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## **Sentence Determination as a Function of Sex Offender Gender**

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**Abstract** The current study examines perceptions of dangerousness and sentencing recommendations for female sex offenders (FSOs) compared to male sex offenders (MSOs). Participants (N = 82) were randomly assigned to read one of three vignettes depicting a sexual offense committed by a male, female, or male-female co-defendant pair. Key individual difference variables—Need for Cognition (NFC) and Gender Role Beliefs (GRB)—were assessed to examine their influence on sentencing and attributional judgments. NFC emerged as a significant moderator: participants with low NFC assigned longer sentences to FSOs, whereas high NFC participants gave longer sentences to MSOs. Participants endorsing traditional gender role beliefs were more likely to attribute the FSO's offending to external factors such as mental illness, substance abuse, and criminal history, relative to those with nontraditional beliefs. These findings highlight the complex interaction between cognitive style, gender norms, and offender sex in shaping legal decision-making and perceptions of culpability.

**Keywords** female sexual offenders, juror perceptions, gender bias, dangerousness, risk assessment

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## 1. Sentence Determination as a Function of Sex Offender Gender

Public perceptions of sex offenders are largely informed by stereotypes and punitive attitudes. Existing research indicates that this group is perceived as highly dangerous and resistant to rehabilitation, thus contributing to strong public support for severe sentencing and post-conviction restrictions (Harper & Hogue, 2015). Gender differences in perceptions are also evident, with women more likely to express negative attitudes compared to men. Additionally, media representations reinforce public biases by disproportionately focusing on certain kinds of offenders and offenses (i.e., stranger assault), while mischaracterizing or underrepresenting other offenders (family assault, female offenders). As a result, policies regarding the treatment of sex offenders are shaped more as a function of societal fear rather than empirical evidence (Harper & Hogue, 2015).

Sexual crimes are predominantly associated with male sex offenders (MSOs). Arrest data reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, 2019), supports the view that men account for the majority of forcible rape arrests. However, research indicates that female-perpetrated sexual offenses may be more prevalent than data suggests. Cortoni et al. (2017) estimate that female sexual offenders (FSO) constitute approximately 2% of all female offenders, yet victimization data suggests the figure could be as high as 12%. Additional studies report that between 14% and 24% of male victims of sexual abuse identify female perpetrators (Green, 1999), with broad ranges suggesting much greater frequency of female sexual offending (Bumby & Bumby, 1997). The disparity between reported and estimated prevalence may be attributed to underreporting, as female offenders often target male victims or co-offend with male perpetrators. As a result, this often leads to cases in which the male accomplice is disproportionately assigned culpability. Importantly, in cases involving male victims, they may be reluctant to disclose abuse due to social stigma and concerns about credibility (Sanderson et al., 2000; Wijkman et al., 2014).

## 2. Female Sex Offenders

The existing body of research on sexual offending is largely centered on male perpetrators (Olver et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2023), leaving gaps in the understanding of female offenders and the biases influencing their legal treatment. Despite evidence that female-perpetrated sexual offenses can result in significant psychological harm to victims, societal perceptions often minimize their impact (Denov, 2004; Hetherton, 1999). Victims of female offenders frequently encounter skepticism when disclosing their abuse, particularly in cases in which the perpetrator holds a caregiver role such as a teacher or nurse (Denov, 2004; Hetherton, 1999). The prevailing stereotype of women as non-aggressive and nurturing caregivers contributes to societal reluctance to classify female-perpetrated sexual offenses as criminal, often instead reframing such behavior as inappropriate intimacy rather than deliberate harm (Denov, 2004). This perception complicates efforts to examine female offenders' motivations, challenging outdated assumptions that women offend solely due to mental illness or coercion by male partners. Data indicates that females account for approximately 4% to 5% of all reported sexual offenses, though these figures are likely underestimates due to reliance on formal reporting mechanisms (Colson et al., 2013; Cortoni et al., 2017). Studies of survivors suggest higher prevalence rates, underscoring the need for further investigation (Dube et al., 2005).

