

# Adolescent's perceptions of sexual relationships between students and teachers

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# History

- No Child Left Behind Act (2001)
- Sexual relationships between therapists and clients (Pope et al., 2006)
- Recent media coverage (Drive West, 2014; Lomax, 2015; Reilly, 2016)

# ESM and the Law

- Sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender are illegal under Title IX (Shakeshaft, 2004)
  - This is the precedent most often used when discussing ESM
- Laws specific to ESM vary by state
- Laws regarding sexual consent vary by state
  - Most often 17 or 18 is the age of consent

# ESM and the Law

- Texas is one of the few states to have a clear ESM law
  - Introduced in 2003,
  - Amended in 2011 to apply to ANY employee of ANY age at ANY school across a single district

21.12 IMPROPER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATOR AND STUDENT.

(a) An employee of a public or private primary or secondary school commits an offense if the employee:

(1) engages in sexual contact, sexual intercourse, or deviate sexual intercourse with a person who is enrolled in a public or private primary or secondary school at which the employee works;

# Previous Research

- Shakeshaft (2004) undertook first formal investigations
- Aggregated data from early 90s-2000
- Around 10% of all students exposed to some form of sexual misconduct by a teacher
  - Verbal/physical/intercourse/saying a student is gay/lesbian

# Previous Research

- Drive West Communications (2014)
- Aggregated nationwide media reports of student-teacher sexual relationships
- In 2014, 782 teachers *accused* of improper relationships
  - Texas had 116 (15%) – the highest in 2014

# Previous Research

- Our own Public Information Request revealed interesting information:
  - 599 ‘investigations’ since 2010; 49 resulted in license revocation
  - “Inappropriate relationships with student/minor” is the only category
  - This category includes sexual relationships, child pornography, etc...
  - Incidences are not tracked by school district
  - Other details must be obtained from law enforcement records

# Psychological Research on ESM

- Focused largely on student and teacher gender
- Used only adult samples
- Often confounds complicit relationships with assault/rape
- It does give us a general idea of how people view these situations



# Psychological Research on ESM

- Situations involving 15 y/o students were seen as less harmful than those involving a 9 y/o student (Fromuth & Holt, 2008)
  - However, 15 years is below the age of consent for *any state* (Park, 2003)
- Situations involving a male teacher and female student were viewed more negatively than the opposite gender pairs (Fromuth et al., 2001; Geddes et al., 2012; Howell et al., 2011)
  - Gender double-standard: People view *sexual abuse* cases with male perpetrators as worse than those with female perpetrators (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Knoll, 2010)

# Psychological Research on ESM

- Fromuth et al (2010) found that a student described as having trouble at home was viewed as being more at-risk for sexual abuse by teachers.
- Fromuth et al (2013a) found that female perceivers rated sexual situations involving students and teacher more negatively than male perceivers
  - Consistent with evolutionary accounts of gender differences in risk-perception
- When a situation was described as ongoing (e.g. multiple sexual contacts over a 4-month period) female perceivers saw the situation as more acceptable (Fromuth et al., 2016)

# Adolescent Perceptions of ESM

- Adolescents
  - Have a diminished capacity to appraise risks (Shulman & Caufmann, 2009)
  - Have difficulty regulating emotions (Steinberg et al, 2009)
  - Do not reach behavioral decision-making competency until early 20s (Cohen & Casey, 2014)
- Thus, adolescent's may evaluate a sexual relationship between a student and a teacher as though it were a normal relationship between peers
- May have difficulty foreseeing the risks and harms involved

# The Present Study

- None of the previous research has investigated how adolescents perceive ESM
  - Adolescents are less mature than previous adult samples
- Previous research has failed to manipulate ages relevant to those in high school (i.e. those most at-risk)
  - Previous studies described 9-15 year olds which constitutes a very different situation
- Previous research has not investigated the influence of teacher age
  - People generally view age-gaps in relationships negatively, especially when the female is older than the male (Banks & Arnold, 2001)
  - Females in their 20s are the most attractive to males from adolescence onward (Antfolk et al., 2015)

# The Present Study

- Previous research has not investigated how the assumed roles of the student and teacher contribute to perceptions of ESM
  - Adolescents may be less sensitive or aware of power differentials
  - May evaluate relationships akin to peer relationships
  - May evaluate situations based on perceived dynamics (e.g. “do they treat each other okay”)

# Hypotheses

- The perceived wrongness and likelihood of reporting student-teacher sexual relationships will
  - H1: decrease as participant (respondent) age increases, and will be greater for females vs. males
  - H2: decrease as age of the student involved increases
  - H3: increase as age of teacher involved increases
  - H4: increase as the power differential between student and teacher becomes more apparent/more extreme.

