Friends of Survivors: The Community Impact of Unwanted Sexual Experiences
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Since sexual assault survivors are most likely to disclose their experiences to a friend; prevention efforts increasingly focus on friends as informal helpers. The current study examined friends’ perceptions of the disclosure experience. Undergraduates (N=1,241) at the University of New Hampshire completed a shortened version of the Ahrens and Campbell (2000) Impact on Friends measure. Results found that about 1 in 3 female undergraduates and 1 in 5 male students were told by a friend that they were a victim of an unwanted sexual experience. Gender differences were found in friends’ responses to disclosure. Women reported greater emotional distress in response to a friend's disclosure, greater positive responses and lesser-perceived confusion/ineffectiveness as compared to men. Implications include the need to develop specific and clear educational material to help the community cope with and effectively respond to unwanted sexual experiences on college campuses.

Keywords: sexual assault; disclosure; informal helpers

Unwanted sexual experiences are an epidemic on college campuses leading to calls for increased prevention and intervention efforts (see Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004, for a review; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). Yet, support systems for survivors and criminal justice responses to deal with perpetrators are predicated on the initiative and courage of survivors who must first come
forward and tell someone what has happened to them. Thus, a growing body of research examines issues of disclosure (e.g., Arata, 1998; Filipas & Ullman, 2001; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). To date, however, most of this work has centered on survivors—whether they tell, whom they tell, and what responses they receive. Less examined are the experiences of those to whom survivors disclose—most often their friends. How do they perceive being on the receiving end of this information? Do they know how to respond in a supportive way? Understanding the experiences of these informal helpers is an important next step in research on this issue. The current study aims to do this in an exploratory way.

**Do Survivors Tell and With What Effect?**

In examining whether survivors disclose their unwanted sexual experiences, Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, and Turner’s (2003) national study of college women found that only 2% of victims of sexual violence reported to police and only 4% disclosed to campus authorities. A majority of victims (70%) did tell someone else, usually a friend. Banyard et al. (2005) found that about 1 in 5 women who self-reported an unwanted sexual experience during part of 1 academic year in college also reported that they told no one about it. The nearly 80% of women who did disclose were most likely to have told a friend or roommate. Feelings of shame, fear, and embarrassment, feeling that what happened is a private matter, or concern that what happened was not “really rape” are all reasons why survivors may choose not to come forward (Filipas & Ullman, 2001).

Several studies have gone further to examine the consequences for survivors of telling others. For example, Ahrens (2006) documented the silencing effect that negative reactions from others can have on survivors who disclose. Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco, and Seft (2007) documented the array of impacts that a first disclosure can have on survivors, ranging from healing responses (feeling comforted and supported) to hurtful responses (creating further distress and anger in survivors). Filipas and Ullman (2001) also discussed the range of reactions survivors receive when they do decide to disclose. They found that although women told on average 2.67 people about their assault, they found the average number of support sources who were helpful to be 1.86. Women also reported a variety of negative social reactions to telling others, including being stigmatized or hearing rape myths from others. Some were even revictimized by those they told. Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, and Starzynski (2007) and Ullman and
Filipas (2001) examined models of post traumatic stress symptoms (PTSD) among sexual assault survivors and found clear links between negative social reactions received to telling about the assault specifically and higher levels of PTSD. This finding is echoed in work by Campbell, Seif, and Barnes (1999), who found significant effects on PTSD symptoms among adult sexual assault survivors who received negative reactions from community professionals (lawyers, medical professionals, police). They term these effects secondary traumatization.

Survivors have also been asked about responses that are helpful. Filipas and Ullman (2001) reported that survivors appreciated emotional support from others as well as instrumental help and hearing from other survivors about their own experiences. They noted,

Most women wished they had received more emotional support, validation/belief, and tangible aid such as being taken to the police or the hospital or being allowed to stay at a friend’s home. Another important response that survivors wished for was not being distracted or discouraged from talking about their experiences. (p. 682)

Mahlstedt and Keeny (1993) also found such responses in their sample of college women who reported dating violence.

