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### Cultural Constructions of Sexual Relationships Between Female Teachers and Male Students

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Cultural Constructions of Sexual Relationships  
Between Female Teachers and Male Students

by

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B.A., Portland State University, 2012  
M.S., Antioch University New England, 2017

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Clinical Psychology at  
Antioch University New England, 2020

Keene, New Hampshire



Department of Clinical Psychology  
**DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE**

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS  
BETWEEN FEMALE TEACHERS AND MALE STUDENTS**

presented on April 15, 2020

by

**Tessa M. Palmer**

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Psychology  
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**4/15/2020**

\*Signatures are on file with the Registrar's Office at Antioch University New England.

## Dedication

*For Louis Joseph Panush,  
who was there every step of the way.*

## Acknowledgements

This project has been a journey, and oftentimes a rather arduous one. As I have wended my way down this path, I have had much guidance and support from a variety of sources. Thank you, first and foremost, to my dissertation committee. To Ted Ellenhorn, for whose tutelage and chairpersonship I zealously lobbied. Thank you for embarking upon this project with me. For trusting me with it and challenging me through it. And just as importantly, for the sophisticated understanding of Van Halen. To Vince Pignatiello, who always, always goes above and beyond. I am eternally grateful for the frequent consultations about absolutely anything and everything, and the unwavering moral support. And, of course, for the infamous “Vince” diagrams. To Porter Eagan, my first real mentor. Thank you for creating the soil in which the seeds of this project were planted, and for maintaining an environment in which those seeds could grow and take root. Your warmth and support have been invaluable from the very outset of my Antioch career.

To Alex Rivera, my love, my partner, my morningstar. Thank you for holding my hand through life. For running alongside me for the last leg of this marathon. For being my light when I have felt lost in the dark. You nourish my soul and feed my fire. Always and forever.

There are countless others who have contributed in more indirect ways, and I deeply appreciate them for all they have been in my life. My enduring gratitude to Judy Smith, Vic Pantesco (a wizard if ever a wiz there was), and Sara Scott. To Mae-Lynn Germany (plaoimantic moon of my life), and Gina Pasquale. To the awe-inspiring staff at VCU University Counseling Services. And to my family—you know who you are.

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## Abstract

While examples of sexual relationships between male high school teachers and female students have been historically prominent, relationships wherein the respective genders are reversed have received increased attention. Research on perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students has focused primarily on the perceived differences between these relationships and those between male high school teachers and their female students. To explain the effect that gender appears to have on the perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students, much of the literature has pointed to cultural constructions of gender, which interfaces with cultural power dynamics. In taking a closer look at the literature and the assumptions therein, it appears that cultural constructions and narratives (and the ways in which these inform perceptions) of these relationships are conflicted and/or split. The purpose of this theoretical research was to posit a theory of the cultural constructions and narratives regarding sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students. To facilitate a more sophisticated and comprehensive understanding of these constructions and narratives, I collected and examined both real-world examples and fictional portrayals of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male students, and employed a feminist psychoanalytic theoretical framework to inform my analysis.

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*Keywords:* student/teacher sexual relationships, gender, culture

## **Cultural Constructions of Sexual Relationships Between Female Teachers and Male Students**

While examples of, and discourse regarding, sexual relationships between male high school teachers and their female students have been historically prominent, relationships wherein the respective genders are reversed began receiving increased media attention in the 2000s and into the early 2010s (Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Gannon & Cortoni, 2010; Geddes et al., 2013; Knoll, 2010). This was followed by both a proliferation of research regarding sexual relationships between adult female high school teachers and their male students (Fromuth & Holt, 2008; Geddes et al., 2013; Knoll, 2010). Much of the research at that time iterated the importance of more sophisticated understanding of female sexual offending, and little attention was paid to public perceptions of these relationships (Zack et al., 2018). The academic literature and media portrayals all contain various activations of strong thoughts, feelings, and cultural constructions and narratives that inform how these relationships are perceived, placed within the discourse, and treated. In this project, I conducted an examination of these cultural constructions and narratives. To that end, I begin with a review of the literature regarding how relationships between female high school teachers and male students are perceived. I then look at the ways in which the perceptions, and attendant explanations for patterns therein, are situated within larger cultural dynamics.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Gender-Reversed Dyad**

Research on perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students has focused primarily on the perceived differences between these relationships and those between male high school teachers and their female students. For

example, research has suggested that instances of female teacher and male student sexual relationships are, when contrasted with a gender-reversed dyad, often minimized regarding perceptions of both the teacher and the negative consequences for the student (Dollar et al., 2004; Ford & Cortoni, 2008; Geddes et al., 2013; Saradjian, 2010; Zack et al., 2018). The relationships are characterized as “inappropriate affection” (Geddes et al., 2013, p. 609), a “confused form of love” (Saradjian, 2010, p. 13), or as examples of women initiating or ushering young men into burgeoning sexuality (Dollar et al., 2004; Ford & Cortoni, 2008).

Overall, research has suggested that at the high school level, female teacher/male student sexual relationships are consistently viewed more positively than male teacher/female student sexual relationships (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2001; Knoll, 2010). Specifically, male teachers are more likely to be viewed as taking advantage of their female students, and the female students are viewed as being more vulnerable to abuse. Conversely, male students are viewed as less likely to be upset by the experience and more likely to have had a positive sexual experience (Fromuth et al., 2001). Additionally, there are ways in which these relationships have become culturally glorified (Dollar et al., 2004; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006). For instance, sexual relationships with female high school teachers can be status-enhancing for the male students, who are expected to value sexual experiences with older women (Dollar et al., 2004; Fromuth et al., 2001). In the research by Dollar et al.,

The relationship between a female teacher and a male adolescent student clearly was viewed as the most normative dyad. For example, the respondents indicated that the student’s peers would be more likely to view the relationship within this dyad as appropriate and cool. Respondents also viewed this relationship as the most likely to

evoke bragging to friends and the least likely to cause psychological harm and confusion to sexual orientation. (p. 98)

The academic research on teacher/student sexual relationships has thus consistently suggested that the gender of the respective parties has a significant effect on the perceptions of sexual relationships between teachers and students.

### **Cultural Constructions of Gender**

In an attempt to explain the significance of the effect that gender appears to have on the perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students, much of the literature has pointed to cultural constructions of gender. For example, women are generally perceived as—and indeed socialized to be—nurturant, protective, and caring, which can all translate to non-aggressive, asexual, passive, and receptive (Fisher & Pina, 2013; Geddes et al., 2013; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006; Saradjian, 2010). Such notions are positioned in diametrical opposition to ideas of men and masculinity: masculinity is equated with aggression, strength, and dominance. Quite simply, men are (supposed to be) dominant and assertive while women are (supposed to be) submissive and passive. The research literature regarding teacher/student sexual relationships suggests that the female high school teacher/male student dyad feels inconsistent with these socialized gender characteristics, which can threaten fundamental worldviews, so the potential dynamics within the relationships get denied, minimized, or reconstructed (Ford & Cortoni, 2008; Saradjian, 2010). Put another way, when female sexual behavior does not align with cultural expectations, potential observers or perceivers likely experience cognitive dissonance which they must manage so as to maintain stability in their beliefs of gender-appropriate behavior (Geddes et al., 2013).

## **Interface Between Gender and Authority**

The research on sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male students consistently supports the idea that gender has a significant effect upon perceptions and appraisals of such relationships. The implication therein, however, is that such an effect should *not* exist, and that the cultural constructions of gender operate in a manner so as to skew the perceptions of relationships between female high school teachers and male students. The authors thus appear to argue, however implicitly, that inherent power dynamics related to authority (teacher and student) should trump gender dynamics (woman and man), and that these relationships should not be perceived (or more importantly, treated) so differently than relationships between male high school teachers and female students. Indeed, Dollar et al. (2004) explicitly state that “respondents appeared to minimize the effect of the inherent power difference between a teacher and an adolescent student, and instead they relied on sexual scripts in judging these situations” (p. 99). Fromuth et al. (2001) reported that “even in teacher/student relationships in which a clear power differential is present, gender role expectations still seem to apply” (p. 69), and Nelson and Oliver (1998) suggested that the cultural constructions of gender and the prescribed interpersonal roles therein are so ubiquitous that it is “impossible for sexual contact between women and boys to have the same social meaning (*even to scholars* [emphasis added]) as contact between men and girls” (p. 560).

