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Sexual Assault Disclosure and Gender: Relationship Between Survivor Gender and Disclosure

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SEXUAL ASSAULT AND GENDER:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SURVIVOR GENDER AND DISCLOSURE

by

CHRISTIAN THOMAS CLEVINGER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Psychology
in the Department of Psychology
in the College of the Sciences
and in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Amie Newins

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to explore whether the gender of a sexual assault survivor influenced to whom they disclosed the sexual assault. Previous research indicates that barriers to disclosure could differ based both on the gender of a sexual assault survivor and characteristics of the disclosure recipient. Examining how disclosure is influenced by survivor gender could help better identify which groups could benefit most from educational resources. Participants (n = 160) were college students who experienced a sexual assault in adolescence or adulthood. Disclosure to a range of different formal and informal supports was assessed. Findings indicated that male survivors were significantly less likely to disclose to female friends than female survivors. Both male and female survivors reported low rates of disclosure to formal support providers (such police, therapists, medical professionals). These findings suggest that both men and women who experience sexual assault are unlikely to report the incident to police and campus offices, and they are unlikely to disclose the incident to medical and mental health providers. Therefore, it is important that barriers to disclosure to formal support providers be examined in future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual assault, defined as any kind of nonconsensual sexual contact (Cook, Gidycz, Koss & Murphy, 2011), is a rampant issue among both male and female college students. Research has shown that approximately 20% of female undergraduate students (Rosenberg, Townes, Taylor, Luetke & Hernbenick, 2017) and roughly 5-8% of male undergraduate student's report experiencing a sexual assault (Cantor et al., 2015; Banyard, Cohn, Ward, & Plante, 2007). Even with its prevalence, sexual assault is a heavily underreported crime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000, 2006). The National College Women Sexual Victimization study, conducted in 2000, found that approximately 90% of college students who experienced a sexual assault did not report their assault to the police (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). A more recent study found that less than one in six rapes are reported to the police and suggested that reporting rates have been relatively stable since the 1990s (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Consistent with these findings, research has also shown that both male and female survivors of sexual assault are generally reluctant to disclose to formal support sources, such as police officers or medical experts. Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner (2003) found that less than 5% of female survivors reported their sexual assault victimization to the police, while 60-70% of survivors reported their assault to informal supports, such as friends and family. Furthermore, more recent research indicated that only 7-12% of male and female college students who experienced a sexual assault disclosed to formal supports while 69-80% disclosed to informal supports (Demers et al., 2017).

Barriers to Formal and Informal Disclosure

Making the decision to tell someone about a sexual assault experience, or disclose, can be challenging for survivors due to the complexity of the disclosure process and possible reactions

that may be received when they disclose (Ahrens, 2006). These possible reactions are some of the many barriers to disclosure that can inhibit sexual assault survivors, and these barriers vary based on multiple factors, such as whether available disclosure recipients are formal (e.g. police officers, medical professionals) or informal supports (e.g. friends, family). When considering formal supports, rates of sexual assault disclosure are low for both male (Jackson, Valentine, Woodward, & Pantalone, 2017) and female survivors (Fisher et al., 2003).

One of the most common barriers to disclosure to formal support sources that both male and female survivors may face is the belief that police officers will not believe their disclosure or fear that they may be met with reprisal (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011; Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006). A study specifically surveying female survivors noted that other common barriers to formal disclosure were a lack of proof of the incident, not wanting their family or other people to know about the incident (Fisher et al., 2003), fear of facing retaliation from a perpetrator, or being dependent on a perpetrator (Sable et al., 2006). While not many studies look at barriers to formal disclosure for men, one study found that the concerns of male survivors seemed more centered around preserving their dignity and masculinity (e.g. not wanting to be perceived as gay) when hesitating to disclose formally (Sable et al., 2006).

Another potential barrier to disclosure may include negative reactions. Negative reactions from formal supports have been noted to occur rather frequently (Ullman & Filipas, 2001), with some research showing that more than half of formal disclosures are met with negative reactions, such as victim blaming (Koon-Magnin & Shulze, 2019). Whether informal supports are more likely than formal supports to respond positively is questionable as the findings comparing the prevalence of positive responses from formal versus informal support sources seems to be mixed (Ahrens, 2006; Ullman & Filipas, 2001). While survivors are more likely to disclose to informal

supports, barriers such as self-blame, guilt, embarrassment, and shame felt following a sexual assault are leading concerns for male and female survivors when considering an informal disclosure (Sable et al., 2006).

Recipient Emotions and Backgrounds

Understanding how disclosure recipients feel when receiving a sexual assault disclosure and what factors influence their reactions can help identify who may be more likely to respond in a supportive manner and who may benefit from educational resources centered around how to respond to sexual assault disclosures. Common emotions that informal recipients experience following disclosure include anger, shock, concern (Branch & Richards, 2013), and distress (Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, & Ward, 2010). Recipients have also noted experiencing sudden changes in their worldview regarding safety. These are all key factors which can impact how a recipient feels and, thus, reacts the moment they receive a disclosure (Branch & Richards, 2013).