The Viewpoint of Informal Helpers

To date, however, the majority of research on disclosure and unwanted sexual experiences focuses on the vantage point of survivors. Much less is known about the viewpoints of those to whom survivors disclose. This is a notable omission in the literature given the growing view of the important role of friends as potential helpful bystanders and allies for survivors found in the research. A recent innovation in sexual violence prevention highlights the role that all community members can play in ending sexual violence (e.g., Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Community members are taught skills for being prosocial and active bystanders before, during, or after an incident of sexual violence (e.g., Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007). Research in support of this prevention framework shows that individuals want to be helpful but often lack the confidence, knowledge, or skills to do so effectively (Opinion Research Corporation, n.d.; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 2007). Yet, to date, we know little about how individuals feel when they have received a disclosure from a friend.
A few studies to date have surveyed college students, with some suggesting that a third of samples have received disclosures (Dunn, Vail-Smith, & Knight, 1999). Qualitatively, these participants report feeling shock and surprise, not knowing what to do, giving advice, challenging the victim (why didn’t she do anything to stop it?), or expressing disbelief in the victim in response. In relation to physical intimate partner violence, college students as informal helpers are more likely to have given helpful intervention responses if they were female and if they endorse lower levels of victim blaming attitudes toward domestic violence survivors assessed using hypothetical vignettes (West & Wandrei, 2002).

Ahrens and Campbell (2000) examined responses to survivors by friends in more detail using victimization perspective theory (e.g., Silver, Wortman, & Crofton, 1990, cited in Ahrens & Campbell, 2000), which posits that informal helpers deal with the stress of those who disclose to them with a conflict of wanting to help and yet feeling helpless and powerless when what they try to do does not seem to help. Ahrens and Campbell tested this theory by developing and researching a quantitative measure of friends’ own reactions to receiving a disclosure about sexual assault from a friend. Their small sample of college students indicates that for the most part participants do not often feel distressed by the disclosure and most feel that they are able to be helpful to their friend. They also find interesting moderating variables, including gender, own sexual assault history, and length of friendship. In particular, men are less empathic, blamed survivors more, are more confused, and feel less effective in helping friends. Friends who have their own sexual assault history feel that the assault has more of an impact on their friend, engage in less victim blame, and see more positive changes and fewer negative changes on the relationship postdisclosure. Friendships with a longer history prior to disclosure are related to more positive changes in the friendship postdisclosure.

**Current Study**

Given the increasing focus on informal helpers as targets of prevention efforts and as agents of intervention who can both prevent risky situations from escalating into sexual assaults and provide solid safety nets for survivors after an assault has happened, there is still much to be learned about friends’ perceptions of the disclosure experience. Even though Ahrens and Campbell’s (2000) study is instructive, their sample included only 60 participants. Although a variety of other studies have examined
how informal helpers generally feel about disclosure, less is known about more specific aspects of how they react to the disclosure. Thus, the current study aimed to replicate and extend the findings of Ahrens and Campbell by gathering a larger and more representative sample of students on a campus. We hypothesized that overall friends would feel positively about the disclosure. We hypothesized that there would be gender differences—with men being less certain about their helpfulness to friends and women being more likely to have their friends’ disclosure trigger their own safety concerns. We also examined whether victimization history was associated with how a student reacted to a friend’s disclosure of an unwanted sexual experience.

Method

Overview

This study is the result of an ongoing research collaboration at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) funded by the UNH Office of the President. It presents findings from the most recent study conducted in 2006 on a range of unwanted sexual experiences among undergraduates on the UNH campus. The main aim of the study has been to examine the incidence and prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences among undergraduate students at UNH (Banyard, Cohn, et al., 2007; Banyard et al., 2005).

Participants

The current analyses are based on data from 1,241 students. The mean age was 19.95 (SD = 2.48). More than half (60.7%) were female. The sample was distributed among years in college (38.8% first-year students, 22.8% sophomores, 20.1% juniors, 17.3% seniors). Compared to university enrollments for that semester, the sample slightly overrepresents women (58% for the university) and first-year students (24% at the university) and underrepresents seniors (28% at the university). It should be noted that deliberate oversampling of courses with first-year students was done given that previous research has indicated that this may be a particularly at-risk group in college communities.

Measures

Participants were asked if a friend ever told them that she/he had been the victim of an unwanted sexual experience since they had been at college.
They were then asked to list how many male friends and how many female friends had told them this. The survey provided definitions of unwanted sexual contact and sexual intercourse to insure overall consistency of answers.

