

Is a decade enough to change perceptions of sexual misconduct? A follow-up study on Estonian university students

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Background

When opening up about sexual abuse, female victims might feel blamed and not believed, meanwhile male victims may fear being viewed as homosexuals (Alaggia, 2005). Fear and shame on the other hand may lead to decreased help-seeking and thus result in different psychiatric disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Alaggia, 2005; Kennedy & Prock, 2018).

Shame and fear may often come down to attitudes about sexual misconduct. These perceptions have often been studied in academic contexts (Shtarkshall et al, 2015; Russel & Gruys, 2021), however, perception of sexual harassment in academic contexts has not changed in the US over the period of ten years (Bursik & Gefner, 2011).

Aim of the study is to find out whether or not the same stagnation in perceptions is true in the context of Estonian university students.

We explore how the evaluations given to sexual misconduct have changed in Estonian university students between 2004 and 2021. We also compare given evaluations based on victim's sex.

Methodology

The participants were shown 12 vignettes presenting possible sexual misconduct scenarios and asked to evaluate the level of misconduct on a scale from one to eight. In eight vignettes (from the third vignette to the tenth, see Fig 1) the sex of the victim and actor was manipulated. This manipulated data was used in our study to compare mean scores of vignettes where the victim is either male or female.

Participants ($N_{2004}=624$; $N_{2021}=650$) were assigned a questionnaire out of four possible victim-actor gender pairs. The first cohort's age ranged between 17 to 57 ($M=22.2$) and the second cohort's between 16 to 72 ($M=30.8$).

We compared mean ranks and ran Mann-Whitney u-tests for statistical significance as deviation from normality was suggested.

We excluded the vignettes shown in Fig 1 that had no statistically significant differences from sex-based figures after running further analysis and concluding that the results were not statistically significant.

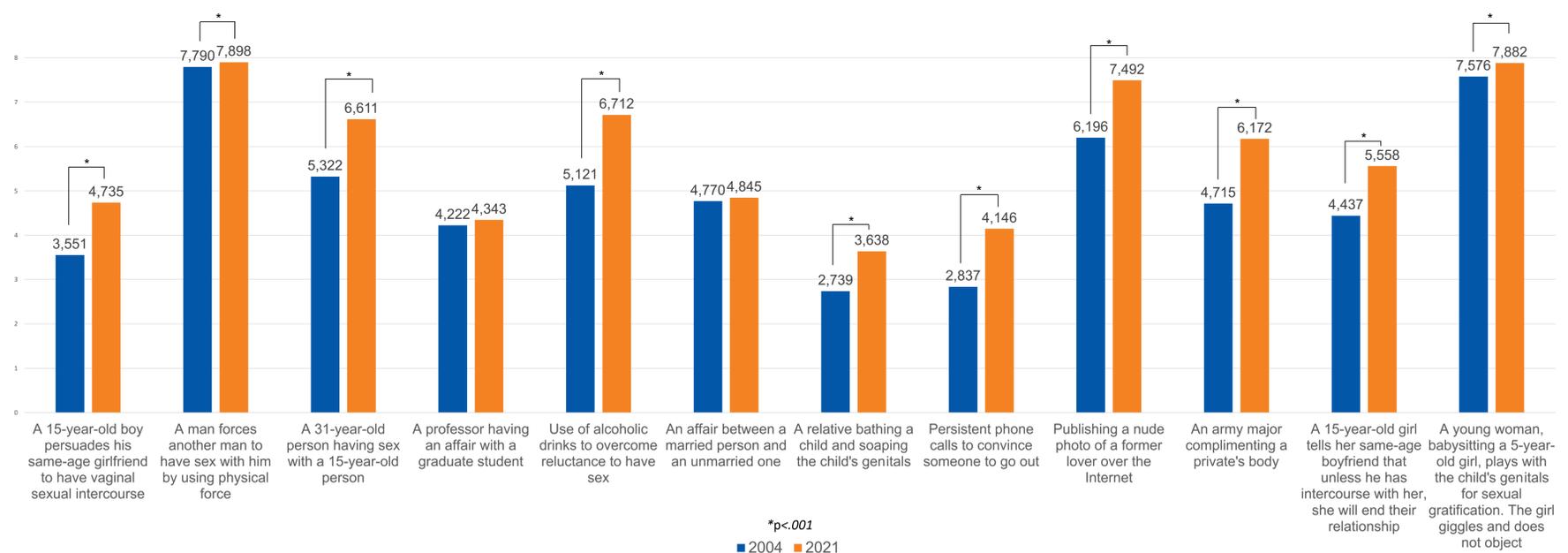


Figure 1. Comparison of mean scores of evaluations of misconduct in 2004 and 2021 cohorts