Research supports the idea that informal recipient backgrounds and prior experiences can also influence social reactions to a disclosure and who is most likely to be a recipient of a disclosure. A cross-sectional study conducted by Paul, Kehn, Gray, & Salapska-Gelleri (2014) found that informal supports, who indicated having previously experienced sexual assault victimization, were more likely to say they had received a disclosure than those without a history of sexual assault victimization. Recipients with a previous victimization history were also more likely to indicate they had responded with empathy and were less likely to say they had felt confused or ineffective when attempting to help disclosing survivors. The same study noted that participants who endorsed stronger agreement with rape myths (stereotypical beliefs regarding

rape, such as women who dress in revealing clothing are asking for trouble; Burt, 1980) and participants who had never received a sexual assault disclosure both indicated they experienced more confusion when considering how to help disclosing survivors than those who agreed less with rape myths and those who had received multiple disclosures of sexual assault. These participants were also more likely than those low in agreement with rape myths and those who had previously received disclosures to blame disclosing survivors for the incident. Furthermore, “Egalitarian” gender role attitudes (i.e., a belief that gender should not affect the perception of an individual) has been associated with less victim blaming than “Traditional” gender role attitudes (i.e., the belief that women are submissive and are in charge of household duties such as cleaning, raising children, maintaining family relationships; Angelone, Mitchell, & Lucente, 2012). Based on these findings, certain characteristics (such as a belief in rape myths) seem to influence the way disclosure recipients respond, which may in turn influence their likelihood of receiving disclosures.

Recipient Gender Differences

Gender of the disclosure recipient may impact likelihood of sexual assault disclosure for a variety of reasons. Men tend to report higher levels of rape myth acceptance than women (Paul et al., 2014; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Correspondingly, in a study where participants indicated their likely responses to a hypothetical sexual assault disclosure, men were not able to empathize victim of the hypothetical sexual assault as much as women (Paul et al. 2014). A study that utilized both questionnaires and hypothetical sexual assault scenarios found that men were also more likely than women to minimize the severity of a sexual assault (Ben-David & Schneider, 2005). Banyard et al. (2010) found that male recipients who had received a sexual assault

disclosure were much more likely to report feeling ineffective and uncomfortable following the disclosure than female disclosure recipients. Gender differences can also play a role in the kind of advice provided, actions performed, and beliefs displayed by disclosure recipients. Female disclosure recipients indicate being more likely than male disclosure recipients to advise survivors to seek formal support, particularly support from health professionals (Suzuki & Bonner, 2017). Women are more likely than men to believe a disclosure from a sexual assault survivor (Emmers-Sommer, 2017). Typically, men were more likely than women to be skeptical of trauma-related disclosures in general (Cromer & Freyd, 2009).

Based on the research discussed, male recipients are more likely to display unsupportive and negative attitudes toward disclosing survivors, while female recipients are more likely to display supportive attitudes. When met with a sexual assault disclosure, female recipients typically feel confident in their knowledge and ability to provide positive support to disclosing victims (Banyard et al., 2010). Female recipients tend to feel less confused or ineffective than male recipients when attempting to help victims (Banyard et al., 2010). However, female disclosure recipients are more likely to report experiencing high emotional distress following a disclosure than male recipients (Paul et al., 2014). The results of previous research are consistent with the notion that women may be more likely to be supportive sources for sexual assault survivors than men or at least be viewed by survivors as being more likely to be supportive (Banyard et al., 2010; Paul et al., 2014).

Gender Differences in Disclosure of General Emotional Experiences

Outside the context of sexual assault disclosures, gender differences may also help predict who receives a disclosure or how certain recipients may react to a sexual assault

disclosure. Specifically, gender differences among emotional self-disclosures, or disclosure of typically intimate topics, and characteristics, such as empathy, could influence how a recipient decides to react to a sexual assault disclosure. A study that examined empathy in a general context found that men are typically less empathetic than women (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). When looking at emotional self-disclosure, multiple studies have shown that women are generally more open to the idea of emotionally self-disclosing to their peers than men (Sultan & Chaundry, 2008; Derlega & Chaikin, 1976; Cunningham, 1981). In prior research on emotional self-disclosure, men have endorsed more reasons to hesitate when wanting to disclose their emotions to peers. Derelga & Chaikin noted that men were often perceived as poorly mentally adjusted when they self-disclosed intimately to peers, while women were perceived as poorly adjusted for not wanting to self-disclose intimately. Cunningham suggested that judgement amongst men carries more weight and, in his research, displayed that men rated most disclosure topics as more intimate, or difficult to talk about, than women. A study conducted by Kleinke & Kahn (1980) found that men who intimately self-disclosed less often were perceived as more desirable, while the opposite trend was true for women.