Historically, theories of female sexual offending have emphasized perpetrators' psychological instability or maladaptation to traditional gender roles (Blanchette & Brown, 2006). Recent research, however, identifies a broader range of motivations, including sexual gratification, intimacy-seeking, and retribution (Harris, 2010). The notion that female offenders act exclusively under male coercion is increasingly disputed, as many cases demonstrate independent offending behavior (Ford, 2006; Heil et al., 2010). Furthermore, female sexual offenders engage in diverse patterns of abuse, contradicting the perception that their offenses are less severe than those committed by men (Faller, 1987; Saradjian & Hanks, 1996; Peter, 2009).

### 3.1 Juror Decision Making and Perceptions of Female Offenders

Gender disparities in sentencing of sex offenders have been well-documented, with female offenders frequently receiving more lenient sentences than their male counterparts (Beeby et al., 2021). That said, although some studies suggest judicial leniency toward female offenders, others indicate harsher penalties when their crimes involve child victims (Socia et al., 2021). This discrepancy aligns with the double deviance theory, which posits that women are penalized more harshly when their offenses violate traditional gender norms (Du, 2022; Maeder & Dempsey, 2012). Broadly, judicial decisions appear to be influenced by assumptions related to the defendant's gender, with female offenders often perceived as less dangerous and more amenable to rehabilitation (Cortoni & Hanson, 2005; Hanson & Bussière, 1998).

Public attitudes reinforce these biases, particularly in cases involving crimes against children, which elicit strong condemnation and frequently result in severe sentencing (Levesque, 2000; Kernsmith et al., 2009). Stereotypes surrounding sex offenders contribute to sentencing disparities; offenders are often perceived as socially isolated and highly prone to recidivism, despite evidence to the contrary (Borhart & Plumm, 2015). Additionally, juvenile offenders are generally viewed as more capable of being rehabilitated, influencing sentencing outcomes in ways that reflect broader societal beliefs about criminal responsibility (Bernard & Kurlychek, 2010; Thompson et al., 2017).

The legal treatment of female defendants in sexual assault cases is inconsistent. In some instances, females receive more lenient treatment, particularly when their offenses align with conventional notions of femininity (Bielen & Grajzl, 2020; Stanziani et al., 2018). For example, women who violate gender expectations, such as those accused of sexually abusing children, may face harsher sentencing due to harm against children violating nurturing stereotypes (Du, 2022; Viki et al., 2005). With that being said, there is a difference in gender expectations for sexual offenses, with some research suggesting that female teachers accused of sexual offenses on adolescent students are significantly less likely to be convicted compared to male defendants in similar cases (Winters et al., 2020). Additionally, defendants who conform to traditional feminine norms tend to receive lower perceptions of guilt (Maeder & Dempsey, 2012).

### 3.2 Gender Role Attitudes

Gender roles are embedded within our cultural and societal frameworks, shaping expectations for male and female behavior beginning in early childhood (Basow, 2018). Through processes such as direct instruction, observational learning, and social reinforcement, children internalize gendered attitudes that encompass behaviors, responsibilities, and perspectives that are deemed culturally appropriate for their sex (Basow, 2018; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Traditional gender role beliefs reinforce a binary model in which masculinity is linked to traits such as dominance, autonomy, and assertiveness, while femininity is associated with nurturance, passivity, and emotional expressiveness (Powers & Griffith, 1987). These roles are further strengthened through familial interactions, media portrayals, and institutional practices, often through differential reinforcement of gendered behavior (Wienclaw, 2011). Although evolutionary theorists have argued for biologically rooted sex differences (Buss, 2019), social constructivist models emphasize the influence of sociocultural factors in shaping gender role acquisition (Bandura, 1986; Basow, 2018). Despite theoretical divergence, both perspectives underscore the importance of developmental mechanisms in the formation of gender roles.