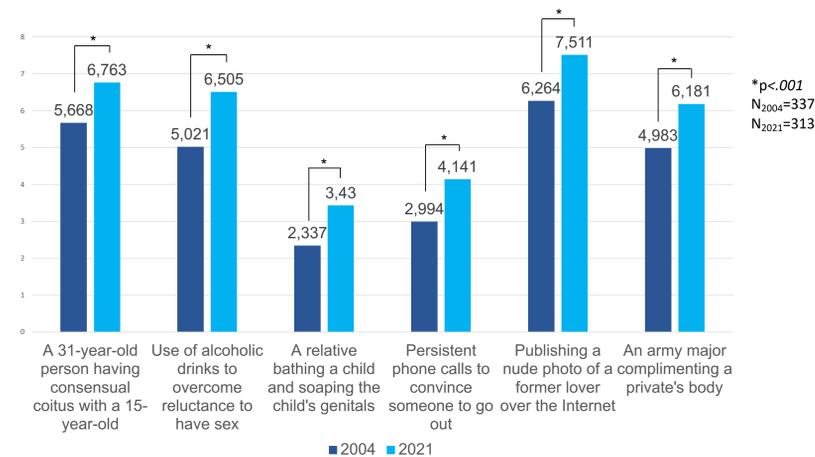


Figure 2. Mean scores of evaluations of misconduct when the victim is male

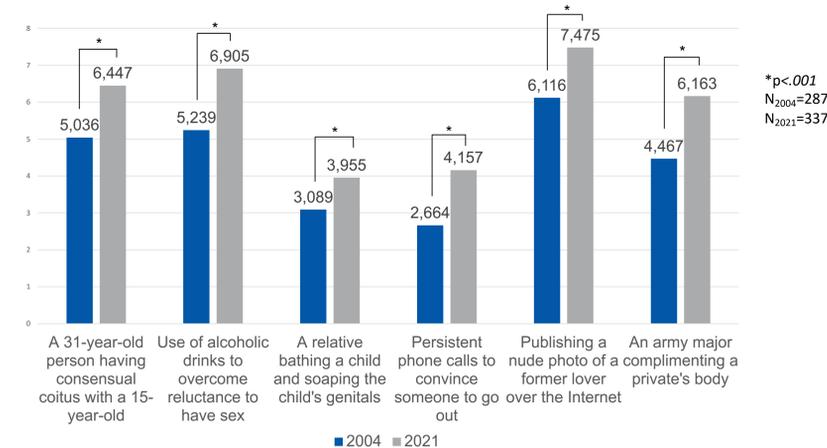


Figure 3. Mean scores of evaluations of misconduct when the victim is female

Results

There were statistically significant changes in ten vignettes, whereas the mean score rose even in the vignettes where the results were not statistically significant.

A man forcing another man to have sex with him by using physical force ($M_{2004}=7,790$; $M_{2021}=7,898$, $p<.001$) and a young woman playing with a 5-year-old girl's genitals for sexual gratification ($M_{2004}=7,576$; $M_{2021}=7,882$, $p<.001$) were evaluated most harshly.

The biggest difference in the two cohorts was seen in the scenario where the actor encouraged the subject to drink alcohol to overcome hesitations about sex with $M_{2004}=5,121$ ($SD=1,954$) increasing to $M_{2021}=6,712$ ($SD=1,719$), $p<.001$.

Our data does not confirm the claim that scenarios with female victims tend to be rated more harshly (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Although some differences can be seen in the misconduct's evaluation mean scores of male and female victims within the two cohorts, they are roughly similar.

Conclusion

The results indicate that within the 16 years, perception of sexual misconduct has changed. Sexual misconduct was evaluated more harshly in most (statistically significant differences in 10 out of 12) scenarios by the 2021 cohort. In sex based comparison, the differences depended more on the scenario than the victim's sex.

Our study proceeds to rebut the statement that female victims scenarios are rated more harshly than male victim scenarios.

These results are important in order to better understand how attitudes about sexual misconduct shape fear and shame in victims and how it may influence their help-seeking behaviour.

Further studies are needed to understand how these perceptions are generalizable to the Estonian population and what exactly have been the causes of change in perception over the past decade.

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