



Facilitating Sexual Assault Reporting Among College Students: Perceptions of Procedural Justice and Bystander Intervention

Tri Keah Henry, Ph.D.

Sexual assault victimization continues to be a pressing concern, particularly on college campuses. Prior research suggests that between 20% to 25% of women will experience some form of sexual assault in college (Fedina et al., 2016; Fisher et al., 2000; Franklin, 2010). These experiences can have significant consequences for survivors, including posttraumatic stress disorder, sexual dysfunction, and internalizing disorders, as well as other physical and psychological harms (Fisher et al., 2000; Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Ullman & Filipas, 2001b).

Survivors of sexual assault rarely report victimizations to formal authorities (i.e., university officials or police; Sinozich & Langton, 2014; Truman & Morgan, 2016). Fear of secondary victimization, concerns that their experiences will not be taken seriously, and feelings of shame and embarrassment may impede formal reporting (Sabina & Ho, 2014; Thompson et al., 2007). Instead, they are more likely to disclose their experiences to informal social support systems like friends, peers, roommates, and family members (Fisher et al., 2003). However, little attention has been given to understanding the role that family and friends play in the formal reporting process. Even less is known about the conditions that would lead these parties to advise survivors to initiate a formal report (see Paul et al., 2016).

The current study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the barriers to formal reporting among victims of sexual assault. Specifically, this study uses randomly assigned manipulated vignettes to examine the factors that influence bystander recommendations to report victimizations to formal authorities (i.e., police). Moreover, this study emphasizes the role of procedural justice and its potential influence on advising behaviors.

Predictors of Formal Disclosure

Prior research has identified several impediments to formal reporting. These impediments include situational characteristics related to the incident (i.e., the offender, victim, and assault characteristics), as well as barriers to disclosure such as fear of reprisal, stigma, shame, and secondary victimization by criminal justice actors (Binder, 1981; Feldhaus et al., 2000; Neville & Pough, 1997). Such barriers to reporting are a consequence of pervasive rape-tolerant myths that cast certain types of assaults and victims as being more credible and worthy of police intervention (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). Assaults that reflect the "ideal" or "classic" victimization (e.g., stranger-perpetrated assault with a weapon) may be deemed more serious than those that do not adhere to stereotypical assumptions of "real rape" (e.g., acquaintance-perpetrated assault facilitated by alcohol). Moreover, these barriers may be enhanced for victims of color who may be perceived as more blameworthy and less credible (Donovan, 2007; Foley et al., 1995; Varelas & Foley, 1998). As criminal justice actors have

been shown to endorse rape-myths, survivors of assault may be unwilling to rely on formal police intervention (Garza & Franklin, 2020).

Patterns of Sexual Assault Discourse

This assumption has borne out in prior research, particularly among college women. According to Fisher and colleagues (2000), less than 5% of all attempted or completed rapes among college women were reported to police. Similar rates have been reported across more recent studies (Kilpatrick et al., 2007; Koss, 1995; Krebs et al., 2009; Lindquist et al., 2013; Sabrina & Ho, 2014). Instead of reporting to formal services, sexual assault survivors are more likely to disclose victimizations to informal support systems like friends and family, specifically female friends (Edwards et al., 2012; Fisher et al., 2000; 2003). As such, friends of sexual assault survivors play a unique role in the psychological and emotional health of survivors, as well as facilitating next steps in the reporting process. Those who respond positively to a disclosure can encourage help-seeking behaviors, clinical intervention, and police intervention (Franklin & Garza, 2018). Notably, research also suggests that friends may act as barriers to reporting, discouraging police intervention, while still positively responding to the needs of victims (Paul et al., 2014).

The Importance of Procedural Justice

Procedural justice may be a useful mechanism for understanding why friends may encourage or discourage survivors to report incidents to police. Police officers are perceived to be procedurally just when they act in ways that 1) promote neutral/fair decision-making, 2) behave respectfully, 3) are trustworthy and honest, and 4) allow citizens the opportunity to express themselves (Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Tyler & Murphy, 2011). Prior research also suggests that procedural justice improves individual's willingness to cooperate with police, including their willingness to assist police in investigations and crime reporting (Murphy & Barkworth, 2014; Tyler & Huo, 2002). In the context of bystander facilitation of sexual assault reporting, those with more positive views of law enforcement may be more willing to advise friends to seek the help of these authorities.

Current Study

Sexual assault survivors are more likely to disclose victimizations to informal support systems, like friends and family members, as opposed to formal agents (i.e., law enforcement). As such, these informal support systems play an important role in facilitating the next steps survivors take in reporting victimizations. The advice given by these bystanders may be influenced by previously held perceptions of police. Specifically, the extent to which bystanders perceive police as procedural-

ly just may inform disclosure responses and the support of police intervention. The current study explores this relationship by examining how perceptions of procedural justice influence bystander decisions to refer police intervention following a sexual assault disclosure. In doing so, the current study addresses a series of research questions:

RQ1: Do perceptions of police procedural justice influence participant-bystanders' willingness to refer friends to police following a sexual assault disclosure?