The persistence of both traditional and non-traditional gender role beliefs exerts considerable influence on individual identity formation, interpersonal dynamics, and institutional outcomes. Traditional beliefs underpin distinct gender binaries, often privileging male-associated characteristics while limiting the range of acceptable female expressions. Conversely, non-traditional beliefs promote a more flexible and egalitarian understanding of gender, enabling individuals to engage in behaviors based on personal agency rather than prescriptive norms (Basow, 2018). Gender identity, which begins to emerge around the age of three, is shaped by these belief systems and informs self-perception as well as evaluations of others (Vasta et al., 1992). *Gender-Schema Theory* (Bem, 1981) posits that individuals form internalized cognitive frameworks that influence the processing of gender-related information, suggesting that individuals rely on internalized schema to process social information, shaping their attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making (Bem, 1981; Martin & Ruble, 2004). Individuals with more rigid, schematic orientations may default to traditional gender-based assumptions, while those with aschematic orientations are more likely to focus on individuating characteristics independent of gender. The belief system to which individuals and societies adhere thus has critical implications for social development and equity across institutional contexts, and several psychometric scales have been developed to assess this. For instance, the Gender Role Belief Scale (GRBS) measures participant's gender role beliefs rating them as traditional or non-traditional and has been used in a variety of research studies to assess for gender role attitudes (Kerr & Holden, 1996).

Juror decision-making is similarly influenced by gender stereotypes. For instance, aggressive behavior may be socially rewarded in males but pathologized when displayed by females (Burke, 2000). Within the legal system, such biases may contribute to differential treatment, as seen in sentencing disparities where female offenders are often viewed through a more lenient lens (Embry & Lyons, 2012; MacNeil et al., 2024). Building on the influence of gender role beliefs on individual perceptions, research has demonstrated that adherence to traditional gender ideologies can significantly shape interpretations of interpersonal violence. For instance, Stanziani et al. (2020) examined the role of traditional gender role beliefs in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). In the study, participants holding strong traditional gender roles—that characterized masculinity as being associated with dominance, emotional restraint, and control—were more less likely to rate domestic violence as a serious crime. Relatedly, Erickson et al. (2017) found that

individuals who more strongly endorsed traditional gender role attitudes were not only more likely to minimize the seriousness of IPV but also to attribute greater responsibility to the victim and offer greater justification for the perpetrator's actions. These findings suggest that rigid adherence to traditional masculinity norms may attenuate the perceived severity of gender-based violence.

Such patterns align with Gender-Schema Theory, suggesting that internalized gender norms serve as cognitive filters, influencing how individuals interpret social information, including legal and moral judgments (Bem, 1981). Cases that align with traditional perceptions in which men are the perpetrators and women are the victims, are more likely to result in convictions (Meaux et al., 2018; Nitschke et al., 2019). Male defendants accused of sexual offenses tend to be perceived more negatively compared to females, and female victims receive greater sympathy compared to male victims of sexual assault (Gavin & Scott, 2016; Osborn et al., 2021). On the other hand, victim characteristics such as clothing, intoxication, and demeanor can impact verdicts, with female victims subjected to greater scrutiny than men when they deviate from expected female gender norms regarding behavior and appearance (Pickel & Gentry, 2017; Stuart et al., 2019). These findings underscore the broader implications of gender role beliefs, particularly traditional ones, in shaping attitudes toward violence, culpability, and justice within interpersonal and legal contexts.

### 3.3 Juror Cognitive Styles

Juror cognitive styles and problem-solving approaches play an important role in legal decision-making. The construct of *need for cognition* (NC) is well-established in psychological research and reflects an individual's tendency to engage in and enjoy cognitively effortful activities (Cohen et al., 1955; Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Research indicates that individuals with high NC are more likely to engage in deep thinking, critically evaluate information, and exhibit greater resistance to biases in judgment, though their cognitive engagement can sometimes reinforce biases rather than mitigate them (Cacioppo et al., 1996). Conversely, individuals low in NC tend to rely on heuristic cues, such as the attractiveness or credibility of a message source, making decisions based on broad assumptions rather than engaging in an elaborate evaluation of the information available (Chaiken 2014; Haugtvedt et al., 1992). Although those with low NC may be persuaded by surface-level features such as general expectations related to a situation or group, individuals with high NC scrutinize information more thoroughly and are more likely to resist weak arguments. With this in mind, research finds that individuals high in NC hold stronger and more persistent attitudes compared to those low in NC (Cacioppo et al., 1983).

