

Perspectives on the treatment of men and boys who sexually abuse

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Introduction

A CSSA Issues Paper 5, *Sexual violence offenders: Prevention and intervention approaches* (Chung, O’Leary & Hand, 2006), gave an overview of current treatment models being used in sexual offender treatment programs in Australia. In that paper, the authors argued ‘that contemporary feminist theory and critical studies in masculinity that address social practices of gender relations provide an important perspective to address sexual violence on a larger scale, but have been largely ignored in treatment perspectives’ (p. 1). In this paper, I explore this important area, which has, for the most part, been neglected in the treatment literature regarding men and boys who have been sexually violent.

A tension exists between the literature on offender treatment and gender or feminist-informed theories of sexual offending. These can be summarised by the questions one is led to ask. Much of the treatment literature asks a variation of the question: ‘What is it about this particular (young) man’s childhood experiences (particularly with his family), and the psychological consequences of this, that can help us to understand why he behaves in sexually abusive ways?’ In contrast, a view emphasising gender, social and cultural factors asks: ‘What is it about masculinity, power, sexuality and violence, that (young) men choose to sexually dominate others less powerful than themselves?’ Of course therapists are first and foremost concerned with their individual clients and their abusive behaviour, yet the decision of these individual men and boys to act in abusive ways occurs in a social context.

The first half this paper explores the literature that has engaged with the tension between these divergent views. The second half of the paper focuses on a small but stimulating body of literature that places gender and power at the centre of understanding and working with boys and young men who commit sexual violence. There is, of course, a vast feminist literature that articulates a gender-informed analysis of men’s sexual violence. The focus of this paper, however, is on literature that focuses directly on therapy and interventions (‘treatment’) with adults, boys and young men, or that seems to offer productive insights for practice.

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The context

This absence of feminist theory in the treatment of sexual offending (whether by men or boys) has been critically noted by several writers (e.g. Allan, 2004; Herman, 1988; Lamb, 1991, 1996, 1999; Lancaster & Lumb, 1999; Liddle, 1993; MacLeod & Saraga, 1988; Messerschmidt, 2000a, 2000b; Purvis & Ward, 2006). On one level, this can be interpreted as a result of the successful colonisation of sexual offender treatment by the ‘psy’ professions (e.g., psychiatry, psychology), which have a history of treating sexual offenders independently of feminist activism and theory (Lancaster & Lumb, 1999).


This may explain why intervention with abusive men in the domestic violence field has a more explicit connection to feminist theory, as these programs tend to be historically related to the feminist domestic violence movement. Nevertheless, this neglect demands attention, given that the work of feminist activists, theorists and therapists has been central to the recognition of sexual assault as an important social problem, as well as contributing significantly to the provision of support (including therapeutic intervention) to children, women and men who have been the victims of men's sexual violence.

Practitioners' engagement with feminist theory

Lancaster and Lumb (1999) investigated the engagement with feminist understandings of child sexual assault in the writing and work of practitioners working with child sex offenders in the UK. They found that while most practitioners are cognisant of the issues of 'theory, power, and the fixity of gender' (p. 120) that constitute the core concerns of feminist theory, these kinds of analyses have little impact on the actual work of 'treating' sexual offenders. They conceptually distinguish *explanatory* knowledge of causation—or why men sexually abuse children—from the psychological constructs that form the knowledge base for *intervention*. Practitioners have generally not incorporated feminist analyses into actual treatment, even where they hold a feminist analysis of the causes of sexual violence. Some practitioners interviewed by Lancaster and Lumb also explicitly rejected a feminist analysis.

In Australia, a feminist-informed 'responsibility approach' to sexual violence work with men and boys has been influential; however, this 'influence' appears to be more at the level of rhetoric than practice (Allan, 2004, echoing the finding of Lancaster & Lumb, 1999), especially in relation to boys and young men. Allan's research was with 36 practitioners working with sexually violent children. Of these, 30 named feminism as an informing influence in their work, and Jenkins (1990, discussed below) was widely cited. However, when these practitioners discussed their work, they tended to locate the cause of children's sexual violence with their family environment and their mother in particular. Indeed, the counsellors in Allan's study engaged in explicit mother-blaming discourse; even where a male partner was being violent towards his female partner, she was viewed as failing in her responsibility to be emotionally available to the children, which in turn was linked to her child's sexual violence.

