, "No, I don't think so..." ... Then one day I... get a phone call from him... "I decided to get you out of my head if you did not do it. Bye". Boom! He just hung up on me... I tried to call him back many times but there was no answer. Then one day he called me at home, to my parents' house. That was my biggest fear at the time...: "I know where your mother works".

Eden describes how, as an adult, the entire affair came to be framed as abusive, whereas at the time, it was the specific demand to sleep with others and the threat presented by the older person that made him feel afraid, helpless, and exploited.

### **The Meaning of Age/Age Gap in the Older Person's Image**

When describing the older person's image, participants referred to his/her age, to their own, and to the gap between them. Data analysis focused on understanding the meaning participants associated with the age and age gap when describing the different perceptions of the older persons. For each image perceived, age was assigned a unique meaning. In the

*romantic partner* image, the participants described the older person as “young” in attitudes and behavior, and at the same time described themselves as “mature”, older than their chronological age. This was further described by Shirel, who was 16 when she began a three-year relationship with a 24-year-old man:

He was quite a child. It was like dating a child. No... Today when I look at it in retrospect, he did not really behave like a 23-year-old guy should behave. We were... it was very convenient. We would go out to restaurants, movies, would sit at home and watch a movie together, spend the weekend...

Although participants in this category described the relationship as symmetrical, in some cases they felt society, particularly parents and peers, were opposed to these relationships, which made them conceal them, but they did not feel deviant. In other cases, parents and peers were indifferent to the age gap: one participant described how her parents had the same gap between them, and how many of her peers were dating older persons.

In the *sexual partner* image, participants emphasized the older person’s age, as they wanted their first sexual experience to be with an older person, perceived as more experienced and mature. One of the participants said that after losing her virginity with the older person, an experience perceived as very positive, she felt the need to share her first experience with others, believing it would also benefit others to follow her example.

In the *authority* image, the age component was very meaningful. The older persons were described as being in a different developmental and emotional stage in life. They were perceived as having much stronger sexual urges, and the participants felt that the pace of the sexual relationship was dictated by the older partner.

In the *unstable* image, most participants described being attracted to the older person, who seemed charismatic and mature at that point, but in retrospect, they realized this ideal perception had ignored the older person’s unstable or pathological aspects.

Finally, in the *exploitative* image, the older person's age played a significant role for the participants. They described themselves as immature and the older person as (ab)using his maturity to control the relationship. This was described by Yiftach, who was 13 when he had a yearlong relationship with an 18-year-old girl:

I didn't know what it was to communicate with a person of that age, and it seemed so amazing and romantic to me. She showed an interest in me and even a sexual interest... And she was also... an intelligent and engaging woman... There were a lot of reasons why I chose to do it... I feel that I did not really have enough judgment to really understand, as a 13-year-old boy, to really understand what would be the consequences of this.

### **Discussion**

The current study examined how individuals who had experienced sexual relationships with an older person during adolescence perceived the image of the older person in these relationships, and the meaning of the age/age gap as related to that image. Examining these relationships as seen from the adolescents' perspectives exemplified that participants' construction of the older person's image reflected considerable complexity. Specifically, they described five different perceptions of older person images: romantic partner in a mutual loving relationship; sexual partner as part of a mutual relationship, at times even initiated by the younger person; teacher or mentor, where the older person was perceived as a significant authority figure; the unstable/pathological image described as extremely unstable; and the exploitative or abusive older person who used force, coercion or manipulation.

Most of the sexual relationships between adolescents and older persons are considered statutory relationships and are outlawed in most of the Western world, as the age gap between those involved is seen as placing the minors involved at risk of exploitation (Manlove, Ryan, & Franzetta, 2007). Despite some research evidence as detailed above, which at the very least

question the simplistic exploiter-exploited dichotomy, there is broad societal support for legal action – including sex offender registration – against the older partners, regardless of perceived consent by the younger person (Bierie & Budd, 2018; Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Manlove et al., 2007; Tener et al. 2014). Statutory relationships are usually cast in terms of a naïve victim exploited by an older offender that include the use of the term “grooming” in order to refer to a cynical technique used by often serial offenders to gain access to victims (Bennett & O’Donohue, 2014). However, as emphasized in the current study, such assumptions may be over-simplistic. Our study highlights the problems with such a reductive understanding of this complex social phenomenon (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007), providing an opportunity to address diversity and ambiguity over uniformity and dichotomy. Indeed, while some of our participants perceived the older person as exploitative or pathological, others saw him or her as a romantic or sexual partner without perceiving them as deviant, let alone abusive.