Dual-processing and dual-system models of cognition provide further insight into need for cognition and how cognitive styles influence decision making. Following a central and peripheral route of cognitive processing, high NC individuals engage in central-route processing, deeply analyzing content, while low NC individuals rely on peripheral processing styles to cues (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Dual-system theories distinguish between rational, reflective decision-making and intuitive, affect-driven judgments (Petty & Briñol, 2006; Epstein, 2003). However, even individuals engaging in analytical reasoning incorporate emotional and intuitive inputs when deemed relevant (Jordan et al., 2007), demonstrating the complexity of cognitive biases in legal assessments.

In this regard, understanding the cognitive and attributional factors that influence jury decisions is crucial. Need for cognition is a key psychological construct that can influence how jurors process information and reach verdicts. Those with a high NC are more likely to approach ambiguous situations with structured reasoning, in contrast to individuals with low NC. Research has shown that individuals who score high in NC tend to seek more detailed patterns in information, which can impact legal decisions, particularly in cases where the evidence is ambiguous (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Shestowsky & Horowitz, 2004). These factors are particularly relevant in jury trials, where the ability to weigh evidence and interpret complex situations can significantly affect verdicts (Sargent & Bradfield, 2004).

## 2.The Current Study

Despite the gender bias in sentencing observed in previous research, there has been little exploration into how jurors, who directly influence sentencing outcomes, perceive female sex offenders (FSOs) compared to male sex offenders (MSOs). The current study seeks to fill this gap by examining how participants make decisions about sentencing sexual offenders based on their gender. The research also incorporates factors such as Need for Cognition (NFC) and Gender Role Beliefs (GRB), as these individual differences have been shown to affect decision-making in other contexts (Stevens et al., 2021).

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Considering the research on female sexual offenders (FSO), we predict a significant difference in participants' determination of sentence length as a function of gender of offender. Specifically, participants will be significantly more

likely to sentence the male offender to longer sentences compared to a female sex offender. In this vein, we predict differences in determinations of dangerousness as a function of gender of offender. Specifically, participants will be significantly more likely to perceive the male sex offender as dangerous compared to the female sex offender.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** To examine the impact of participants' level of cognition on determinations of sentence length, we explore the moderating effect of NFC in the relation between sex offender gender and determinations of sentence length. We hypothesize that Need for Cognition (NFC) will moderate the relationship between offender gender and sentencing, such that participants with high NFC will recommend longer sentences for male offenders, while participants with low NFC will recommend longer sentences for female offenders.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** To examine the impact of participants' gender role beliefs (GRB) on determinations of sentence length, we explore whether and to what extent participants' gender role beliefs impact their perceptions of our dependent measures of motivation to commit crimes. We hypothesize that participants with more traditional gender role beliefs (GRB) will be more likely to attribute female offenders' actions to external factors (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse), compared to those with non-traditional GRB.

## 1. Method

### 2.1 Participants

A total of 95 individuals over the age of 18 were recruited via *Clickworker*, an online survey tool. Among those recruited, 82 (25 Male and 57 Female) successfully completed the manipulation check and were included in this sample. 73% were between the ages of 18-45 with a mean age of 39, and 72% identified as White. 35% reported some college education and an additional 27% reported completing a bachelor's degree. All participants qualified to serve on a U.S. jury. Eligible participants received a .50 compensation for participating in this study.

### 2.2 Measures and Procedures

After obtaining consent to participate in this research, participants were given one of three different vignettes regarding a sexual offense case. Each vignette was a 400-word summary of facts involving charges of a series of sexual assaults committed on a child victim. In all scenarios, the victim was an 8-year-old female foster-child of the perpetrator that experienced abuse over the span of several months with escalating severity of the abuse. In all scenarios, the perpetrator plead guilty as part of a plea bargain and was sentenced to one count of 1<sup>st</sup> degree child molestation. The gender of the perpetrator was manipulated. In the first condition, the perpetrator was male, and in the second the perpetrator was female. In the third condition, there were two perpetrators, a male and female spouse that committed the crimes together.

Following review of the vignette, participants were asked to sentence the perpetrator to a sentence of 1 to 20 years in prison and assess on a 7-point Likert-scale how likely it was that the perpetrator would reoffend in the future, how dangerous overall they believed the defendant to be, and how likely it was that the defendant would benefit from treatment. We also asked participants to extrapolate on the possible motivations of the offender to commit these crimes rating on a 7-point Likert-scale the likelihood that perpetrator was motivated by: deviant sexual desires, past history of abuse, general criminal activity, past history of mental illness, past history of substance abuse.