Moreover, this study also addresses the extent to which rape-tolerant myths attributed to certain types of victims and situational characteristics of sexual assaults may impact participants' willingness to advise formal (i.e., police) intervention. The following research questions assess the degree to which situational characteristics influence perceptions of seriousness requiring intervention:

RQ2: Does victim intoxication moderate the effect of procedural justice on participant-bystanders' willingness to refer friends to police following a sexual assault disclosure?

RQ3: Does victim race moderate the effect of procedural justice on participant-bystanders' willingness to refer friends to police following a sexual assault disclosure?

Lastly, research suggests that women sexual assault survivors primarily disclose victimizations to other female friends. Therefore, the following research question is examined:

RQ4: Does participant-bystander sex moderate the effect of procedural justice on willingness to refer friends to police following a sexual assault disclosure?

Methodology

Data for the current study were derived from a paper and pencil survey administered during the fall of 2016 at a mid-sized, southern university. Students were recruited using a purposive sampling technique targeting those enrolled in upper division and introductory criminal justice courses. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to respond to a survey questionnaire entitled "2016 College Experiences Survey" in which participants were randomly assigned a manipulated vignette depicting a sexual assault disclosure involving two university students. Manipulations included the victim/offender race dyad, as well as victim alcohol consumption. A total of 675 responses were collected. After accounting for missing data on key response items, a final analytic sample of 571 cases was used to assess the above research questions.

Vignette Description and Design

Participants were randomly assigned one of four sexual assault vignettes depicting a disclosure. The vignette created a 2 (White victim/offender dyad or Black victim/offender dyad) x 2 (victim intoxication or no intoxication) between-subjects factorial design. Importantly, only the victim's race is explicitly identified in the vignette. Below is an example of the vignette included in the questionnaire:

"One night [Keisha/Elizabeth], an [African American/Caucasian] and final-year student at a state university, who is your friend, went to a house party with [Jerome, Tim], a guy she knew from one of her classes. [Jerome, Tim] was cute and she liked him a little, though they had never been out together before. While at the party, she [consumed 5 alcoholic drinks, did not consume any alcohol]. [Keisha, Elizabeth] and [Jerome, Tim] flirted and danced a little. [She was buzzed from the drinks at

the party, but was able to walk home without stumbling or needing any help]. When she was ready to leave the party, [Jerome, Tim] offered to walk with her across the lighted parking lot to her apartment, which was nearby. On her way home, [Jerome, Tim] asked if she was interested in having sex. [Keisha, Elizabeth] said "No" very forcefully, but [Jerome, Tim] did not pay attention to her answer. He grabbed her, began to kiss her, and then lifted her skirt. He forced himself on her and completed the act of sexual intercourse. The next day, [Keisha, Elizabeth] approached you for advice. What would you suggest [Keisha, Elizabeth] do?"

Measures

The dependent variable for this study was police referral, captured using a single item that asked participants to rate the likelihood they would recommend police involvement after reading the sexual assault scenario. Responses were measured using a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 6 (extremely likely) ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.88$). Due to the heavily skewed nature of responses, this measure was subsequently collapsed into a binary "yes" or "no" response category. Those indicating that they would be "very likely" to advise intervention were coded 1 ($n = 435$; 76.2%), while the remaining points (indicating some reservation in referring survivors to police) were coded 0 ($n = 136$; 23.8%).

The primary independent variable for this analysis was procedural justice captured using 13 items adopted from Tyler and Wakslak's (2004) study of procedural justice among Los Angeles Police Department officers. Responses were measured using a 6-point, Likert type scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Statements like "police give honest explanations for their actions," "police listen to people before making decisions," and "police are always polite when dealing with people" were included to capture quality of decision-making, treatment, and citizen trust in police.

Moreover, vignette manipulations were captured using a series of binary variables. Victim alcohol consumption was coded 1 if the scenario indicated that the victim "consumed five alcoholic drinks" ($n=287$; 50.3%) or coded 0 if the victim "did not consume any alcohol" ($n=287$; 49.7%). Similarly, victim race was also captured using a binary measure where White victim was coded 0 ($n= 287$; 50.3%), and Black victim was coded 1 ($n = 284$; 49.7%). Additional independent variables include measures of negative experiences with police, voluntary police contact, perceptions of incident illegality, rape myth acceptance, and lifetime sexual victimization. Finally, four control measures were included in the analysis: participant race/ethnicity, participant sex, current class standing, and participant family income.