# Participants

- $N = 1,203$  secondary students attending 3 high school in a local school district
  - 4% sophomore, 50% junior, 46% senior
- 526 males, 625 females
- Average age of 16.83 ( $SD = .76$ ), from 14-19 years old
- 32% white, 5% black, 53% Latino, 3% Asian, 1% Middle-eastern, 6% mixed or other

# Procedure

- Participants read and responded to four short scenario descriptions of a student and teacher
  - The survey focused on ‘consensual sexual relationships’ to avoid confounding responses with unwanted sexual contacts (e.g. sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape).
- Then rated how wrong and how harmful the situation was on a scale from 1(*not at all*) to 6(*extremely*)
  - These two were combined into a single “wrongness” score ( $\alpha = .84$ )
- Rated how likely they are to report the situation to a teacher/parent administrator from 1(*not at all*) to 6(*extremely*)



# Procedure

- Scenario 1: Baseline
  - Described a student who frequently spends time at their teachers house, but they do not have sex.
  - Allows us to control for individual differences in sensitivity
- Scenario 2: Student age
  - Described the student as **14** ( $n = 455$ ), **16** ( $n = 368$ ), or **18** years old ( $n = 323$ )
  - Did not mention teacher age
- Scenario 3: Teacher Age
  - Described teacher as **21** ( $n = 379$ ), **30** ( $n = 381$ ), or **40** years old ( $n = 385$ )
  - Did not mention student age

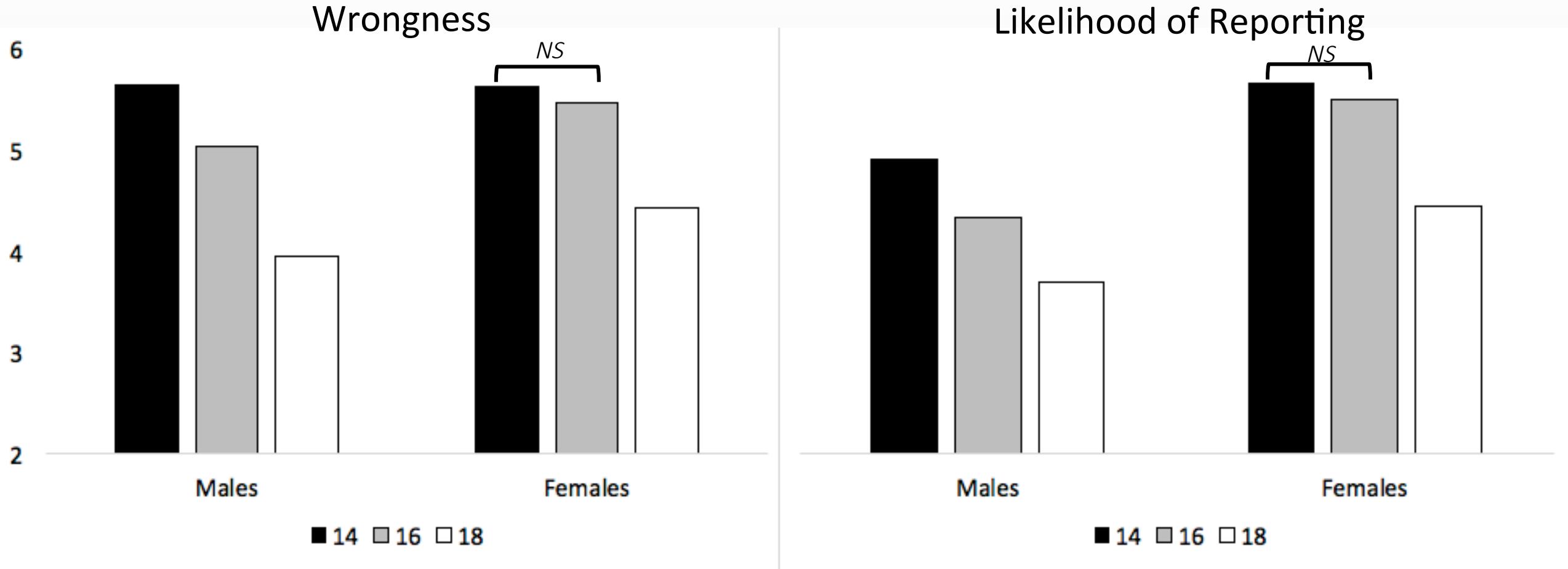
# Procedure

- Scenario 4: Power Differentials
- *“Imagine you find out your friend has been having sex with their teacher for some time. Your friend explains that they were initially excited about the relationship...”*
- No Differential ( $n = 380$ )
  - *“...and things went well for a while. However, they recently lost attraction for each other and ended the relationship on good terms.”*
- Low Differential ( $n = 289$ )
  - *“...but now believes the relationship will end because the school year is about to end.”*
- Medium Differential ( $n = 267$ )
  - *“...because they thought it might improve their grade, though the teacher never promised this.”*
- High Differential ( $n = 208$ )
  - *“...because the teacher promised better grades in exchange for sex.”*