Participants who indicated that a friend had disclosed to them were asked to complete a shortened version of Ahrens and Campbell (2000) Impact on Friends measure. We used 22 items from the scale across four of the subscales developed by Ahrens and Campbell. Factor analysis of current study data produced a solution similar to that reported by Ahrens and Campbell, thus we decided to use a number of their subscales. In particular, we used four items from the Confusion subscale (e.g., “I didn’t know what to do to help”); Cronbach’s alpha for the current sample was .76, \( M = 10.42, \ SD = 3.64 \) and seven items from the Validating subscale (indicating participants felt positive about their response to the disclosure: “I felt appreciated” or “I felt at ease dealing with her/his experience”); Cronbach’s alpha = .66, \( M = 22.43, SD = 3.85 \). We also used four items from the Ineffectiveness subscale (with items such as “I felt that I wasn’t supportive enough”); Cronbach’s alpha = .76, \( M = 9.32, SD = 3.28 \) and seven items from the Emotional Distress subscale (e.g. “I became afraid to do things that never bothered me before”) producing a Cronbach’s alpha of .87, \( M = 16.98, SD = 3.85 \). Given the high intercorrelation between the Ineffectiveness and Confusion subscales (\( r = .57 \)), a decision was made to combine these two into one subscale for further analyses.

Three questions from the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Gidycz, 1985) were used to assess lifetime experience of sexual victimization (“How many times in your life have you ever had sexual intercourse against your wishes because someone used force?” “Because someone threatened to harm you?” “When you were so intoxicated that you were unable to consent?”).

Procedures

The study collected information from students at the end of February and asked questions about unwanted sexual contact or intercourse that had occurred since the beginning of the fall semester of that academic year. In 2006, approximately half the sample (\( N = 1,241 \)) completed paper surveys in a random sample of UNH undergraduate courses across colleges. The other half (\( N = 1,163 \)) completed a Web-based survey. The Web-based survey included only a subset of questions from the full survey. It did not
contain questions related to the current research questions. Thus, data presented in the analyses below are from only the in-class paper surveys. Differences between participants who received the Web and paper versions of the survey including differences in victimization rates and set of analyses from this study are the subject of another paper (current authors, in preparation).

## Results

A total of 354 (28.9%) students said that a friend had disclosed to them while they were attending the university (more than half of those who had friends disclose to them, 206 students or 58%, revealed that more than one friend had disclosed to them). Of students who had a friend disclose to them, 96.5% were told by a female friend that this had happened and 19.7% were told by a male friend. Female students (33.7%) were much more likely to say that a friend had disclosed to them than were male students (21.4%), $\chi^2 = 21.58, p < .001$. Nonetheless, this suggests that 1 in 3 female undergraduates and 1 in 5 male students will be told by a friend that he or she was a victim.

Participants were then asked about their reaction to their friend’s disclosure. Table 1 shows student responses based on the percentage that indicated “agree” or “strongly agree” to each item. Nearly two thirds of students felt that they were a good source of support for their friend. However, it is important to point out that about the same percentage of students felt upset as felt that they were doing a good job helping their friend.

## Sex Comparisons

Analyses were performed based on data from the subsample of the 354 students who reported that a friend had disclosed to them about an unwanted sexual experience. A MANOVA was conducted using the 22 individual items from the Impact on Friends Scale as dependent measures and sex as the independent variable. We found a significant main effect of sex, $F(22, 254) = 5.38$, Wilks’ Lambda = .68. Table 2 presents the mean differences by sex.

Across the 22 items on the Impact on Friends measure, there were sex differences in 12 items. Overall, men reported higher levels of discomfort talking to disclosing friends, greater concerns they were causing harm to their friend, greater worries they were not supportive enough, and greater
sense that they felt burdened by their friend’s disclosure. Women were more likely to report agreeing that they became more afraid for their own safety and afraid they would be assaulted, were angry at society for the problem of rape, being fearful of doing things they used to do, and feeling greater loss of a sense of security than did men. Women were also more likely to agree that as a result of the disclosure they felt they were a good source of support for their friend, felt more knowledgeable about the issue, and felt they did a good job helping. Two items approached significance ($p < .10$), with men more likely to agree that they felt their efforts were not helpful and women more likely to have felt upset dealing with their friend’s experience.

In addition, a MANOVA was performed on the three composite indices of responses to friends (confusion/ineffectiveness, positive response,
emotional distress). Again, there were significant sex differences with a main effect for sex, $F(3, 273) = 16.89, p < .001$, Wilks’ Lambda = .84, partial $\eta^2 = .16$. Table 3 presents these findings. Women reported greater emotional distress in response to a friend’s disclosure, greater positive responses, and lesser-perceived confusion/ineffectiveness about what to do when a friend disclosed that they had had an unwanted sexual experience. Effect sizes were small.