Following this, participants completed the *Gender Role Beliefs Scale* (GRBS) and the six-item *Need for Cognition Scale* (NFC-6), to assess their gender role attitudes and cognitive styles.

The Gender Role Belief Scale (Kerr & Holden, 1996) measures societal attitudes toward gender roles and expectations. This 20-item scale includes statements related to both prescriptive beliefs about gender roles and descriptive beliefs about gender characteristics and differences. These statements, (i.e. "It is disrespectful to swear in the presence of a lady", and "Men should continue to show courtesies to women such as holding open the door or helping them on with their coats") are rated on a 7-point Likert-Scale, with higher scores suggesting that participants hold traditional and patriarchal gender role attitudes. A short-form of the scale was developed by Brown and Gladstone (2012), utilizing 10-items while assessing for traditional and non-traditional gender role beliefs and the measure demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a high reliability score (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83) (Brown & Gladstone, 2012). In our study, internal consistency was similarly strong ( $r = .88$ ).

In addition to the GRBS, participants completed the NFC-6 to assess their cognitive styles with decision-making. Participants rate their agreement to statements regarding how they think about problems and information (i.e., "I



would prefer complex to simple problems” and “I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.”). The shorter six-item NFC-6 (de Holanda Coelho, et al, 2020) is derived from the longer versions of the NFC scale (Cacioppo, et al, 1982; 1984) and has demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.90). In our study, the NFC-6 displayed similar reliability ( $r = .85$ ).

## 1. Results

To test our hypotheses, a series of quantitative analyses were conducted on participant ratings on the dependent measures. The first hypothesis was partially supported: participant determinations of sentence length did not differ as a function of gender of sex offender ( $p = .23$ ). We did however, observe a significant difference in perceptions of dangerousness as a function of gender of offender:  $t(80) = 2.07, p = .021$  (one-sided), Cohen's  $d = 1.093$ . The male sex offender was perceived as significantly more dangerous compared to the female sex offender: ( $M = 6.38$  v.  $5.88$ ).

To examine the impact of participant level of cognition on determinations of sentence length, we tested the moderating effect of NFC in the relation between sex offender gender and determinations of sentence length in a 2 NFC (high v. low) x 2 Gender of Offender (male v. female) between-subjects ANOVA on sentence determinations. Need for cognition (NFC) moderated the relation between gender of the offender and participants' sentence determination,  $F(1, 78) = 5.18, p = .026, \eta^2 = .062$ . Specifically, participants with high need for cognition (dichotomized) sentenced the male offender to more time (in years) compared to female offenders ( $M = 16.22$  v.  $13.04$ ). The opposite effect was found for participants with low need for cognition. Participant with a low NFC sentenced the female offender to longer sentences ( $M = 14.58$  v.  $17.63$ ) compared to the male sex offender (See Figure 1).

Finally, we found that participant gender role beliefs impacted their perceptions of our dependent measures of motivation to commit crimes. Specifically, for participants assigned to the condition in which the offender was female, gender role beliefs emerged as important in terms of their perceptions of *motivating factors*. We found that participants with traditional gender role beliefs were significantly more likely to believe the female was motivated to commit the crime due to 1) unstable family dynamics  $t(41) = -1.68, p = .05$  ( $M = 4.14$  v.  $3.19$ ), 2) mental illness  $t(41) = -3.06, p = .002$  ( $M = 5.32$  v.  $3.71$ ), and substance abuse  $t(41) = -1.87, p = .03$  ( $M = 3.73$  v.  $2.57$ ).

### 2.1 Additional Analyses

In the co-defendant scenario, participants reported a greater likelihood that the male spouse would commit another sex crime compared to female spouse:  $t(80) = -2.19, p = .016$  (one-sided). Cohen's  $d = 1.301$ : ( $M = 6.09$  v.  $5.46$  on a scale of 1 – 7). NFC was negatively correlated with GRB:  $r(82) = -.29; p = .003$ . Low NFC participants were more likely to hold traditional gender attitudes compared to high NFC.