## **Application to Clinical Psychology**

### **Sex and Sexuality**

Sex and sexuality are undeniably enormous parts of the human experience in a variety of ways. Indeed, our very existence is the product of sex. Beyond that basic biological fact, and any biological imperatives related to our fundamental animality, are the uniquely human aspects of

our sexual lives. Sex is, for example, a profoundly important aspect of our attachment systems and the ways in which we engage partner relationships, which are of primary importance in our lives (Birnbaum et al., 2006). Sexual well-being is highly correlated with general happiness and life satisfaction, beating out other factors such as social life and income (Stephenson & Meston, 2015). We are, every day, surrounded by sexual imagery by way of various media, including film and television, advertising, and music. We are regularly asked to define ourselves according to our sexuality and to use such definitions as barometers for normalcy or deviancy. In short, sex and sexuality abound.

Given the importance of sex and sexuality, clients often bring to therapy their struggles therein, such as dysfunction, oppression, deviance, and trauma. The potential negative sequelae of sexual conflicts are both many and varied, and include posttraumatic stress, suicidality, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction, and interpersonal or relational issues. (Acierno et al., 2001; Elliott et al., 2004; Probst et al., 2011). Certainly, this list is not comprehensive, and the constellation of symptomatology (or lack thereof) is unique to individuals. As such, clinicians have a responsibility to have at least some familiarity with or awareness of how to conceptualize and treat struggles with sex and sexuality and potentially attendant trauma.

### **Implications for Treatment**

Therapists are unavoidably products of their culture and their perceptions can have a profound effect upon how they conceptualize and treat cases and the individuals therein. There is an historic body of literature to support the claim that clinical judgments are easily influenced by stereotypes that therapists might hold (consciously or otherwise) about the various populations, including gender, to which their patients belong (Sue, 2001; Wisch & Mahalik, 1999). As Eells

(2007) puts it, “a clinician’s assumptions about what constitutes psychopathology and how psychopathological states develop, are maintained, and are organized, will frame how that clinician formulates cases” (p. 8). Thus, what goes into a clinician’s formulation or conceptualization of relationships between female high school teachers and their male students, and any consequent interventions, is bound up with said clinician’s views and assumptions about what constitutes normality and aberrance.

Clinical psychologists must understand a problem or phenomenon before they can effectively treat or work with it, and a part of that understanding is an awareness of larger contextual factors and cultural loadings. When stories of sexual relationships between female teachers and their male students emerge within therapy relationships, it is important that the therapist have an awareness of the cultural perceptions, constructions, and baggage that such stories bear.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this theoretical research was to posit a theory of the cultural constructions and narratives of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students. It is intended to be a cultural studies perspective for clinicians. Included below is an elaboration of the conceptual framework that served to guide the research and interpretation of the literature, as well as my process for developing a theory of how these relationships are culturally perceived.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I use a psychoanalytic theoretical framework to examine the cultural constructions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students. Psychoanalytic theory has a great deal to offer in an examination of human behavior and how it is informed by

social and cultural factors. It is a useful lens given its capacity for complexity, and its inclusion of models and explanations for sex, aggression, and the interplay between the two. I relied especially upon feminist psychoanalytic theory, which, in reaction to the ubiquity of male-oriented concepts and constructs, offers dynamically informed conceptualizations of female development and socialization and often utilizes social and cultural theory as well (Benjamin, 2004; Chodorow, 1989, 2012; Haaken, 2002; Harris, 2005; Sullivan, 1989). Feminist psychoanalytic theory can provide rich explanations and contexts for the ways in which sex and aggression interact differently for women and men respectively, and the ways in which such interactions are informed by cultural discourse.

In a treatise on female aggression, Haaken (2002) provides an exploration of culturally accepted expressions of female aggression and the ways in which they are represented in feminist psychology itself. In Benjamin (2004) and Chodorow's (1989, 2012) writings, they reject an essentialist view of gender and aver that women are trained into highly fraught culturally accepted expressions of femininity through complex processes of emotionally-laden and conflict-ridden socialization and object relations. Benjamin (2004), Haaken (2002), Harris (2005), and Sullivan (1989) all discuss different ways in which split constructions and perceptions of gender can be problematic. A feminist psychoanalytic conceptualization of the perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students can help psychologists more appropriately intervene by giving them a more nuanced and complex perspective on the phenomenon.

### **Research Foci**

I undertook this project with an aim to understand cultural perceptions, constructions, and narratives regarding sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male

students. The following is an examination of various examples, both fiction and non-fiction, of the portrayals of these relationships. Such examples include various news sources and internet publications, as well as examples within popular culture such as film and television, and an analysis of how they are purveyed and consumed. To aid in elucidating the dynamics within these examples, I employed a psychoanalytic theoretical lens.

It is important to here note the complexity of gender and how I use gender language within this research. Contemporary definitions emphasize the social aspect of gender and use a spectrum rather than a binary model. The American Psychological Association (APA; 2015) defines gender as sociocultural in nature, referring to constructs of masculinity and femininity (boyhood/manhood and girlhood/womanhood). This is in contrast to the term “sex,” which refers to the physiological/biological constructs of male and female (APA, 2015). Historically, the terms have been conflated, and “male” and “female” have been used to describe gender. Given the sociocultural focus of this project, I examined gender dynamics, not biological sex. However, I did consistently use the terms *male* and *female*, and when doing so, I referred to gender rather than biological sex. This is admittedly antiquated, but I used these terms for two primary reasons. First, it reflects the cultural perceptions that are being examined. And second, we are currently lacking applicable linguistic equivalents (i.e., one would not say “woman teacher” or “boy” student). Ways in which this is a limitation and could be fodder for additional research are included in the discussion section.

## **Method**

### ***Information Gathering/Organization***

To facilitate my analysis of portrayals of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students, I collected and examined both real-world and fictional

depictions of this phenomenon. To find real-world examples I looked at online news stories, editorials, and op-eds. For fictional accounts, I examined film, television, and music. For both fiction and non-fiction, I attended to how the stories were purveyed (i.e., the ways in which the teachers and students are talked about and the language that is employed).

### *Theory Development*

I embarked upon this project in order to explore what might be occurring on a cultural level regarding the narratives and constructions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students. One of the primary reasons that I selected feminist psychoanalytic theory as the primary framework to guide my inquiry is the sophistication and complexity it offers, especially concerning the dynamics of sex and aggression, the interactions between the two, and the inclusion of social and cultural theory. In developing a theory of the cultural perceptions, my process was iterative and reflexive. It was iterative in that my readings of the academic research and the media artifacts (both fiction and non-fiction) informed one another, and I revisited my analyses multiple times with new understandings and questions. In the spirit of reflexivity, it has been important to keep in mind a variety of dynamic contexts and discourse. I attempted to maintain an awareness of the sociocultural context and the inherent gender dynamics while drawing from theories of development and culture. I additionally tried to maintain a stance of openness to any unforeseen dynamics and threads that emerged. And finally, I attempted to remain attentive to my own micro-context, the biases and blind spots therein, and the ways in which these dynamics informed my inquiry.

## Examples

### Non-Fiction

#### *LawFirms*

In 2019, *LawFirms* published a list of “25 Female Teacher and Student Sex Crime Scandals.” As a part of the introduction to the list, they speak to some of the legal discourse regarding these relationships. They point out that female teachers consistently receive lighter sentences for sexual offending than do male teachers, even when the crimes are technically the same. They also speak to the potential for some elements of status enhancement for female teachers who have been accused of sexual relationships with their students. Instead of being labelled as predatory, they argue,

female teachers involved in sex scandals tend to receive lighthearted, even flattering press coverage and minimal jail sentences that make them memorable pop culture stories, instead of being *reviled sexual predators* [emphasis added] forgotten by the public as they serve out their criminal sentences.