# Results: Hypothesis 1

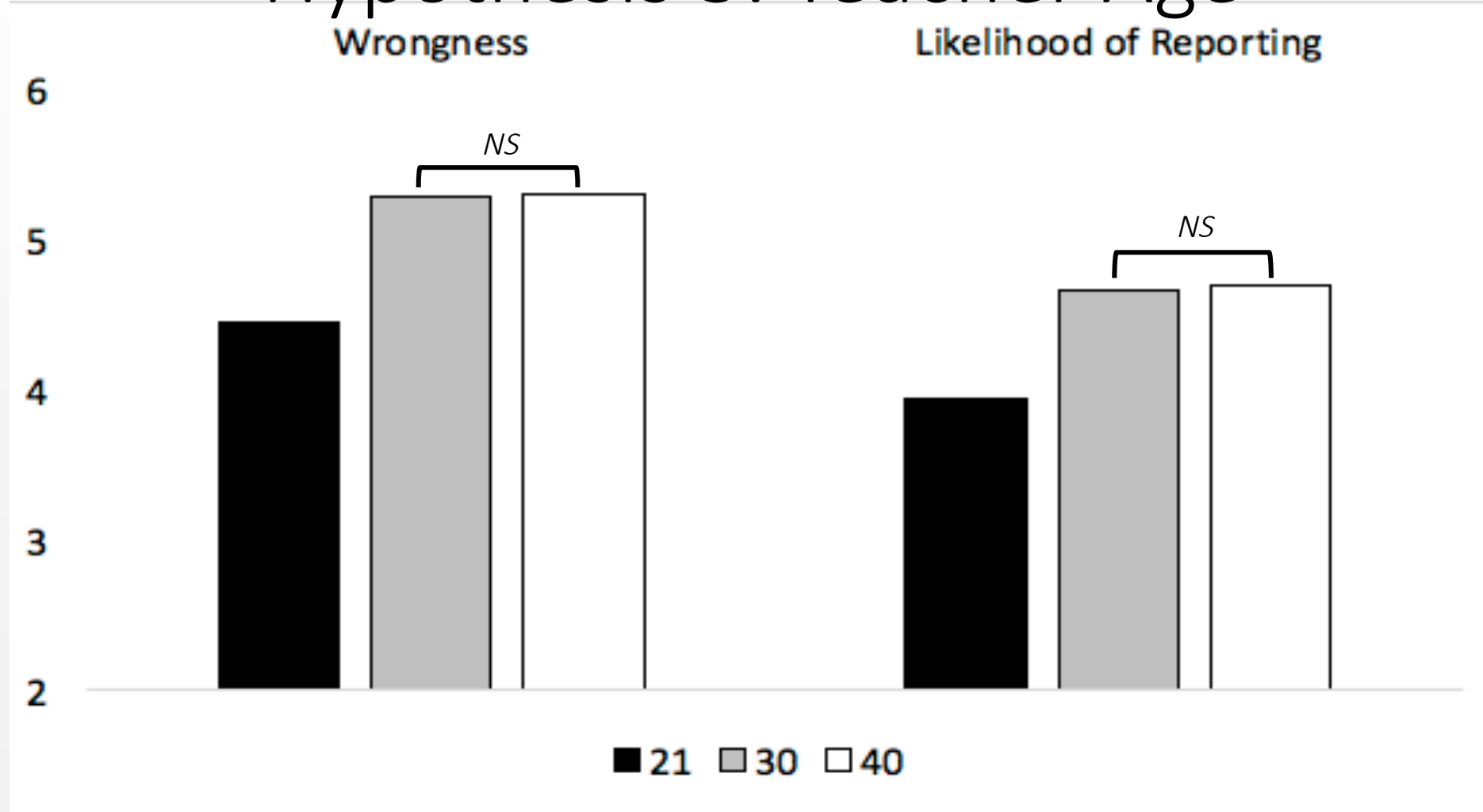
- Baseline Scenario
- Older participants ( $B = -.14, p = .006$ ) and males ( $B = .75, p < .001$ ) saw the situation as less wrong
  - Interaction was not significant
- Older participants ( $B = -.12, p = .065$ ) and males ( $B = .50, p < .001$ ) were less likely to report
  - Interaction was not significant