## 1. Discussion

In the current study we examine participant perceptions of dangerousness of female sex offender compared to a male offender. Considering the previous research on perceptions of female sex offenders, as well as the impact of gender attitudes in our society, it was expected that there would be significant differences in ratings of dangerousness and punishment for sexual offenses for female offenders. This was partially observed in our results. Interestingly, despite participants rating male offenders as more dangerous, no significant differences in sentencing were found between male and female offenders. This finding suggests that severity of sexual offenses overshadows gender biases in punishment decisions. This is not unexpected considering the literature that supports the idea that sexual offenses sit at the top of criminal hierarchies and considered particularly heinous crimes (Harper & Hogue, 2015). Additionally, a significant gender difference was observed with male offenders being considered more dangerous overall. This finding suggests that, although the nature of sexual offending is thought of as particularly deserving of punishment, participant (and juror) gender biases may still influence perceptions of risk. It is worth noting that even when a co-offender was involved, male offenders were considered more likely to reoffend compared to female spouses. This finding is in-line with the broader expectations of the study, that male offenders would be considered more dangerous and deserving of punishment. In this case, the male spouse was considered more dangerous than the female spouse even though the female spouse was equally involved in the crimes. It is possible that this is an artifact of the participants assuming that the female spouse was coerced, even though there was no suggestion of this in the third condition's vignette, and this would similarly follow research on paired sexual offenses (Robinson & Kurzban, 2007; Slobogin & Rubinstein, 2013). This finding suggests that gender biases may impact the way individuals evaluate culpability in domestic contexts.

Additionally, the interaction between participants' need for cognition and the gender of the offender highlights a nuanced relationship affecting sentencing outcomes. Specifically, those with a low need for cognition assigned shorter sentences to male offenders compared to female offenders, while those with a high need for cognition exhibited the opposite pattern. It is possible that participants with lower need for cognition viewed female sex offenders as more deviant and thus more in need of punishment, whereas participants with higher need for cognition saw female offenders as more ill than male offenders, and thus more deserving of leniency. This indicates that cognitive engagement may shape how gender influences perceptions of dangerousness and motivation for crimes. Overall, these findings underscore the complexity of gender dynamics in legal assessments and the potential for underlying biases in sentencing decisions.

Expanding on possible gendered attitudes influencing decisions making, the second hypothesis was concerned with gender role attitudes of the participants and was partially confirmed. The participant's gender role beliefs influenced their evaluations of the female offender in the second condition, but not the male offender in the first condition. Specifically, participants with traditional gender role beliefs were more likely to believe that external factors such as mental illness, criminal past, and substance use issues, were a motivator for the crimes of the female offender. There may be an explanation for this finding, with participants holding traditional gender role beliefs viewing female sexual offenders as particularly deviant from gender norms and were actively seeking explanation for such perceived "abnormal" female behavior. This study highlights the complex relationship between offenders' gender, participants' cognitive styles, and perceptions of criminality. Future research should explore this further.

Although we did not find the gender differences in sentencing that we broadly expected, NFC emerged as a noteworthy moderator of this relationship. Low NFC participants sentenced the female offender to longer sentence compared to male offender. The opposite was found with High NFC participants sentencing the *male* offender to longer sentences. A possible explanation for this is that the high NFC participants considered other factors in decision making, believing the female offender was affected by other factors and thus less culpable and in less need of punishment, whereas the low NFC participants found the female offender to be particularly abhorrent and thus more in need for punishment. The relationship between need for cognition and gender role beliefs is important, where participants with low need for cognition were more likely to hold traditional gender role beliefs. Considering that low need for cognition decision makers utilize broad attitudes and schemas, it would make sense that these participants would broadly apply these beliefs in their assessments.

## 2.1 Limitations and Future Research

No vignette can fully capture the complexities or high stakes of real-life sentencing decisions and risk assessments. A key limitation of participant-juror studies, particularly those relying on surveys, is the challenge of ensuring complete confidence in the screening process, despite efforts to include only qualified participants. This concern applies broadly to studies utilizing online data collection. Additionally, as our data were drawn from a convenience sample, generalizability is limited. This is particularly relevant given that most participants identified as White, preventing an analysis of ethnicity's impact on our dependent measures. Moreover, the relatively small sample size limits the statistical power of our findings.