**Victimization History Comparisons**

An additional MANOVA was performed using victimization history as the independent variable and the three subscales indicating positive and
There was a significant main effect for victimization history, $F(3, 258) = 4.28, p < .01$, Wilks’ Lambda = .95, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. Interestingly, the one scale on which there was a significant difference was for emotional distress, with participants who had a history of their own victimization reporting higher levels of emotional distress in response to hearing a friend’s disclosure of an unwanted sexual experience. The effect size was small.

### Discussion

The current study examines the prevalence of friends’ disclosures of unwanted sexual experiences among college students and students’ reactions to such disclosures, an understudied question in the growing literature on social support and unwanted sexual experiences. Although a significant minority of participants to whom a friend had disclosed reported being unsure about what to do, nearly half reported that they felt they were able to...
be supportive and helpful, and most found it a positive experience that they were able to help or to be supportive when a friend disclosed to them. These results are consistent with earlier work by Ahrens and Campbell (2000), who noted many positive reactions by friends who worked to support survivors who disclosed to them. It replicates these findings using a larger sample, a sample representative of students on the campus where the current study took place. Also significant are responses indicating that participants felt anger and distress related to the disclosure, reminding us that unwanted sexual experiences have consequences for people beyond individual survivors and that communities ought to provide education and support to recipients of disclosure about unwanted sexual experiences.

These findings alert us to the need for programming as well as widespread education on campuses. One promising form of programming that has become more widespread on college campuses is the focus on bystanders and allies. For example, a number of programs focus particularly on men’s roles as allies in preventing sexual violence or in supporting survivors after an unwanted sexual experience has occurred (Berkowitz, 2002; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkebach, & Stark, 2003; Foubert, 2000; Foubert & Cowell, 2004; Foubert & Newberry, 2006; Katz, 1995; Kilmartin & Berkowitz, 2005). Increasingly such programs are also being tailored for women and all community members (e.g. Ahrens, 2006; Banyard, Moynihan, et al., 2007; Edwards & Sexton, 2006). Social marketing strategies with these messages also appear (Potter et al., 2008; Virginia Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, 2007) The results of the current study are important for this new line of prevention programming and research. Effective prevention efforts that specifically target bystanders need to be built on a more thorough understanding of bystanders’ experiences. To date research has focused importantly on survivors’ perceptions of social supports and disclosure reactions. We still know little about how friends feel about receiving disclosures. Furthermore, while bystander-focused prevention programs have been created for both men and women, to date nearly all of them are conducted using single sex groups. The current research provides support for such a model, suggesting that male and female friends of survivors may need to focus on different issues related to being a bystander and ally. Male bystanders may need to build confidence in their abilities to be supportive to friends, whereas female bystanders may need assistance with their own feelings of vulnerability and anxiety that may arise from the bystander role.

The current study has a number of limitations including its cross-sectional design, the sample’s limited ethnic and racial diversity, and its
focus on a college sample. Future research is needed to examine the process of disclosure in more detail. For example, how do friends’ reactions to a disclosure match survivors’ perceptions of their friends’ reactions? Friends may indicate that they felt they were supportive, but do survivors’ perceptions mirror this? Do survivors actually find these friends helpful? How does the disclosure process unfold? How do the reactions of friends unfold over time? Do friends help survivors connect with more formal support systems, such as crisis centers or the criminal justice system?

Indeed, more research on disclosure from larger and more diverse samples of recipients is needed as is longitudinal research that would give more information about the long-term effects of disclosure, such as whether recipients who feel they were not helpful seek out information to help them respond in more helpful ways in the future or if they sought help for themselves regarding their feelings of anger, revenge, or ineffectiveness. Likewise, what is the lasting effect on women (and some men) who reported that being disclosed to leads them to become more afraid for their own safety, fearful of doing things they used to do, and feeling greater loss of a sense of security, and what is the nature of that fear?

Our findings along with those of others (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2007; Ahrens & Campbell, 2000; Filipas & Ullman, 2001) indicate the need to develop and implement educational materials and programming that give friends and other informal helpers greater knowledge, specific information, and concrete suggestions about appropriate or helpful language to use or things to do when a friend discloses to them. Equally important, friends need to learn about ways of taking care of themselves and their feelings in the aftermath of a disclosure. In particular, they need information about where to go or whom they can talk to in confidence about their feelings. Dunn et al.’s (1999) “Guidelines” for helping when a friend discloses date/acquaintance rape adapted from Hall (1995) is a practical list of suggestions for helping friends who disclose as well as for ways of seeking self-care for the recipient of disclosure. Campus administrators could easily and economically broadcast these throughout their university communities.

References


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