#### *Fox News*

A *Fox News* online article (McKay, 2017) takes a critical stance regarding the tabloid approach to news stories about sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male students. McKay (2017) speaks to the “relentless” and “predictably similar” nature of tabloid media accounts of such relationships, including mugshots of the female teacher shown alongside “sexy” social media snapshots. In addition to being objectified, she argues, female teachers are often perceived as “immature, confused, or even vulnerable,” even when male teachers who engage in analogous relationships with students are generally perceived as predatory. McKay additionally offers that on the other side of the relational equation, it is

culturally assumed, and portrayed by the media, that a male high school student would be excited about, enjoy, and experience no deleterious effects as a result of, a sexual relationship with a female teacher. It thus becomes in some ways more “socially acceptable for the male student to become victimized.” The article also includes examples of linguistic titillation. For example, a female teacher is referred to as “romping” with one of her students, and another as “bedding” a student.

### ***Medium***

In a *Medium* article, Anna Dorn (2017) explores cultural perceptions of relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students using reactions to Debra Lafave (one of the more famous female high school teachers who engaged in sexual relationships with male students) as the primary site of inquiry. An interviewee is quoted as saying that “female predators tend to be sexually objectified and obtain a sort of celebrity status,” which ultimately highlights a dynamic wherein objectification can be status-enhancing for a woman, even if it is simultaneously disempowering.

The article additionally touches on the evidence that women tend to be prosecuted less and receive more “lenient” sentences for similar or identical crimes. It is argued that this is even more the case for “attractive” women, but it is unclear how attractiveness is being measured. Interviewees in the article critique the notion that society is unwilling to punish a conventionally attractive woman, in part because it is incomprehensible that a high school male would not be desirous of sexual contact with an “attractive” female. Dorn (2017) also speaks to the use of eroticized or softened language such as “romp” and “relationship” as opposed to “rape” or “sexual abuse” when the gender is reversed.

Dorn (2017) additionally includes the other side of the dyad. As cultural perceptions appear to be resistant to the idea of women being predatory, she says, so are they resistant to the idea of men/young men being victims. This is also attributed to gender socialization and stereotypes. The idea of being vulnerable to victimization by a woman challenges notions of masculine strength and dominance, and men are expected to always want and initiate sex. To exemplify this, Dorn quotes President Trump from a 2014 radio interview in which he indicated that sex with Debra Lafave was possibly beneficial to the male high school student with whom she had a sexual relationship.

Dorn (2017) also interviewed Holly Richmond, PhD, a sexual assault expert. Richmond said to Dorn that it is difficult for us to see women as sexual predators “because...we can’t even see them as sexual beings other than how they have been defined by the traditional male gaze.” She goes on to say that “to give a female sexual predator that much sexual power is culturally antithetical to what we’ve been taught.” Predatory behavior has an intense subjectivity to it, and that does not square with the positioning of women as sexual objects without their own desires and agency. Dorn ultimately embraces the position that we need a more sophisticated cultural understanding of “sexual perpetration” that is evidence-based as opposed to constructed role-based.

### ***The Washington Post***

In a *Washington Post* article, Holley (2016) reports about Mary Beth Haglin, a substitute high school teacher who argued that she was the victim in her romantic/sexual relationship with a 17-year-old male high school student. She (Haglin) said that he was persistent in his advances and that he was ultimately able to “dupe” her with his maturity and manipulation. She indicated that he took advantage of the fact that she was “vulnerable.” The article also includes some

eroticized/sensationalized language. For example, sexual exchanges between Ms. Haglin and her student are referred to as “trysts.”

In another *Washington Post* article, Sebastian (2015) writes about how evidence suggests that the possible negative sequelae (for the student) of sexual relationships between high school teachers and their students is fairly equivalent regardless of the respective genders. The cultural (and psychological and legal) implications are consistently different, however, and “male victims typically receive lower awards in civil cases ... and female perpetrators get lighter sentences.” There continues to be disagreement, even among professionals, about whether or not the disparity in the treatment of such relationships, dependent upon the gender of the parties is appropriate or problematic. One Minneapolis defense attorney, for example, is quoted as saying,

I think they should be treated different ... Every high school boy had some kind of fantasy about some female teacher. I walk away from these cases and say, “That would have been my finest hour.” I don’t know that I see the damage to the victim in those cases.

Others argue that, as with a gender-reversed dyad, a high school boy might feel that he is able to give consent, and he might even brag about it to his friends, but that does not preclude the experience being ultimately traumatic. One psychiatrist avers that “you don’t realize the consequences until later in life. You realize that you were taken advantage of. . . . I promise you, it’s going to mess up your life.”

### ***Psychology Today***

Steve Albrecht (2012) is very outspoken in his article about the “double standard” for female and male teachers respectively. He begins by challenging the notion that there is any distinction to be made between the behaviors themselves, and argues that what is occurring is

predatory, regardless of gender. He avers that female teachers prey upon male students using much the same methods as male teachers with female students, including gradualism, grooming, flirting, and targeting. Albrecht states that female teachers, too, are intentional in seeking vulnerability in their students of which to take advantage. He goes on to offer that constructions of motive are where the two given scenarios diverge; that male teachers are seen as primarily motivated by (masculine attributes such as) sexual desire, power, dominance, or paraphilia, and female teachers are assumed to be motivated by (feminine attributes such as) care for the student, and/or a need to feel attractive and desirable. Albrecht ultimately emphasizes that, regardless of any potential difference in motive, all high school teachers of all genders are informed that it is unethical, amoral, and at times illegal, to have sexual relationships with students.

### ***NBC News***

An online *NBC Washington* article (MacFarlane et al., 2018) reported that six local female teachers were allowed to continue to work with high school students after their teaching licenses had been at one time canceled or revoked in other school districts after sexual misconduct with male high school students. This was possible due to a policy wherein school districts are not required to report on sexual misconduct if there is no police arrest or criminal charges. This means that these six teachers were able to teach in new school districts without notifying the districts (nor the high school students and parents) of their history of sexual misconduct. While the policy itself is not gender specific, Carol Shakeshaft of Virginia Commonwealth University is quoted pointing out that critical charges are less likely when the teacher is female, even when it is now estimated that approximately one third of sex offending teachers are women. Thus, it is more likely that female teachers would be allowed to continue teaching.

***Daily Mail***

In a *Daily Mail* article, Haney (2018) reported on sexual relationships between Rebecca Swinson, a North Carolina high school teacher, and two male students. The article focuses on the fact that she pleaded guilty to various counts of sexual offense and was apologetic for her actions in court. According to the article, Swinson's attorney, James Quander, argued that her genuine contrition should be taken into account. Quander argued that Swinson is not predatory, and that the male students pursued her. Instead, Quander suggested that "she's an exceptional woman who should not be lost because she made an exceptional mistake."

***Los Angeles Times***

Aimee Palmitessa was a teacher at Brentwood, a prestigious private high school, when she was accused of having a sexual relationship with one of her male students. As reported by the *Los Angeles Times* (Winton, 2018), this student went on to sue the school for the ways in which the system participated in his abuse. As reported by the student, he consulted with a school guidance counselor, who encouraged him to remain in the relationship with Palmitessa, citing the example of the relationship between French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, Brigitte Macron, who was once his teacher. The suit also claims that this guidance counselor proceeded to warn Palmitessa to "keep her distance" from the student, while another colleague of hers suggested that she "stay away." Thus, though other teachers and staff appeared to be both aware and critical of the relationship, it was never reported until the student's parents found out about it.

***The Huffington Post***

In a *Huffington Post* article, Goldberg (2015) proffers that there has been a slow cultural shift in that female high school teachers who engage in sexual relationships with their students

are beginning to face more equitable consequences in comparison to their male teacher counterparts. In the article, this is attributed in part to the fact that there are more women police officers, and that “there is also a greater awareness among prosecutors, judges and the general public that students who are victimized by an authority figure, regardless of gender, experience trauma with life-long consequences.” Christopher Anderson, executive director of Male Survivor, an advocacy organization for male sex-crime victims, is quoted speaking of two “seismic shifts” that have contributed to more equitable prosecution. The first is a “recognition that it does not matter who the perpetrator is or what the circumstances are. A teacher has absolutely no business engaging in sexual contact with a student,” and “the second is a shift in the culture where boys and their parents are feeling empowered to come forward to say that something has been done.