A recent critical review of the relevance of a range of feminist theories in the treatment of men who have sexually abused children concluded that the value of feminist theory lies in its ability to inform preventative efforts at the social change level, but is of little clinical utility to practitioners as it is unable to account for individual differences among men (Purvis & Ward, 2006). These authors also argued that some feminist theories offer no account of how male offenders can change, obviously a pressing question for practitioners. Ultimately, the article is a succinct example of the tendency to give rhetorical acknowledgement to the importance of feminist analyses at a social level, but a reluctance to work at applying these insights to treatment. Their statement that 'it is not clear what role feminist ideas could have at this level other than perhaps providing ideals of equality in gender relationships' (Purvis & Ward, 2006, p. 310) leads one to ask what the goal of such treatment efforts are.



The main focus of the critical literature on the treatment of sexual offenders tends to be concerned with two closely related features of the treatment literature: the question of offender responsibility and agency, and the lack of detailed attention to the role of masculinity in men's and boys' sexual violence.

The key criticisms of the treatment literature

The main focus of the critical literature on the treatment of sexual offenders tends to be concerned with two closely related features of the treatment literature: the question of offender responsibility and agency, and the lack of detailed attention to the role of masculinity in men's and boys' sexual violence. The lack of feminist analysis in the literature on the treatment of sexual offenders was identified almost 20 years ago (Herman, 1988), and a persuasive critique of the reliance on psychodynamic and developmental models of understanding and treating sex

offenders was developed. Herman's central point was that 'in many psychopathological explanations of the sex offender's behaviour, the offender himself tends to disappear', and factors such as the offender's 'parents, wife or victim' (p. 707) were considered to be most relevant to understanding and treating his abusive behaviour, while the decision of the offender to abuse was a marginal consideration. At that time, family systems theory was influential in understanding men's sexual abuse of their children. Other feminist writers argued that the family systems literature discussed men 'as if they were children, more frequently passive, aroused by what others do to them, or spontaneously acting and in need of control' (MacLeod & Saraga, 1988, p. 34).

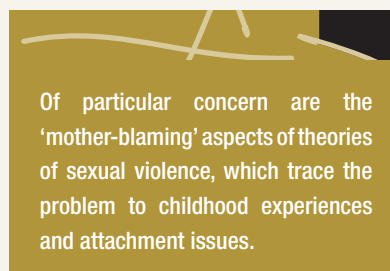
Responsibility

The same considerations apply to more recent theories that locate the cause of the offender's behaviour with developmental and psychological aspects of the individual offender. It could be argued that psychological theories of child sex offending that focus on the offender are a step forward from those explanations that either claimed incest allegations were a product of the child's fantasy, or that situated the cause of 'incest' with the mother and/or child. Yet there are continuities from the family dysfunction theories of incest, to the attachment-based and other psychological theories of sexual offending. The continuities are related to the themes of mother-blame, deferment of the offender's responsibility, the assumption of men's 'needs' in and of themselves being legitimate, and a focus on the need for external constraints.

To briefly illustrate a contemporary example of this position in the treatment literature, consider the following quote from the most recent publication by William L. Marshall, a particularly influential figure in the field of sex offender treatment:

At the base of our model are the problematic childhood experiences of males who become sexual offenders. These early experiences involve poor child-parent attachments; childhood physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect; inconsistent discipline; and early exposure to pornography (Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & Fernandez, 2006, p. 15)

This account explicitly locates the cause of sexual offending in highly individual historical/developmental experiences that have a (at least partially) deterministic effect on adult psychological functioning. Such 'explanations' for sexual offending tend to neglect the choice, or the agency, of the offender (Lamb, 1996). As mentioned earlier, of particular concern are the 'mother-blaming' aspects of theories of sexual violence, which trace the problem to childhood experiences and attachment issues (Allan, 2004, 2006; Breckenridge, 1999, 2006, also notes the mother-blaming tendencies of interventions concerning intra-familial child sexual *abuse*).



Of particular concern are the 'mother-blaming' aspects of theories of sexual violence, which trace the problem to childhood experiences and attachment issues.