The current findings are consistent with Bierie and Budd’s study (2018) of young persons in statutory relationships, which was based on 20 years of data from over 6,000 police departments in the US. In their study, 30% of the relationships were described as “romantic”. Similarly, our findings are consistent with previous results showing that minor-adult sexual experiences may lead to diverse emotional reactions, similar to those reported by minors who had sexual contact with peers, or adults who had sexual contact with adults (Felson et al., 2019; Rind, 2001, 2019; Rind & Welter, 2014). Nevertheless, the current study adds to previous findings by articulating the subjective experience of these individuals, thus enabling a better understanding of the unique psychological and interpersonal dynamics occurring in such relationships and providing insights for interventions. Our findings are also similar to a previous study (Tener et al., 2014), which was based on interviews with statutory rape victims conducted in two child advocacy centers. In both, most young persons identified

as victims described the relationships as mutual, with some of them even describing the older persons as beloved boyfriends. In other cases, the relationship was described as strictly sexual, designed to satisfy sexual curiosity or urges, and/or gain social status. In neither study did the participants view the older persons exclusively as offenders who had abused them.

Many scholars assume that given their age at the time of the sexual relationships between an adolescent and an older person, the young persons' understanding of such relationships is likely to change over time. Some suggest that after the relationships end, victims have a more realistic perspective on how the power differences have made them act against their will (Higginson, 1999). Yet, the participants in the current study are adults who, despite reflecting on these relationships retrospectively, still perceive them in multiple ways rather than adopting society's definition of them as deviant.

This societal reduction of the phenomenon to terms of deviance, assuming such relationships pose a threat to the fabric of society (Cocca, 2002), is motivated by both the young persons' age and by the age gap. The current study addressed the issue of age as perceived specifically by the participants as well as its relevancy to each of the relationship images perceived. The broad range of perceptions that vary by the nature of the relationship perceived (according to the different images described herein) demonstrates how contextual factors play a significant role when it comes to the meaning of the age gap. Age was seen as a significant factor when it came to the exploitative or authoritative image, where the older person was perceived as much more mature and powerful, taking advantage of the younger person. Yet it was deemed insignificant in the romantic partner image, where participants described the relationship as mutual. In the latter category, some participants even felt they were older than their partner, emphasizing their own mature personality rather than their chronological age. Interestingly, in the sexual partner image, participants treated age as

significant, but in a way that motivated the young person to pursue or acquiesce to first-time sexual contact with a more experienced person.

### **Limitations**

Our findings should be evaluated in light of the limitations of the study. First, this exploratory study did not address contextual factors that may deeply affect participants' experiences, such as religiosity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Future studies should take these factors into account, as they may provide crucial insights. Studies in the United States, for example, show that those defined as involved in statutory relationships are often African-American girls aged 13-15, whose own mothers were teenagers at the time of their first birth, and who live in at-risk families in low socioeconomic status (Hines & Finkelhor, 2007; Kandakai & Smith, 2007; Manlove et al., 2005, 2007).

Another major issue that has not been addressed is the potentially significant effect of culture. To gain a full understanding of the phenomenon at hand, we must attend to the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the social agents involved (Eisikovits, Davidov, Sigad & Lev-Wiesel, 2015). This study was conducted in the unique context of the Israeli society, which is predominantly Western, but also highly religious with a strong emphasis on family values (Lavee & Katz, 2003). Further research is needed to better understand sexual relationships between minors and older persons as perceived in other cultures, particularly non-Western, where only a few studies address this phenomenon (e.g., Abdulah & Shah Haneef, 2017; Lee, 2016; Tener, 2019; Wood, 2011).