# Hypothesis 2: Student Age



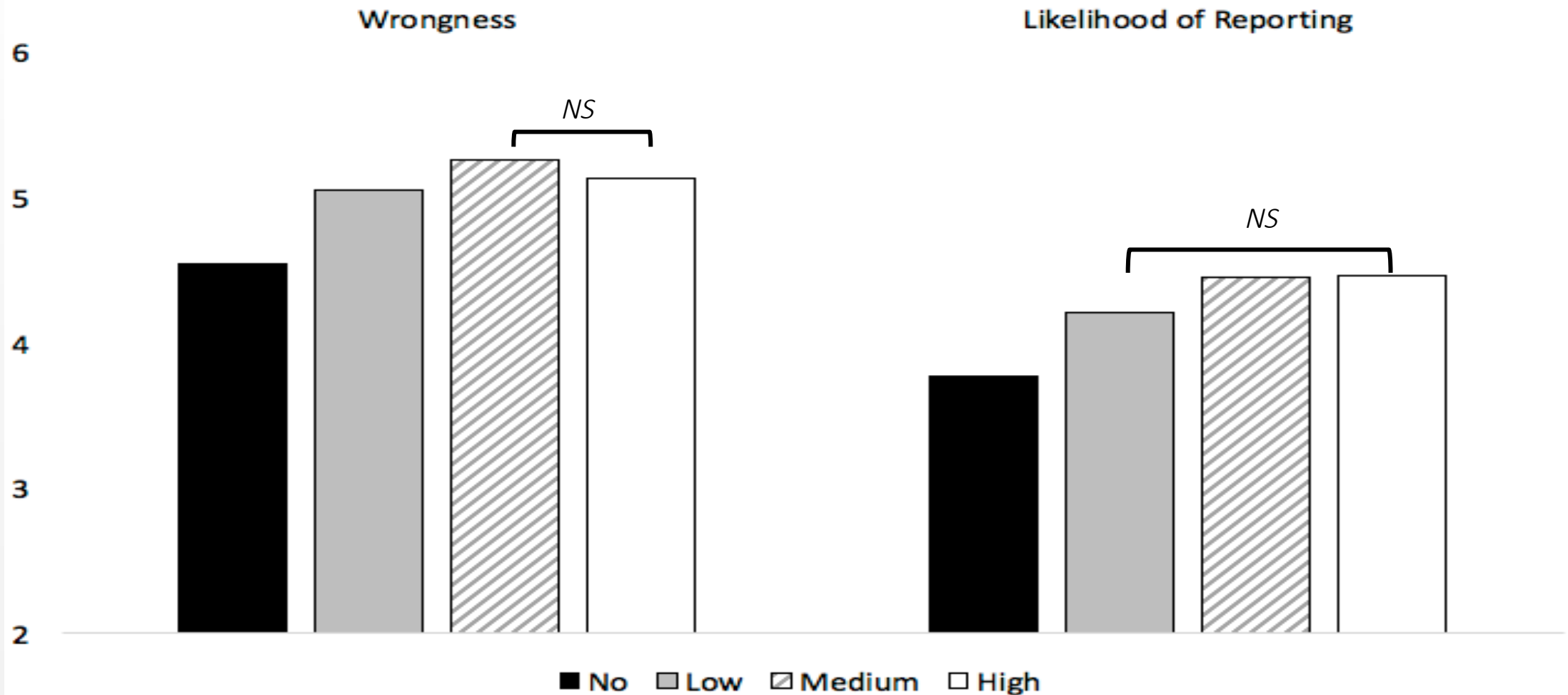
3(Student age: 14, 16, 18) x2(Gender: male, female) ANCOVA, using student age and baseline responses as control variables.

# Hypothesis 3: Teacher Age



3(Teacher age: 21, 30, 40) x2(Gender: male, female) ANCOVA, using student age and baseline responses as control variables.

# Hypothesis 4: Power Differentials



3(Student age: 14, 16, 18) x2(Gender: male, female) ANCOVA, using student age and baseline responses as control variables.

# Results

- Age and gender of the perceiver were important
  - Older students and males saw the situations as less wrong and were less likely to report
- Situations were seen as less wrong when the student was older and when the teacher was younger
- Situations were seen as less wrong when the role/power of the teacher was not made salient

# Discussion

- Students (especially younger students, and male students) may be likely to evaluate ESM less negatively if:
  - The relationship looks like a peer relationship
  - If people are not being explicitly harmed
  - Because they do not seem the power difference as threatening
  - Because they are not fully able to anticipate negative consequences arising



# Discussion

- This district has a high rate of ESM historically
- So, students may be responding in socially desirable ways
  - Students may be particularly aware of consequences and still responded with averages of 3-4 on wrongness and harm scales!
  - If anything, this data *overestimates* negative perceptions
- Still, students seem relatively unaware of, or resilient to, the harms and ramifications
  - Students may simply not be aware of the strict *legality*

# Questions

- How do we accurately communicate the harms and dangers to students?
- How can we maintain the close bonds and healthy relationships that teachers must form with students?
- How can we address these problems without encouraging *false alarms*?
- Training programs should target students instead of teachers
  - Focus on identifying borders between healthy and unhealthy relationships