This is of particular importance, given that therapists working with sexual offenders see the offender's acceptance of responsibility as a key goal of therapy (e.g., Marshall et al., 2006; see Jenkins, 2005a, for a discussion of responsibility with young men who sexually abuse). This aim seems to be in direct contradiction to explanations where the offender is represented as being profoundly shaped by childhood experiences. Of course, the point of therapy would be to develop the offender's awareness of these forces so that he is enabled to regain self-control. This constructs an unsatisfactory picture of the offender as an individual unable to exercise self-control without the benefit of therapeutic expertise and intervention. (Although it is worth noting here that this criticism could be made of a range of therapeutic models, including those discussed in the last part of this paper. In fact it may be argued that, in general, therapy as a response to sexual offending is inherently problematic for this reason.) This is why some practitioners are able to discuss men who sexually abuse children in terms of their powerlessness, rather than their power (Lancaster & Lumb, 1999). The complex issues of power and the *experience* of powerlessness are discussed later in this paper.

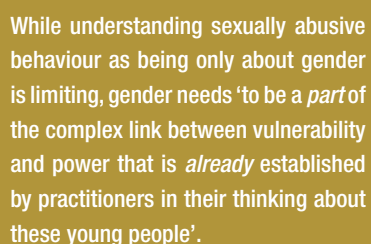
This logic of 'determinedness' (i.e. that men's sexual violence is determined to some extent by their past experiences) stems partly from contemporary ideas of victimisation that deny the decision-making ability of those who have been sexually assaulted (Lamb, 1996, 1999). While there can be temporary benefits in this subject position of 'victim' (e.g., a time of relief from some responsibilities, social legitimisation of the harm caused and, in the US at least, benefits related to insurance), it can become a 'totalising' description. The term 'victim' has taken on a meaning beyond the fact of being subject to violence. 'Victim' has become an identity, with its own set of expected behaviours and 'symptoms'. Lamb challenged this notion of victimhood, specifically by applying the logic to perpetrators of sexual abuse. She argued that experiences of victimisation should not be minimised or denied; however, we need to have a concept of victimisation that does not neglect the agency and responsibility of individuals. She suggested that the offender's behaviour cannot be explained by his own victimisation.

Gender and masculinity

The lack of critical attention to gender in studies of sexual violence in residential care has been recently noted in the UK literature (Green, 2005). In line with Green, we might ask what we mean when we ask that 'gender' be considered. Is it merely noting that girls are more often the victims of abuse and boys are more often the offenders? Or are we asking that we look more thoroughly at the way in which ideas and practices (discourses) of gender, sexuality and violence are implicated in sexual abuse committed by boys and young men?

What Green (2005) emphasised and illustrated, through the use of interviews and field observations, is that boys' sexual objectification and abuse of girls in residential care occurs in a context of rigid expectations about gender and sexuality that normalises aggressive male sexuality and passive female sexuality. Gender expectations are aggressively policed through physical and verbal abuse (including homophobic abuse of boys who do not perform this aggressive masculinity, and denigration of girls, who are seemingly penalised no matter how they deal with gendered sexual pressures). These beliefs and practices are perpetuated not only by male and female residents, but staff as well. In this context, aggressive sexual behaviour by boys is seen as normal and rarely considered to be abuse.

The lack of theorising about gender in relation to sexual violence in UK residential homes is also noted in research by Barter (2006). In her interviews with residents and staff, she found that while most participants felt that boys' sexually abusive behaviour was 'inappropriate', they attributed blame to girls for being 'provocative', and saw boys as victims of girls' provocation. 'Paradoxically, girls are viewed as being in control of their sexuality while boys are seen as the victims of their normal, but uncontrolled, sexuality' (Soothill & Walby, 1991, cited in Barter, 2006, p. 352). Those who attributed responsibility to boys often deployed the notion of the 'pervert' to explain his behaviour. 'By using the term 'pervert', young people are able to situate the boy's behaviour outside the normal range of male sexuality. This enables them to condemn his actions without having to challenge wider gendered relations of inequality and power' (Barter, 2006, p. 352). Many of the staff understood male and female sexuality in highly traditional gendered ways, with the themes of natural male sexual drive and female responsibility for men's sexual violence often cited.



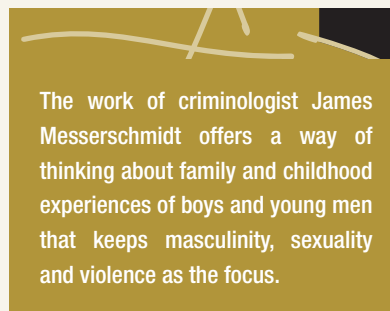
While understanding sexually abusive behaviour as being only about gender is limiting, gender needs 'to be a *part* of the complex link between vulnerability and power that is *already* established by practitioners in their thinking about these young people'.