In another *Huffington Post* article, Murdock (2015) reports that after having a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old, male student, high school teacher Erica Ginnetti was sentenced to 30 days in jail. She had sent sexually explicit pictures of herself to the student, and at her sentencing, the judge likened this to “dangling candy” in front of him. The judge reportedly asked, “what young man would not jump on that candy?”

### ***Zimbio***

In 2019, the website *Zimbio* (Jake, 2019) published a list of the “50 Most Infamous Female Teacher Sex Scandals,” and included language such as “busted,” “boffing,” and “tryst.” The woman ranked #16 was Jennifer Mally, a high school teacher in Phoenix, AZ. In the description of her and her behavior, an unnamed clinical psychologist who had reportedly interviewed Mally after her arrest said,

Her actions were not predatory in nature. She did not seek out the boy for sex. She had low self-esteem, and needed constant reassurance. ... She was incapable of internalizing her authority role and ill-equipped to manage the demands of her profession.

Beth Geisel, a high school teacher from Albany, NY, was ranked #15, and it was emphasized that she experienced herself to be the victim in the situation, and that she had been coerced into sex with two of three male students through blackmail.

### ***eBaum's World***

In 2014, a site by the name of *eBaum's World* published a list of the “25 sexiest sex offenders” to make the news that calendar year. One can see the eroticization and glorification in the title itself—though the sex is “offensive,” it is also “sexy.” The list is comprised entirely of women, and almost entirely of female high school teachers who have been reprimanded for sexual relationships with their male students. As one scrolls through the list, it appears exciting and titillating, as evidenced in part by the use of language such as “student lover,” “trysts” and “making out.” The teachers are referred to as objects, such “blondes,” and spoken of as getting “busted.”

### ***Return of Kings***

The internet publication *Return of Kings* was created and maintained by Roosh Valizadeh, who has since put the site on indefinite hiatus. In June 2018, Valizadeh published an article listing “10 attractive teachers who had sex with their teenage students.” Perhaps predictably, all of the teachers listed are female. The article does not contain narrative detail, primarily including pictures and brief statements of facts about the cases, including ages and charges brought. The photos, however, include captions such as: “This hot 26-year-old science teacher,” “She almost looks like wife material,” and “The psychology of these women baffle the

sane.” The article ends abruptly with the following: “Teenagers are almost universally horrible, annoying people. When women choose to be high school teachers, there is some deeper psychology behind their decision. They are to be avoided, both for our own sakes and for our sons’.”

### ***fucktheteacher.com***

The website *fucktheteacher.com* (2019) is an extensive compilation of lengthy posts about female teachers who have been charged with having sexual relationships with male students. Emphasis is on graphic descriptions of sex acts and commentary about the women teachers. Language includes: “banging,” “sucked him off,” “dense bitch,” “horny teacher,” “jealous bitch,” “the fuck spot (that’s what we hope she was calling her apartment),” “that good pussy,” “as much underage pipe as her honey hole could stand,” “we are confident that if this teacher right here texted us and was DTF, we would have been out of our tighty whiteys so fast it would have made her head spin,” “if miles of prepubescent cock is what makes this young woman happy then who are we to throw her in jail for 10 to life?,” “cum dumpster,” “this insatiable sexpot took a lot of teenage cock,” “she fucked a squad of young boys so good they killed for her,” “a great American cougar and teen cock connoisseur,” and “spicy 24-year old teacher poontang.”

### ***Barstool Sports***

Jerry Thornton (2017), a writer for *Barstool Sports*, initiated an annual tradition in 2009: the “starting lineup” of (female) sex scandal teachers (SSTs). He says that “only the best of the best, the hottest, craziest and hardest working women in the SST business made the cut.” Within the tradition, the women are categorized into sports roles such as: Leadoff; Hitters; Cleanup; Manager, Starting Pitcher; Closer; Platoon; and Rookie of the Year. The language used within

the descriptions of the women and their behaviors includes: “boned”; “boinking”; “blowie”; “handjibbers”; “blowjibbers”; and “spank material.” At one point, Thornton speaks of “incriminating texts ‘of a sexual nature’ between her and her (I’ve never used the term more loosely) *victim*.”

### ***YouTube***

A YouTube clip “10 Hottest Female Sex Offender Teachers” (Str8 Pimpin, 2015) is comprised entirely of pictures of female high school teachers who were found to be having sexual relationships with (mostly) male students, labelled with the ages of the respective parties. Van Halen’s (1984) “Hot for Teacher” plays in the background.

“10 Times Female Teachers Slept with Students” (Top 10 Archive, 2016) is a clip that lists the top ten female teacher sex scandals, and uses language such as “romp,” “taboo love,” “salacious affair,” and “fornicating.”

“5 School Teachers Who Slept with their Students” (Goldbeck, 2017) is another list of examples. There is a heavy emphasis on the sex acts, including type of sex acts, how many times, and where they happened, and the women are spoken of as “throwing [their] lives away.”

### **Fiction**

#### ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

In an episode of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Greenwalt & Green, 1997), the high school biology teacher (a non-threatening, middle-aged man) is mysteriously and violently killed and the substitute teacher is an attractive and relatively younger woman named Ms. French. Ms. French’s entrance is very sexual/sexualized: she moves in slow motion, hips swaying, with pseudo-jungle music playing in the background. The first class that she teaches is about the praying mantis, and Ms. French shares with the students that the female of the species

is more aggressive than the male, by which the male students in the class are intrigued. While the male high school students are smitten with her, the female students are bitter and suspicious. The two female leads comment about how pathetic it is that Ms. French is obviously insecure and unable get a man her own age.

Ms. French is thus originally positioned both as the object of young male lust and as a pathetic and predatory sexual subject. The young male fantasy becomes nightmarish, however. As it turns out, she is a monster in disguise (an oversized praying mantis, even) who needs male virgins to fertilize her eggs. She seduces virginal male high school students into her home, drugs them, and then rapes them. In the end, she is slain as the monster she is.

### ***Friends***

The television series *Friends* (Bright et al., 1994–2004) has a multi-season story arc about a relationship between a female high school teacher and a male student. It begins when the younger brother (Frank) of one of the main characters (Phoebe) announces that he is going to marry his high school home economics teacher, Alice. Though her age is never stated explicitly, it is clear that Alice is supposed to be significantly older (middle-aged), and she is not particularly sexy. Rather, with her diminutive stature, high voice, and conservative clothing, she is a more of a sweet, maternal type. When the couple makes their announcement, the general reaction is one of surprise, disapproval, and some revulsion. Phoebe tries in multiple ways to intervene in the relationship, including appealing to Alice about how breaking up with Frank would be for his own good. Though it is played for laughs (ostensibly because of Alice's lack of sexiness), the relationship between Alice and Frank is intensely sexual. They are frequently depicted engaging in over-the-top displays of public affection, including graphic kissing and groping. The two eventually do get married, have triplets together, and remain publicly lusty all

the way to the end of their story arc. Alice ultimately suffers no professional or legal consequences.

### ***How to Get Away with Murder***

As a part of their training, a group of young law students in an episode of the show *How to Get Away with Murder* (Swafford & Sullivan, 2016) are tasked with defending a male high school student who has been charged with theft. Over the course of the episode, the audience learns that the student was inexplicably stealing large amounts of baby supplies, such as formula and diapers. After investigating, the group of students discover that he has been stealing baby supplies because of a pregnancy that was the result of a sexual relationship between him and one of his female teachers. The legal team try to convince the young man to allow them to use this information to win the case, but he refuses. This is the impetus for some conflict and debate between the students about the morals and ethics of the relationship between their client (a male high school student) and his female high school teacher.

The group's discussions serve to represent the social discourse. Some of the students refer to the teacher with excitement and titillation and talk about how any male high school student would love to have sex with an attractive female teacher. The other law students have a different perspective. They argue that the power differential transcends the gender dynamics, and they emphasize that the client has a personal history of physical abuse. Thus, they argue, the female high school teacher is predatory in that she was capitalizing on the student's former trauma.