Future research should address these limitations by utilizing larger, more diverse samples to better reflect jury pools in the United States. Replication studies are needed to confirm our findings and further examine the influence of gender role attitudes on assessments of female sexual offenders. Additionally, future research should explore individual characteristics that may shape decision-making in these contexts.

## 2.2 Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the intricate relationship between offender gender, juror attitudes, and cognitive processing in shaping legal decision-making. Although male offenders were consistently perceived as more dangerous than female offenders, sentencing recommendations did not significantly differ by gender. This suggests that while perceptions of risk remain gendered, the severity of sexual offenses may override certain biases in sentencing decisions. However, differences emerged when assessing offender motivations, as participants with traditional gender role beliefs were more likely to attribute female offending to external factors such as mental illness, substance abuse, or coercion. This finding reinforces existing research suggesting that female sex offenders are often viewed through a lens of diminished agency, in contrast to male offenders who are perceived as acting with greater intent and culpability.

Additionally, cognitive processing styles played a crucial role in sentencing outcomes with our participants. Participants with a high need for cognition were more likely to impose longer sentences on male offenders, while those with a low need for cognition assigned harsher sentences to female offenders. This suggests that cognitive engagement influences how jurors interpret culpability, potentially reinforcing or mitigating gender biases.

This research study has important implications for both research and policy. Future studies should further explore how gendered perceptions influence real-world courtroom decision-making, particularly in jury trials. Additionally, these results highlight the need for legal policies and juror education initiatives aimed at reducing implicit biases in sentencing. Addressing these biases through structured jury instructions or implicit bias training could promote more equitable legal outcomes across gendered lines in sexual offense cases.

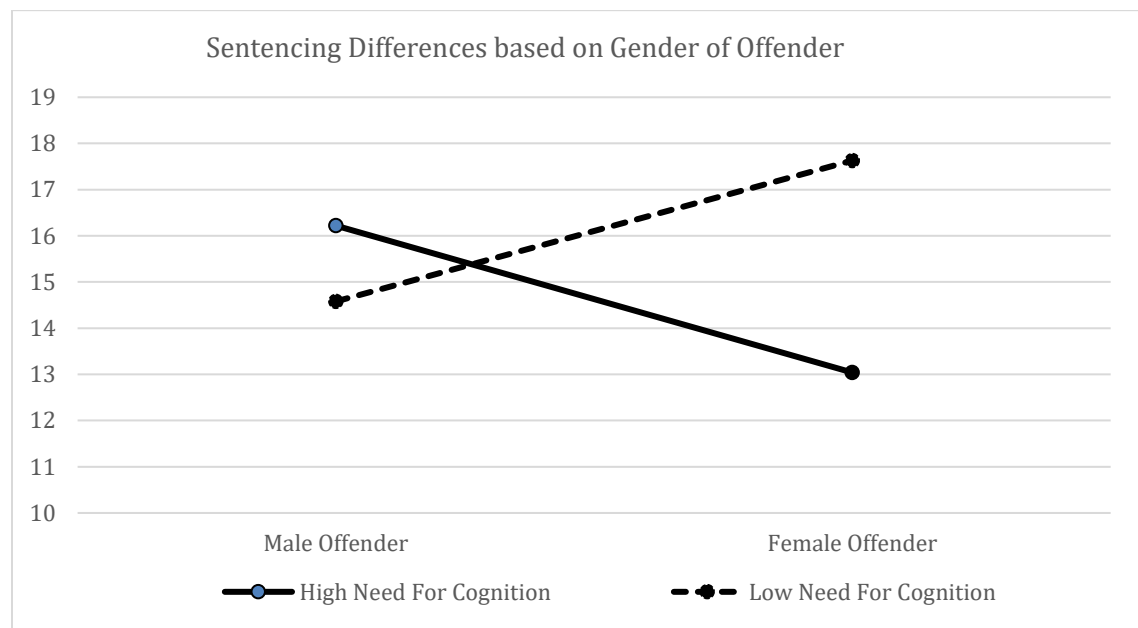


Figure 1

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