Results

In order to address the research questions, two multivariate binary logistic regressions were estimated. First, a main effects model predicting the effect of procedural justice on police referral following a sexual assault disclosure was estimated, controlling for other theoretically relevant factors. Second, a model assessing the moderating effect of vignette manipulations and participant sex on procedural justice predicting police referral was estimated. These results are displayed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Research Question 1 is addressed in Table 1. Findings indicated that procedural justice was a significant, positive predictor of police referral following a sexual assault disclosure. Specifically, as perceptions of procedural justice increased, participants were 1.02 times more likely to advise survivors to report victimiza-

tion to the police. Moreover, voluntary police contact and perceptions of illegality also increased the odds of police referral. Those with voluntary prior police contact, as well as those who perceived the assault as an illegal act were 2.0 and 1.36 times more likely to advise police intervention, respectively. In contrast, increased acceptance of rape myths and victim alcohol consumption decreased the likelihood that participants would recommend formal police intervention after a disclosure event.

Table 1: Multivariate Logistic Regression Predicting Police Referral (n=571)

Independent Variables	β	SE	Exp (b)
Procedural Justice	.02	.01	1.02*
Negative Experiences with Police	-.03	.09	.96
Voluntary Contact with Police	.69	.23	2.00*
Illegality of Event	.31	.09	1.36*
Victim Race	.20	.21	1.22
Victim Intoxication	-.52	.22	.59*
Rape Myth Acceptance	-.03	.01	.97*
Lifetime Sexual Victimization	-.32	.25	.73
Nagelkerke R ²	.17		

Note: * $p < .05$; Control measures included in analysis but not presented.

Table 2 addresses Research Questions 2-4, highlighting the conditioning effects of situational characteristics on procedural justice and participant willingness to refer friends to police after a sexual assault. Results indicate that victim and situational characteristics did not moderate the effects of procedural justice on the likelihood of police referral. Specifically, neither victim race nor victim intoxication moderated the effect of procedural justice. However, the effect of participant sex on procedural justice was marginally significant ($p = .083$).

Table 2: Multivariate Logistic Regression Predicting Conditioning Effects on Procedural Justice (n=571)

Independent Variables	β	SE	Exp (b)
Procedural Justice X Victim Race	.00	.02	1.00
Procedural Justice X Victim Intoxication	.01	.02	1.01
Procedural Justice X Participant Sex	-.03	.02	.97
Nagelkerke R ²	.18		

Note: * $p < .05$; Only interaction effects presented. Direct measures included in analysis but not presented.

Discussion

The current study examined the underlying decision-making processes related to whether bystanders, specifically friends of sexual assault survivors, would recommend formal police intervention after a disclosure among a sample of 571 undergraduate criminal justice majors. Particular attention was given to understanding how bystanders' perceptions of police would influence this decision. Using a randomly assigned manipulated vignette depicting a sexual assault, the present study addressed 1) whether perceptions of procedural justice facilitated referrals for formal incident reporting and 2) the extent to which the effect of pervasive rape-

tolerant myths and other factors moderate the effects of procedural justice on willingness to refer police intervention. Results indicate that bystander's perceptions of procedural justice matter when advising survivor's next steps in the reporting process. Moreover, these effects are invariant across important situational contexts and victimization experiences. The findings have important policy implications.

First, compared to participants who viewed law enforcement as the least procedurally just, those with much more favorable perceptions were much more likely to advise police intervention. This finding is consequential given that 1) campus sexual assault is highly underreported to police (Fisher et al., 2000; 2003) and 2) survivors are more likely to report victimizations when those they disclose to (i.e., friends) recommend doing so (Ahrens et al., 2007; Paul et al., 2014). As such, procedural justice may act as an important underlying mechanism for understanding reporting behaviors. Bystanders with positive perceptions of police they may believe that formal reporting will result in beneficial outcomes for victims, and therefore encourage them to do so.

Second, prior research suggests that rape myths related to victim race and intoxication influence perceptions of who is considered a "real victim" in incidents of sexual assault (Koss, 1985; Koss et al., 2004). Results from the present study suggest that perceptions of procedural justice operate similarly regardless of situational contexts that have traditionally influenced perceptions of victim credibility. Importantly, these effects were found for both male and female bystander-friends. These findings highlight the importance of establishing and maintaining positive citizen-police relationships as they may influence behavior beyond individual encounters. This may include facilitating cooperation with law enforcement, which is important in the context of campus sexual assault.

These findings highlight the broad effects of procedurally just policing. Police behavior during police-citizen interactions may have long-lasting consequences that not only impact the individual involved, but may also indirectly influence friends, family, and other acquaintances. Law enforcement should be aware of the potential consequences of their behaviors and strive to maintain procedurally just principles during interactions with citizens. Officers should be trained to incorporate procedurally fair decision-making (i.e., treat citizens with respect and dignity, allow them to express their perspective, behave in an honest and transparent manner, and engage in fair/neutral decision making) in everyday aspects of policing. Doing so may be particularly beneficial in the context of sexual assault.

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