Ultimately the group is unable to come to a consensus about whether what happened between their client and his teacher was rape. When the student continues to refuse to testify against his teacher, the legal team assumes that he is trying to protect her, and the team leader

ultimately calls the teacher to the stand without the student's permission. In the end, the primary takeaway appears to be that justice was served, as evidenced by an expression of pride in the team leader's decision to call the teacher to the stand. Though the sense of justice appears primary, it is not without some conflict, however, as the student expresses that his objective was to build a better life for the baby, not to protect his teacher from legal recourse. The episode thus ends on a note of some unease.

### ***Shameless***

After learning that there is a registered sex offender in the neighborhood, one of the central characters in the television show *Shameless* (Vernoff, & Shill, 2013), Lip, joins with a group of neighborhood men to intimidate the criminal, and the rest of the group is chagrined to find that their target is in actuality an attractive, petite, relatively young woman- a high school teacher who had a sexual relationship with a male student. Though the rest of the crew resigns themselves to hunting elsewhere, Lip remains determined that she should be punished for her crimes. He and his younger brother (Cam) get into a debate about the implications of gender and power, and while Lip falls on the side of power and authority, Cam argues that gender is an important mediating factor. Ultimately, Lip plans a sting wherein he will attempt to awaken her predatory impulses and capture photographic evidence of her crime. He is ultimately no match for her sexual power, however, and they have a passionate sexual exchange. The former teacher is still ultimately punished, however, when Lip's girlfriend shows up and threatens her (the teacher's) life if she does not leave the neighborhood immediately.

### ***Saturday Night Live***

In the April 11, 2015 episode of *Saturday Night Live* (SNL; Jost et al., 2015), a lawyer tries to prove that a female high school teacher who had a sexual relationship with one of her

students took advantage of this student but instead learns that she cannot win the case because the affair had only positive consequences for the victim. Upon asked about his mental state, the student reported that it was like being at an amusement park. He testifies that one repercussion of the sexual relationship with his teacher is some pain/fatigue attendant to the large amount of fist-pumping and high-fiving from his male peers. The student's father was congratulatory rather than concerned or disapproving. The male judge expresses being impressed with the student.

SNL (Klein et al., 2016) aired a follow-up skit on January 23, 2016. The premise was almost identical to the first skit, including the same characters, with the addition of a second female teacher who participated in the sexual relationship between the original student and teacher. Once again, the skit portrays an attorney who is able to establish only positive consequences for the male student, such as status-enhancement with his peers. This time the student's father is once again proud, and this pride has reunited him with the student's formerly estranged grandfather. And the judge (the same one from the previous skit) once more expresses being impressed with the student.

### *Dawson's Creek*

The show *Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998–2003) contains a multi-season narrative arc wherein one of the central male characters (Pacey, a high school student) has a sexual relationship with a female teacher (Tamara Jacobs). Ms. Jacobs' entrance is flirtatious and seductive. The first time the audience meets her, Pacey is working at a video store and she walks into the store in slow motion with saxophone music playing in the background. She ultimately rents the film *The Graduate*, which is one of the most famous pop culture portrayals of a sexual relationship between an older woman and a younger man. She is flirtatious and seductive throughout the customer service exchange. Upon leaving, Pacey turns to his friend and

co-worker (Dawson, another central character and also a male high school student) and says excitedly that he hopes to have sex with Ms. Jacobs. In response to Dawson's skepticism, Pacey explains that seducing younger men makes older women feel young. Later in the episode, Pacey and Ms. Jacobs share another flirtatious exchange and then kiss, after which she runs away.

The relationship then takes on a dynamic wherein Pacey is pursuing Ms. Jacobs as she tries to plead with him to establish boundaries. She tells him that their relationship can only be that of teacher and student and expresses concern about his age and vulnerability. He insists that he is a fully consenting participant and they kiss again. Relational dynamics become more complicated when Pacey's academic performance begins to decline, and he requests private tutoring from Ms. Jacobs. She agrees, and the tutoring sessions become rife with plays for sex and power. Ms. Jacobs offers reinforcement for studious behavior and then playfully withholds. Pacey demands his reward, in response to which she becomes sexually aggressive in a way that highlights his sexual inexperience. He is defensive and jealous and makes a comment about her being promiscuous (and thus untrustworthy). Later in the episode, Pacey and Ms. Jacobs have sex for the first time.

The power dynamics continue to shift as Pacey comes to address her, at least in private, by her first name (Tamara). Pacey again becomes jealous and then becomes sexually possessive and coercive. It appears as though the audience is expected to be forgiving of his transgressions because they ultimately love each other. Love thus seems to operate as a sort of justification for the relationship. The other students find out and Pacey is the object of ridicule. Tamara is furious about Pacey's inability to be more discreet and blames him for the fact that she is in trouble both professionally and legally. She ends the sexual relationship. Pacey becomes Tamara's rescuer and "confesses" in court that he made up the rumor of an affair between them. He then tries to

re-establish the sexual relationship, at which point she informs him that she is moving out of town. As they say goodbye, there is no discussion about the ethics or morals of the relationship or the power dynamics therein.

Tamara returns briefly for one episode during the subsequent season. At this point, Pacey is pursuing a romantic/sexual relationship with an age peer when he sees Tamara in town. This creates a conflict for him, and he consults with Dawson, telling him that part of what attracts him to Tamara is that she is an adult. Dawson pleads with Pacey to stay away from Tamara, saying that he should not be with an adult at this point in his life. Pacey seeks out Tamara and they say goodbye, kiss passionately, and part ways one last time. Pacey is never subsequently portrayed as traumatized by the relationship.

### ***Life As We Know It***

*Life As We Know It* (Judah et al., 2004–2005) follows three male high school students and is presented at times quite literally from their perspectives (through first-person narrative asides). One of the three (Ben) is attracted to their English teacher, aptly named Ms. Young. To the camera, he asks why the school would hire such a young and attractive teacher. He says that it (her attractiveness) is distracting to him. Ms. Young is different from the other portrayals discussed in that she is a more active pursuer. She flirts with Ben in class and intentionally puts them in a situation wherein he sees her topless. She offers him a ride home. She is the one in power/control.

Ben and Ms. Young later run into one another at a liquor store where she helps him to acquire alcohol. She invites him to keep her company while she runs errands, and continues to be flirtatious. She expresses her insecurity about her age in comparison to the high school girls, especially as it pertains to her attractiveness. Ms. Young proceeds to initiate a kiss, about which

Ben expresses excitement and triumph. The physical relationship continues and intensifies, and they are almost discovered on multiple occasions. The relationship then begins to have a negative effect on Ben's life. He is burdened by having to keep the relationship with Ms. Young secret, he learns that she is jealous of his interactions with his female peers, and his parents begin to suspect that he is abusing substances because of his unusual behavior. Ms. Young becomes bolder and more aggressive, and flirts with him outside in front of the other students. She uses her position to manipulate the school play so that the two of them can spend more time together during rehearsals, etc. She eventually pulls him into a custodial closet in the school where they have sex for the first time.

Ben is excited and announces proudly to the camera that he is having sex with a teacher. Ms. Young becomes jealous and possessive as it becomes clear that he is beginning to have chemistry with his co-lead in the play. She manipulates him into refocusing his attention on her and swears him to secrecy about their sexual relationship. Ben's friends spy on him, and when they discover the relationship they respond with jealousy, admiration, and excitement.

Motivated by jealousy, Ms. Young goes on to give Ben's co-lead in the play a poor grade on a paper, after which Ben tries to end the relationship. She tries to sexually manipulate Ben into staying in the relationship. He feels stuck, breaks off the relationship again, and she responds by threatening his grade. At this point in the narrative, Ms. Young is appearing increasingly unstable and/or sinister. The tone of the relationship continues to spiral into something darker and more troubling. Ms. Young is bitter, a woman scorned. She has sex with Ben's (older) brother out of spite and continues to use her power as his teacher to try to manipulate Ben. They continue to fight and are eventually discovered. Ms. Young is ultimately asked to leave and never teach again. After Ben's parents find out about the relationship, Ben's

father expresses feeling both angry and proud. His parents are unsure how to navigate the situation and they ultimately decide to not report Ms. Young to the police.