The above research projects reflect the importance of understanding the particular contexts in which boys' and young men's sexual violence takes place. It also shows how issues of masculinity and responsibility are connected in explanations of sexual violence. The cultural norms that operate in specific places can actually create an environment that fosters sexual violence as acceptable while minimising the individual boys' responsibility. This has implications for treatment, as it suggests that close attention must be paid to how men and boys might resist engaging in violence in the

context of their day-to-day lives, and that many situations may arise where sexual violence is seen as acceptable to some degree.

While understanding sexually abusive behaviour as being only about gender is limiting, gender needs 'to be a *part* of the complex link between vulnerability and power that is *already* established by practitioners in their thinking about these young people' (Brownlie, 2003, p. 528). This is particularly relevant in the context of the increasing attention being paid to the links between family violence and sexual offending by male children and adolescents, 'links which are often presented in an ungendered way ... The difficulty lies in making these links and in finding ways of talking about a continuum of sexual violence—which involves boys as well as adult men—without slipping into explanations which demonise the former' (p. 528).

The work of criminologist James Messerschmidt (2000a, 2000b) offers a way of thinking about family and childhood experiences of boys and young men that keeps masculinity, sexuality and violence as the focus. Family dynamics and childhood experience are not discounted, but reinterpreted in terms of the culturally dominant practices of masculinities that families and boys engage with in the process of achieving a sense of identity. The performance of 'hegemonic masculinities' (which can include violence and sexual abuse) is an important way in which boys connect to their father or other male attachment figures. Interactions with parents are gendered and young men are active participants 'in the ongoing, collective family definitions of appropriate masculine practices' (Messerschmidt, 2000b, p. 87).



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Much of the research into the family-of-origin of adolescent sex offenders looks at factors such as family violence as a feature of individual families. However, family violence is in fact connected with much broader patterns of masculinity and gender relations. 'In attributing child sexual abuse to the phenomenon of family dysfunction, the family is seen as an entity isolated from its cultural, religious and social contexts' (Cossins, 2000, p. 38). This calls into question the idea that such violence is indicative of 'dysfunction' in particular families.

According to Brownlie (2001), where gender does appear in the therapeutic literature (regarding young people), it tends to be about one of three issues:

- the gender of the victims or practitioners in the therapeutic relationship;
- as an 'issue' in relation to girls who sexually abuse; or
- as part of making sense of the reluctance of some practitioners to see boys' sexually abusive behaviour as abusive.

There are some exceptions to this lack of engagement with gender (Cook & Taylor, 1991, and Templeman & Stinnet, 1991, both cited in Brownlie, 2001) that link the behaviours of young sexual offenders to that of 'normal' boys. A danger of framing sexual offending in terms other than individual pathology is that it may elicit a backlash, as it would make explicit the need for broad social change if sexual violence is to be reduced (Glasgow, 1993, cited in Brownlie, 2001). However, it also reflects an unwillingness to think about sexual offending, as well as childhood, in gendered terms.

Alternative approaches

This section looks briefly at some of the recent work (research, theory and therapy) that engages directly with men and boys who sexually abuse and employs a perspective that shifts the focus away from developmental and childhood factors or offers alternative ways of understanding these experiences.

Three important points can be drawn from Messerschmidt's (2000a, 2000b) research:

- interactions with parents are gendered, and young men are active participants 'in the ongoing, collective family definitions of appropriate masculine practices' (2000b, p. 87);

- not all the boys' fathers are overtly abusive; however, all families do engage with constructions of what it means to be a 'real man' in some way; and
- the role of school and peer culture in developing practices of masculinity are as important as family (they are interrelated).

A sense of masculine entitlement may be particularly important in relation to boys' sexual violence to women and female peers. As one of Messerschmidt's research participants says: 'I felt entitled, 'cause I'm a guy' (Messerschmidt, 2000a, p. 297). Their family may or may not have contributed to this understanding of masculinity, as this may also be supported by sources in society other than the family. Stillman (2006), for example, works with the idea that families can either support or resist dominant and abusive masculinities. This draws out the point that gender identities do not originate from within families, but that individuals and families have a relationship with broader ideas about masculinity, sexuality and violence. Nor do young men engage with these ideas solely in the context of their family (school is especially important), and there is no reason to assume a causal relationship between the beliefs and practices of a boy's family (which themselves might be diverse) and his own practices of masculinity.