Third, while the literature highlights the importance of attending to minors' own perspectives (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Felson et al., 2019), this study was based on retrospective reports during adulthood. Future studies should attend to the adolescent's own narrative soon after the disclosure of the sexual relationship between the adolescent and the older person. There were also differences between participants in this study in terms of the amount of time

that passed between the actual experience of the relationship and the interview conducted in this research. Thus, participants had different amounts of time to reflect on their sexual relationship experiences. A related limitation is that the current study is focused on the younger persons' experiences at the expense of the perceptions of others involved, particularly the older person.

Finally, the current design limits the ability to draw conclusions regarding causality. Mixed-methods longitudinal studies could allow a better understanding of the findings depicted in this study. Additionally, the findings of this study have limited generalizability. Conducted in one country with a small number of participants, they cannot be applied to all adults who have been involved in sexual relationships with older persons as adolescents. Rather, the study is aimed to contribute heuristically to the work of future scholars and practitioners. The complexity of its findings should thus serve to further reflect on the issue and ask questions from the perspective of insiders. Future studies may also apply a similar qualitative approach not only to learn directly from participants, but also to empower them to integrate their experiences, share and resolve conflicting narratives (Shaw, 2007).

### **Policy and Practice Implications**

In the context of these limitations, the present study is part of recent, initial steps to enable a better understanding of this complex phenomenon and inform the justice system and the helping professions by replacing presuppositions with evidence. In particular, it may provide some frameworks for designing future studies with larger, more representative samples. Its findings contribute to highlighting the complex and often ambivalent nature of relationships between adolescents and older persons. Both the helping professions and the justice system find it difficult to connect with these youths, partly due to the tendency to treat them as naïve victims, regardless of their own, often contradictory, perspectives.

Informed by this study's findings, intervention programs can focus on the younger person's perception of the older person and the relationship with him or her, emphasizing the right to be listened to and understood, before considering the legal consequences. In terms of our suggested implications for the legal system, as argued by Pearlstein (2010), prosecutors should be encouraged to consider the totality of the circumstances in determining whether to prosecute. Some might argue that the older person can only be a negative influence on the adolescent; however, as shown here, this is not necessarily true in all cases. In determining whether to prosecute and how to rule, laws should give prosecutors and judges the discretion to consider all the factors involved in each individual situation to best protect and serve the interests of each minor.

Despite the tendency of many professionals to presuppose that such relationships are harmful, our findings suggest that they may have a variety of subjective meanings, and that although these may change in the transition to adulthood, they may actually remain stable thereafter. These multiple and changing perceptions should be taken into account when treating the young person, maintaining a delicate balance between the need of society and the justice system to make strong statements against victimization and the need of adolescents to experiment and explore, and to have their perspectives respected. This is in line with recent studies suggesting that children's right to participate in different contexts in their lives was related to their subjective well-being (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017).

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Table 1

*Participants Characteristics*

	Female (n=22)	Male (n=6)	Total
Mean age during interview (SD)	29.22 (7.85)	32.33 (15.63)	29.89 (9.74)
Age range during interview	18-51 years	24-64	18-64 years
Mean age during relationships (SD)	14.95 (1.09)	14 (1.41)	14.78 (1.17)
Age range during relationships	12-16	12-16	12-16 years
Older person gender	19 male, 3 female	2 male, 4 female	21 male, 7 female
Mean age of older person (SD)	22.09 (3.8)	23.33 (5.92)	22.35 (4.24)
Age range older person	17-29	18-32	17-32 years
Relationship type	Heterosexual relationship n=19	Heterosexual relationship n=4	Heterosexual relationship n=23

	Same-sex relationship n=3	Same-sex relationship n=2	Same-sex relationship n=5
Mean age gap (SD)	7.36 (3.87)	9.33 (6.47)	7.78 (4.48)
Age gap range	2-14 years	3-18 years	2-18 years
Relationship duration	Six months to several years	One month to several years	One month to several years
Relationship legal definition	Statutory rape (victim between 14-16): n=20 Child sexual abuse (victim under 14): n=2	Statutory rape (victim between 14-16): n=4 Child sexual abuse (victim under 14): n=2	Statutory rape (victim between 14-16): n=24 Child sexual abuse (victim under 14): n=4