### ***Student Seduction***

*Student Seduction* (Svatek, 2003) is a *Lifetime* film about Christine, a young and attractive early-career high school chemistry teacher whose connection with a male student becomes overly close and ultimately dangerous. Christine is supposed to be attractive—sexy, even, but with an air of innocence or naivete. When one of her male students, Josh, begins to struggle with the course material, for example, she offers after-school tutoring, even though it is apparent to the audience that he is attracted to her. He invites her to lunch to express appreciation for the tutoring, and she accepts. During the lunch (which is very date-like), Josh refers to her in a flirtatiously colloquial way and she tries to establish boundaries by calling his behavior too informal and reminding him that they are teacher and student. The lunch is the merely the first example of a string of interactions like this: Christine consistently has trouble maintaining certain boundaries (i.e., being physically close, allowing him to fix her car) but always pulls back and verbally reminds Josh of the intended nature of their relationship.

Though Christine is somewhat ineffectual in her attempts to keep the relationship with Josh within “appropriate” boundaries, the audience is not supposed to believe that she is attracted to him; rather, she is portrayed as a very devoted teacher who genuinely wants to help her students. Thus, gender dynamics appear to trump power/authority dynamics in this depiction. In keeping with this narrative, Josh is characterized as the pursuer, even the predator. He tries to find ways to be intimate with her, he insistently helps her with her car when it is broken down one day, he takes the liberty of calling her by her first name, and he tries to find ways to make physical contact with her. Josh is eventually confirmed as predatory when, after a heated

exchange between the two of them, he coercively kisses Christine. She tries to report the event to the principal, who ultimately discourages her from lodging a formal complaint. The principal does speak with Josh directly, however, after which he is intensely dysregulated and goes to Christine's home. Amidst a desperate attempt to convince Christine that there is a genuine romantic relationship between the two of them, Josh sexually assaults her.

To avoid any consequences of his actions, Josh (at his parents' behest) accuses Christine of sexual misconduct, using the inappropriate closeness of their relationship as evidence against her. This is initially an effective strategy and Christine finds it very difficult to clear her name. At one point she telephones Josh to try to convince him to confess to the assault and subsequent lies. She then shows up at the home of one of her female students to try to convince her to share her own story of being assaulted by Josh. When she is unable to convince this student to come forward, Christine has coffee with another female student to try to convince her to testify against Josh. Christine is ultimately unsuccessful in her attempts to gather evidence against Josh and she takes a plea bargain. When the first female student hears this news, however, she decides to come forward with her testimony and the film ends "happily."

### ***A Teacher***

In the film *A Teacher* (Fidell, 2013), Diana Watts is a high school teacher who could be described as sweet, shy, and a bit mousy. She is a sad and lonely character—one who is consistently detached from herself and her life. Eric is the opposite in almost every way. He is a high school student—confident, cocky, jockish. When the film begins, they have already established a sexual relationship, often taking place in the back of Diana's car. It is apparent to the audience that Diana is in love with Eric and that he is not as emotionally invested in the relationship as she is. Eric appears to be positioned as the one in power. He is dominant. The

sexual relationship is often focused on his pleasure (i.e., he wheedles her into performing oral sex while he is driving a vehicle). Diana tries to end the relationship after getting scared about being discovered but is subsequently jealous and obsessive. She may be the one with power/authority, but she is also the one getting hurt. Diana decompensates and Eric's relative youth is brought into relief. He does not know how to respond to the size and complexity of her emotions and eventually discloses the relationship to his father. The movie ends with Diana in tears as she is faced with the potential consequences of the relationship that she had with Eric.

### ***MILF Money***

The music video for the song "MILF Money" by Fergie (2016) takes place primarily within "Milfville" a place populated with wanton housewives. One scene includes Fergie as a teacher in a room full of male high school students wearing letter jackets. She is the quintessential "hot teacher" (glasses, ruler, etc.) and she dances at the front of the classroom. She is dancing (very sexually) with increasing speed while the students begin banging on the desks in time. It is worth noting that this is the only song of the examples that is by a female artist.

### ***Hot for Teacher***

The Van Halen (1984) hit "Hot for Teacher" is written from the stereotypically libidinous high school male perspective, at one point speaking euphemistically about his writing utensil. In the accompanying music video, female teachers are depicted as models, strippers, and beauty contestants.

### ***Hey Teacher***

The song "Hey Teacher" by Louis XIV (2005) is also focused on the lust of the male student, who is trying to convince his female teacher to begin a sexual relationship.

### ***Teacher's Pet***

The Venom (1982) song “Teacher’s Pet” describes a sexual encounter with a female teacher who is very much in charge; she is the aggressor, and depicted as sexually aroused. But there is nothing portrayed as traumatic to the student; rather, there is intense male gratification, in part evidenced by how he brags about his sexual performance.

### ***Scandalous Scholastics***

The Gym Class Heroes (2006) song “Scandalous Scholastics” is a bit different from the other songs in that it starts to hint at the teacher being predatory—someone who would demand sex for grades. But the male student is still not ultimately positioned as victim or prey. His tone is that of a braggart, and he is lusty, liberated, triumphant.

### ***Teacher Teacher***

In Rockpile’s (1980) song “Teacher Teacher,” the narrator/male student pleads with his female teacher to initiate him into manhood with sex. So, while the teacher is still positioned as powerful in her experience and expertise, the student is an active pursuer.

### ***What I Go to School For***

“What I Go to School For” by Busted (2002) is another account of male student lust. He sings about ogling his teacher during class and suggests that her age is a turn-on and makes her superior to his female age-peers.

## **Results**

In looking at the cultural artifacts, there is much evidence of the cultural conversation regarding sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male high school students and a few different threads emerge. For the purposes of this work, I identified three themes: (a) equivalence, (b) hypersexualization, and (c) denigration.

## Equivalence

Equivalence is found in articles and portrayals containing debate about whether or not female teachers who have sexual relationships with their male students should be treated, judged, and punished exactly as are male teachers who have sexual relationships with their female students (Albrecht, 2012; Dorn, 2017; Goldberg, 2015; LawFirms, 2019; MacFarlane et al., 2018; McKay 2017; Sebastian, 2015). The assertion is that such equivalence “should” exist. Such an assertion privileges the domain of authority (the teacher as the powerful, responsible party), in that the argument is that the gender of the teacher should not be a mediating factor. Rather, regardless of gender, the infraction on the part of the teacher and the potential negative sequelae for the student are the same and should be treated as such.

Within examples of the theme of gender equivalence, it is often remarked upon that the consequences for female teachers who have sexual relationships with students are disproportionately small compared to the consequences for male teachers who have sexual relationships with female students (Albrecht, 2012; Dorn, 2017; Goldberg, 2015; LawFirms, 2019; MacFarlane et al., 2018; McKay 2017; Sebastian, 2015). Media coverage of these relationships is described as “lighthearted,” “flattering” (LawFirms, 2019), and status-enhancing (Dorn, 2017), positioned in opposition to a more “accurate” representation of these women teachers as sexual predators. Authors who value the idea of equivalence are often critical of women teachers being portrayed as somehow “vulnerable,” and they iterate the importance of being able to perceive male high school students as victims.

The equivalence conversation is taken up explicitly in some of the popular culture artifacts. In *Shameless* (Vernoff & Shill, 2013), for example, Lip and Cam (brothers) have a conversation about the female former high school teacher and whether or not she deserves the

label of sex offender. As abovementioned, Lip argues on the side of equivalence and says that a sexual relationship between a high school teacher and high school student is inherently predatory. Cam suggests that contextual factors, including gender, should be taken into account, and offers that perhaps the teacher and student cared deeply for one another (implying that such an emotional connection could “justify” the sexual relationship). The argument is also taken up between members of the legal team on *How to Get Away with Murder* (Swafford & Sullivan, 2016). One difference, however, is that while Cam on *Shameless* argues for the importance of contextual factors (including the possibility or likelihood of a deep emotional connection between the teacher and student), the students’ arguments against “equivalence” emphasize the desire and pleasure for the male student. They ultimately suggest that it would be absurd to position a male student as a victim to a female teacher, given that there is such a high likelihood (guarantee) that the male student was an enthusiastic participant. Thus, the qualities of maleness and libido equal consent.