Anne Cossins' approach in *Masculinities, sexualities and child sexual abuse* (2000) shares this focus on gender. She provided a succinct summary of her project, which:

challenges the methodology of disciplines, such as psychology and psychiatry, which have, in relation to child sex offenders, reduced an historically widespread and socially tolerated cultural practice to the individual qualities or tendencies of the offender, thus obscuring the historical context of child sexual abuse, the social context of the offenders' life, the structures of power that constrain his life, the ongoing and dynamic impact of that context on the offender, the offender's active engagement with his social context and the implications of that engagement for understanding his sexual practices. (p. xvi)

Cossins (2000) noted that in highlighting the importance of masculinity in sexual offending, there is still a need to explain why some men who 'act within the dominant script' sexually abuse children, some abuse adults and most men do not sexually abuse. She argued that this is related to men's experience of powerlessness in other spheres of their life, especially in their relations with other men. She argues that it is the unattainability of the 'masculine ideal' that contributes to men's experience of

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powerlessness: 'They are the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it' (Kimmel, 1994, p. 136, cited in Cossins, 2000, p. 109). Cossins argued that child sexual offending can be understood as a masculine practice engaged in by men who experience powerlessness in the context of their relationships with other men, in contrast to the psychological theories that posit child sexual offending as a deviation from normal masculine sexual practice. She asked: 'is child sexual offending a particular masculine social practice by which a man can accomplish gender?' (p. 111)

Despite the welcome focus on masculinity as a central factor in men's sexual offending, one of the shortfalls of this approach, especially in Messerschmidt's work, is that it does not account for sexual offending by men who are 'successful' in their pursuit of the masculine ideal. One way to account for this is to understand masculinity not as a fixed identity that, once accomplished, is secure. Rather, it must be constantly reasserted and always achieved, as a man's claim to masculinity is always under challenge. So even men who are powerful in general still experience a sense of powerlessness, or at least the potential for or fear of powerlessness (Cossins, 2000).


The above sociological approaches to understanding men who sexually abuse offer useful insights for therapeutic practice. The kind of thinking developed in this work is applied more directly to therapeutic

work by Australian therapist Alan Jenkins. Jenkins is probably best known for his book *Invitations to responsibility* on working with abusive adult men (Jenkins, 1990), although he has written more recently about work with younger men who sexually abuse (Jenkins, 2005a, 2005b). His unique contribution is the development of a practice model that eschews many of the traditional psychological constructs and is firmly grounded in an understanding of the ways in which (young) men's identities are formed in a cultural context that promotes violence and abuse. He also pays close attention to the power dynamics within the therapeutic relationship itself, and takes seriously the importance of an ethical orientation in the therapist–client relationship.

I will give one example of how this approach differs from the current dominant models. While much of the psychology-based research posits exposure to violence as a risk factor or contributing factor to the development of sexually abusive behaviours, an entirely alternative approach is offered by Jenkins (2005a). Rather than understanding exposure to, or direct experience of, violence as a factor in the development of sexually abusive behaviour, Jenkins argued that these experiences are themselves oppressive and unjust. The guiding principle here is the development of an 'ethic of fairness', in contrast to (for example) the resolution of childhood trauma, or addressing issues related to attachment patterns. The young man's experiences of abuse must be acknowledged in their own right, as instances of violence inflicted upon him. Jenkins is careful to distinguish this acknowledgment of abuse suffered from the idea that the experiences of the past have caused or led to the current abusive behaviour. It is not a matter of resolving past trauma in order to discover the individual, historical causes of one's abusive behaviour. Firstly, as a therapist, the relationship with one's client involves relations of power. Jenkins believes that it is an irresponsible and unethical use of power to fail to acknowledge the young man's own experiences of injustice. It would be politically and philosophically inconsistent to acknowledge one instance of injustice (the abuse committed by the client), but to minimise another (the abuse suffered by the client). Secondly, the intent is to nurture a consistent 'ethic of fairness', which produces new possibilities for action for the client. It is, in this sense, 'forward looking' (Jenkins, 2006), rather than the traditional psychological practice of explaining the present by looking to the past. Importantly, this might involve engaging the young man in a consideration of the ways in which ideas about masculinity encourage men to behave in abusive ways to women and children, whether this fits with his own sense of ethics, and what other 'preferred' ways of being are possible through resisting these invitations of male privilege.