### **Hypersexualization**

Another theme that emerged is the hypersexualization of the portrayals and perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students. In non-fiction media (news stories, web publications, etc.), there is emphasis on the specific sex acts that occurred, including the what, when, where, and frequency (eBaum’s World, 2014; fucktheteacher.com, 2019; Goldbeck, 2017; Thornton, 2017; Valizadeh, 2018). It appears additionally notable that there is frequent reporting on the performance of oral sex on (male) students, which suggests a continued emphasis on male sexual gratification and female sexual subjugation/domination. There is also a linguistic accentuation of the erotic/exciting aspects of these sexual relationships. This includes use of words such as: romping, bedding, tryst, boffing,

salacious, taboo, and fornication (Dorn, 2017; eBaum's World, 2014; fucktheteacher.com, 2019; Holley, 2016; McKay, 2017; Thornton, 2017; Top 10 Archive, 2016; Valizadeh, 2018).

The hypersexualization can be seen in the fictional cultural artifacts as well. For example, in *Shameless* (Vernoff & Shill, 2013), Lip decides to prove that the former female high school teacher is predatory by posing as a high school student and seducing her, thus proving that she is characterologically predatory. He is ultimately successful in his seduction, but the sexual gratification that he experiences within the exchange is so great that he is "unable" to go through with his plan to expose her. In *How to Get Away with Murder* (Swafford & Sullivan, 2016), those who argue that gender should be a mediating factor use the sexual gratification of the male students as rationale/justification. In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Greenwalt & Green, 1997), *Dawson's Creek* (Kapinos et al., 1998–2003), and *Life As We Know It* (Judah et al., 2004–2005), one consistent aspect of the portrayals of the female teachers is that they are sexy, sexualized, and intensely compelling to their male students.

Hypersexualization appears to be especially prevalent in music. All of the songs collected here for analysis are from the male student perspective with the one exception of MILF Money (Fergie, 2016) and all place great emphasis on the titillating aspects of sexual relationships between female teachers and male students. Indeed, there appears to be a distinct focus on male desire and gratification. In Van Halen's (1984) "Hot for Teacher," for example, the song is from the student's perspective, and he refers to his writing utensil, which is an obvious allusion to the penis, representing phallic power and sexual subjectivity. In Venom's (1982) "Teacher's Pet," the student brags about the gratification of his sexual desires. Other songs (Busted, 2002; Gym Class Heroes, 2006; Louis XIV, 2005; Rockpile, 1980) speak to the male student fantasy of sex with a female teacher, and the uniquely intense gratification of bringing that fantasy to life. The

male student is depicted as libidinous, sexually subjectified, and enthusiastically consenting.

Some argue that this sexualization serves to obfuscate the power dynamics and thus the predatory nature of the female teacher and the victim status of the male student (Dorn, 2017; LawFirms, 2019; McKay, 2017; Zack et al., 2018). As detailed above, this is seen in the research literature about sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students, as well as in news articles and other internet publications reporting on real-world examples. The notion that the titillation serves as a blinding mechanism can also be found in the popular culture artifacts. In the *Saturday Night Live* skits (Jost et al., 2015; Klein et al., 2016), for example, we see lawyers trying to argue that a male high school student was victimized by a sexual relationship with his female teacher. The lawyers are ultimately unable to make their cases because of the excitement and titillation in the courtroom. The female teacher in question is sitting suggestively in the room, continuing to flirt with the (excited) male student. The (male) judge sits in admiration of the student, while the student's father is proud and congratulatory. The commentary may be comedic, but it is an apt portrayal of the cultural discourse regarding these relationships.

### **Denigration of The Teacher**

Another emergence in the media analysis is vitriol directed at the female teachers, who are suggested to be getting off too easily. One sees an insistence upon equivalence of “punishment” of male and female teachers, sometimes aggressively. On the *LawFirms* website (2019), for example, they suggest that female teachers should be “reviled” as “sexual predators” but instead they receive media attention that is ultimately status-enhancing. This begs the question of exactly how their status is enhanced, and whether such “enhancement” is desirable. Ms. French in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Greenwalt & Green, 1997), for example, is portrayed

not only as hypersexual and predatory, she is a literal monster who requires virginal sperm to procreate. The vitriol appears to manifest quickly and easily as (sexual) denigration and/or shaming of the female teachers.

In the website [fucktheteacher.com](http://fucktheteacher.com) (2019), for example, the women teachers are referred to (among other things) as: dense bitch; horny teacher; jealous bitch; cum dumpster; insatiable sexpot; and great American cougar and teen cock connoisseur. The website also refers to: that good pussy; spicy 24-year old teacher poontang; and “as much underage pipe as her honey hole could stand.” Valizadeh (2018) captions a photograph of a female high school teacher who had a sexual relationship with a male student with “She almost looks like wife material.” On the Barstool Sports website, Jerry Thornton (2017) says that “only the best of the best, the hottest, craziest and hardest working women in the SST [sex scandal teachers] business made the cut.” He refers to the women as “spank material” and refers to them performing “handjibbers” and “blowjibbers” on their male students. Thus, while female high school teachers can attain a sort of celebrity status, some of that attention is objectifying and potentially disempowering.

## **Discussion**

### **Splitting**

Within psychoanalytic theory, the concept of “splitting” has been taken up in different ways over time. For example, early conceptions of splitting resided within drive theory, while later definitions suggested that it is more defensive and/or relational in nature (Jiraskova, 2014; McWilliams, 2011; Weiss, 2015). Regardless of context and nuance, however, splitting is fundamentally a concept to explain an unconscious mechanism whereby various phenomena (self, others, ideas) are perceived in incompatible extremes or polarities (i.e., all bad vs. all good). This occurs when it is impossible, threatening, or confusing to comprehend the

complexity of a person or experience. Splitting thus breaks down a whole concept or phenomenon into (incompatible) parts, which makes it impossible to comprehend and interact with its real complexity (Jiraskova, 2014; McWilliams, 2011; Weiss, 2015).

Though splitting was initially described as a process that would occur within an individual, some analytic thinkers have posited ways in which splitting can operate on a sociocultural level (Haaken, 2002; McWilliams, 2011; Weiss, 2015), which is how it is used for the purposes of the current work. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists have pointed to a fundamental cultural split in perceptions/constructions of gender, and have expounded upon the limits and constraints of such a split, and how it affects how men and women are respectively socialized and positioned (Chodorow, 1989, 2012; Haaken, 2002; Harris, 2005; Sullivan, 1989). In Nancy Chodorow's (1989) book, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*, for example, she rejects an essentialist view of gender and avers that due to the cultural split, women are trained into highly fraught culturally accepted expressions of femininity through complex processes of emotionally-laden and conflict-ridden socialization and object relations. In her book on the "feminine principal," Barbara Stevens Sullivan (1989) discusses the ways in which masculinity and its associated qualities are idealized in contrast to femininity. In a treatise on female aggression, Jan Haaken (2002), explores some of the cultural splits between male and female and masculinity and femininity and then the ways in which perceptions of women themselves are split (i.e., between pure (good) and dirty (bad)). She goes on to examine the pitfalls of overcorrection, however, and suggests that:

Once gender is destabilized as a "deep" category of difference, there is a tendency to assume that differences associated with gender are merely superficial. In the field of

aggression, there is a particularly pronounced tendency toward this kind of intellectual splitting—the position that gender either means everything or that it means nothing.

(p. 208)

This then becomes a sort of meta-splitting, which I argue below is operating within perceptions of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male high school students, especially within the theme of equivalence.

### **Split Perceptions of Teacher/Student Relationships**

Taking the cultural division of gender (including prescribed ideas of masculinity and femininity) as a fundamental and fertile split, divisions and conflicts proliferate from there. Some of the proliferation is a reinforcement of the initial split and thus more or less expected. As individuals within this culture have been historically so divided into male and female, men and women, masculine and feminine, so they are divided by associated attributes (Sullivan, 1989). And the associated attributes are split. For example, maleness and masculinity are associated with “good”: (a) power, (b) domination, (c) activity, and (d) subjectivity. Femaleness and femininity are associated with “bad”: (a) weakness, (b) submission, (c) passivity, and (d) objectivity. Stereotypic gender norms and expectations such as these are a large part of the discourse regarding relationships between female high school teachers and their male high school students. In many of the media and popular culture artifacts detailed above, it is argued that the associations between certain characteristics and behavior and the respective genders are so strong that it creates a conflict when the evidence contradicts expectations. The argument is that when a female teacher engages in what is generally perceived as predatory behavior (and predation/power/dominance are generally associated with men and masculinity), then, it creates a dissonance. One way to resolve the dissonance is to see the behavior differently. This, it is

argued by those who espouse the idea of equivalence (Albrecht, 2012; Dorn, 2017; Goldberg, 2015; LawFirms, 2019; MacFarlane et al., 2018; McKay, 2017; Sebastian, 2015), at least in part explains why female high school teachers who have sexual relationships with their students are perceived as less predatory than their male peers, and why the consequences are often less severe.

Borne of the fundamental gender splitting, there are loaded polarities at work within this discourse, including a division between gender (woman/man) and authority (teacher/student). One sees this operating within the equivalence debates regarding which should be given weight when making decisions about the consequences of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students. There is also a division between conceptions of sex and love, and which is seen as more acceptable (i.e., the notion that a sexual relationship would be more “acceptable” or “justifiable” if love is involved), and the assumption that women are more likely to be engaging in sexual relationships because of feelings of love. Perceptions of the female teachers themselves are polar as well, perhaps most especially between being sexualized and being desexualized (historically described as the virgin-whore complex). One sees the desexualization in the associations of women with nurturance, caretaking, passivity, and receptivity. As aforementioned, this enters the discourse regarding teacher/student relationships in the form of arguments that the perception of women as caretakers precludes the ability to see women as violent/aggressive/sexual perpetrators. On the other hand, one sees the sexualization in the portrayals of female teachers who have sexual relationships with their male students as libidinous femme fatales. As detailed above, another argument put forth in some of the cultural artifacts is that the titillation of such portrayals serves to mask the offense and the harm to the

victim. This may be so, but I argue that it operates in other ways as well; ways that do not appear to be a part of the discourse.

The cultural eroticization of the female teachers arguably contributes to the ways in which they are denigrated as well, which appears to be a cultural blindspot given that it is not a part of the discourse. As detailed above, some of the cultural artifacts refer to the women in ways that are objectifying, degrading, and shaming. This serves to ultimately disempower and effectively re-subjugate women. It also maintains a status quo emphasis on male sexual gratification, which then overlaps with the assumption that it is not possible for a male student to be victimized by a female teacher because a male student would presumably be desirous of a sexual relationship. And the assumption of such desire is another product of the fundamental gender split; sexual gratification is presumed to be paramount for men, while emotional connection is presumed to be paramount for women, which sexologists have argued is not necessarily accurate (Bergner, 2009). The sexual denigration is arguably the product of yet another split in the manners in which men and women are respectively condemned, punished, or aggressed against.

Thus, layers of splitting and polarized thinking appear to operate in a way that is culturally blinding. Even in attempts to engage the discourse in a critical way, individuals can engage in Haaken's (2002) meta-split, wherein the implicit argument is that when trying to conceptualize sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students, gender means either everything or nothing. The divisions and the inherent blindness operate within the discourse in a manner that inhibits the capacity to see or talk about the real complexity of the phenomenon. It stands to reason, then, that a shift in perspective is necessary in order to facilitate a more productive and meaningful conversation about sexual relationships

between female high school teachers and their male students. And requisite to such a productive and meaningful conversation is a greater capacity to see these relationships and the individuals therein with greater wholeness and complexity. For the purposes of the current work, this is important from a clinical perspective.

### **Clinical Application**

As aforementioned, clinicians are products of their cultures and the messages (and splits) therein, and clinical judgments are easily informed by implicit assumptions (Eells, 2007; Sue, 2001; Wisch & Mahalik, 1999). Within the context of working with this phenomenon (sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students) from a clinical perspective, then, the onus is on the clinician to try to transcend the splits and polarities and hold the complexity of the relationships and the individuals therein. Research regarding cultural “competence” has consistently suggested that one of the foundational ways in which therapists can and should begin to work toward seeing cultural phenomena more clearly is by maintaining an awareness of their blindspots and biases (Sue, 2001). This includes an awareness of the ways in which biases are informed by social discourse. Within the context of working with sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students, clinicians need to be able to open space for the pieces that are unseen and unheard. They need to be able to work with what is not being named. If working with a female teacher who has had a sexual relationship with a male student, for example, a clinician should be able to hold her as a complex and whole individual, including (but not limited to) feelings of aggression, desire, *and* victimization. And they would need to be able to hold the same feelings when working with a male high school student who has had a sexual relationship with a female teacher.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

As it is important for clinicians to maintain an awareness of their own biases and blindspots, so it is for researchers as well. My own experiences and identities have informed my inquiry, from how I picked my subject matter, to what theoretical framework I have used, to how I conducted my inquiry, and to how I understand the data. Among other things, I am a White, cisgender, feminist woman. I am a therapist whose clinical work is relational/dynamic in nature. All of these aspects of who I am have influenced the current work, and some of them are limiting in nature. For example, there is a greater emphasis on the experience of women than men. The feminist psychoanalytic theoretical framework that I employed is a very White feminist framework. As mentioned earlier, another limitation of the current work is that it operates within a binary model of gender. While a binary model applies to the cultural artifacts analyzed within the current work, that will likely become outdated as perspectives on gender have been shifting to more of a spectrum model. It will be additionally interesting and important to see how shifting conceptions of gender might shift the perceptions of sexual relationships between teachers and students.

Future research could benefit from an exploration of different cultural considerations and perspectives regarding a variety of domains of human diversity. This could include race, sex, gender, age, and ethnicity. It could be additionally useful to expand the analysis to additional types of cultural artifacts, including, for example, public comments and social media. Other research could also look directly at clinician perspectives on sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male high school students. This could include interviews with clinicians who have worked with this phenomenon and/or analysis of clinician formulations of hypothetical scenarios.

## Conclusion

I undertook this project with an aim to understand cultural perceptions, constructions, and narratives regarding sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students. To that end, I conducted an analysis, informed by a feminist psychoanalytic theoretical lens, of both fiction and non-fiction portrayals of this phenomenon. I identified three themes within the portrayals: (a) equivalence, (b) hypersexualization, and (c) denigration. *Equivalence* refers to the debate regarding whether or not sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students should be perceived and treated the same as are sexual relationships between male high school teachers and female high school students. *Hypersexualization* refers to the ways in which the female teachers are eroticized and objectified. And *denigration* refers to the ways in which the female teachers are (sexually) disparaged and shamed.

To explain these themes, I employed a feminist psychoanalytic framework to explore the ways in which cultural splits and polarized thinking appear to contribute to how the relationships between female high school teachers and male students are perceived. I argue that the layers of splitting and polarized thinking appear to operate in a way that is culturally blinding in that it inhibits the capacity to see or talk about the real complexity of the phenomenon. I go on to aver that a shift in perspective is necessary in order to facilitate a more productive and meaningful conversation about sexual relationships between female high school teachers and their male students, and that this is important from a clinical perspective. Clinicians have a responsibility to maintain an awareness of their blindspots and biases and the ways in which they are informed by social discourse. They need to be able to open space for the pieces that are unseen and unheard attendant to the splits and polarized thinking within broader cultural perspectives. To effectively

work with the phenomenon of sexual relationships between female high school teachers and male high school students, clinicians must work beyond the splits and polarized conceptualizations and instead interact with complex and whole individuals.

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