One possible criticism of this focus on the social and cultural aspects of masculinity is that it could be seen to minimise the responsibility of individual offenders. This is to miss an important point in this approach, which is that social and cultural constructs of masculinity support men's violence, and that these ideas about masculinity and men's violence also excuse individual men from responsibility. I discussed this earlier in this paper, showing how theories of family dynamics and developmental/psychological factors can be used to minimise men's responsibility for their violence. The idea of working against these 'restraints' to accepting responsibility is a cornerstone of Jenkins approach (see especially Jenkins, 1990).

The central concern then of this approach, and what marks its difference from the currently dominant models, is that its central focus with (young) men who sexually abuse (and those working with them) is 'to address, in a comprehensive way, their relationship with masculinity and, in particular, their relationship with some oppressive ideas or attitudes that underlay a construction of masculinity that promotes



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abusive behaviours' (Slattery, 2000, p. 82). In this approach, masculinity is placed 'centre stage' as the focus of treatment. It recognises that all men and boys must engage in some way with powerful ideas about gender, many of which invite them to behave in ways that are abusive and harmful. This can be contrasted to the traditional psychological approaches that focus on learning specific 'skills' and managing particular problematic behaviours without specific reference to the social and cultural context in which men's abusive behaviours occur. In the approach I have been discussing, change is brought about by the development of a pervasive ethical position.

Conclusion

At a broader level, there is some concern that the focus on intra-familial dynamics in the development and treatment of sexually abusive behaviour is misplaced and misleading. Some writers have expressed concern that current Australian responses to male violence against women and children are becoming less influenced by feminist analyses and more focused on identifying and treating problematic intra-family dynamics, shifting attention away from the gendered structural, political, cultural and social factors that contribute to men's sexual violence (Allan, 2006; Costello, 2004–2005). In relation to sexual offending, this applies specifically to the questions of men's responsibility and the role of masculinity. While this concern is validated by a critical review of the treatment literature, there is also a small body of work that provides the basis for alternative models for working with boys and men who use sexual violence. The overall aim of this paper has been to highlight the relevance of a feminist-informed gender analysis of sexual offending, and the challenge for treatment providers and researchers is to build upon these insights in working with boys and men who sexually abuse.

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Erratum

The article 'Judging rape: Public attitudes and sentencing', by Haley Clark, *ACSSA Aware* 14, pages 17–25, omitted a key sentence from a quotation from the *Victorian Sentencing Manual* (Judicial College of Victoria, 2005):

The article gives the following extract from the *Victorian Sentencing Manual*:

"24.6.2.11: Conduct of the victim prior to the offence—The sentencer is entitled to take into account the conduct of the victim prior to the crime. That conduct may render the offender's actions more or less serious. The sentencer must proceed on the basis that where absence of consent is an element, the pleas of guilty or jury verdict has established that element. Foolish behaviour or unintentional provocation, or risk taking does not necessarily justify a reduced sentence" (pp. 20–21).

The extract should actually read:

"24.6.2.11: Conduct of the victim prior to the offence—The sentencer is entitled to take into account the conduct of the victim prior to the crime. That conduct may render the offender's actions more or less serious. **Sentencers should avoid too ready an acceptance of submissions that stereotype the victim as being responsible for the offence.** The sentencer must proceed on the basis that where absence of consent is an element, the pleas of guilty or jury verdict has established that element. Foolish behaviour or unintentional provocation, or risk taking does not necessarily justify a reduced sentence: **Murphy 20/12/1974 CCA NSW.**" (The wording that was omitted when this was cited in our article is highlighted in bold text).

It should also be noted that all extracts from the *Victorian Sentencing Manual* contained in this article are a reflection or summary of existing case law, and not a normative statement by the Judicial College of Victoria endorsing such views. By discussing a wide range of case law, the *Sentencing Manual* provides a more extensive consideration of the issues to consider in relation to victims' characteristics or previous behaviour than was portrayed in the three examples used in the article. The entire *Victorian Sentencing Manual* can be viewed online at: www.judicialcollege.vic.edu.au