Disclosure Prevalence and Gender

While few studies have examined the prevalence of general emotional self-disclosures based on gender of the individual disclosing, findings seem to indicate that emotional self-disclosure among women tends to occur more frequently than among men. Research examining who men typically self-disclose to appears to be mixed and limited. Sultan & Chaudry (2008) found that both men and women felt more comfortable disclosing to friends of the same sex. However, a study conducted by Allen & Haccoun (1976) found that men were more likely to

only disclose certain types emotions based on whether the recipient was male or female, with more intimate emotions (e.g., sadness or happiness) only expressed toward women. Women in the Allen & Haccoun study were comfortable disclosing to both male and female friends, regardless of the type of emotion.

Returning to the context of sexual assault and focus of the current study, because sexual assault disclosure is a type of emotionally intimate disclosure, similar gender differences may exist. Consistent with this idea, among college students, 30-40% of female college students (Paul et al., 2013) compared to approximately 20% of male college students endorse being recipients of a sexual assault disclosure (Banyard et al., 2010). When looking at gender differences among disclosing survivors, Banyard and colleagues found that among students who had received at least one sexual assault disclosure, 96.5% had received a disclosure from at least one female friend and 19.7% of students had received a disclosure from at least one male friend. While these findings may be partly due to the gender differences in the prevalence of sexual assault, these findings also seem to coincide with research on gender differences in emotional self-disclosure.

Current Study

There is limited literature regarding how survivor gender affects sexual assault disclosure. The current study aims to add to the body of sexual assault disclosure research by attempting to identify whether a survivor's gender influences to whom they disclose their sexual assault. This study is unique in that it examines disclosure to a range of different formal and informal supports, including some for which gender of the disclosure recipient is also available. It is hypothesized that male survivors will be less likely than female survivors to disclose to formal supports given that male sexual assault continues to be more stigmatized than female

sexual assault (Hvalka, 2017). In contrast, male survivors are expected to be more likely than female survivors to disclose to male informal supports (i.e., male friends and fathers) based on research done by Douglas & Hines (2011) which showed that male victims of intimate partner violence were more likely to disclose to male friends, and Sultan & Chaudry (2008), which showed that men are also more likely to disclose their emotional feelings to other men.

Exploratory analyses will examine whether survivor gender is associated with differences in likelihood of disclosing to female informal supports (i.e., female friends, mothers).

Method

Participants and Procedures

Data for current study were collected through an online survey conducted via Qualtrics available to students at the University of Central Florida (UCF) who were at least 18 years of age. The survey was conducted by the Center for Research and Education of Sexual Trauma at UCF RESTORES, and data were collected between the Summer 2018 and Summer 2019 semesters. The online survey was distributed through the UCF Psychology Department Sona Research Participation System. Students were provided research credit for their participation in this study. Study procedures were approved by the UCF Institutional Review Board. Participants implied their consent by continuing on to the survey after first being provided information about the purpose and possible risks of participation. Only participants who indicated their gender as either male or female and who endorsed at least one unwanted sexual experience since age 14 on the Sexual Experiences Survey - Short Form Victimization were included in the current analyses. A total of 160 participants were included in the current analyses. Participants had a mean age of 19.50 ($SD = 3.19$). There sample was composed of 135 women (84.4%) and 25 men (15.6%) in the sample. When looking at participant racial demographics, 59.4% identified as White/Caucasian/European, 21.3% identified as Latino/Latina/Hispanic, 10.6% identified as African American/Black/African origin, 4.4% identified as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 3.1% identified as Bi-racial/Multi-racial, 0.6% identified as American Indian/Alaskan native, and 0.6% identified as Other. Of the 160 participants, 75% identified as Heterosexual, 16.3% identified as Bisexual, 5% identified as Gay/Lesbian, 1.9% identified as Questioning, 1.3% identified as Other, and 0.6% identified as Asexual.

Measures

Demographics. Demographic information was collected in order to determine participant gender. Other demographic information, such as age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, year in school, military affiliation, extracurricular activities, and fraternity/sorority membership, was also collected within the 10-item measure.

Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization. History of sexual assault victimization was assessed using the Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization (SES-SFV; Koss et al., 2007), a 72-item self-report measure. On the SES-SFV, participants are asked to indicate whether they experienced seven different types of unwanted sexual experiences (unwanted sexual contact and both attempted and completed oral, vaginal, and anal penetration) via five different types of perpetration tactics (e.g. using force, threatening to harm, getting angry) during two timeframes (past 12 months and from age 14 until 12 months prior to completion). Johnson, Murphy, & Gidycz (2017) demonstrated evidence for good reliability and validity of the SES-SFV within college women. The SES-SFV has also demonstrated adequate evidence of reliability and validity within college men (Anderson, Cahill, & Delahanty, 2018).

Sexual Assault Characteristics. Participants who endorsed at least one experience on the SES-SFV were asked a series of additional questions regarding the unwanted sexual experience they considered to be the most serious/traumatic. As part of these questions, participants were asked to indicate to whom they disclosed their sexual assault (e.g., female friend, male friend, hospital or medical professional).

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine whether the gender of the survivor was associated with likelihood of having disclosed to various types of individuals. When the chi-square test was statistically significant, binary logistic regressions were conducted to compute odds ratios as an estimate of effect size. In the logistic regressions, women were the reference group (i.e., women were coded 0 and men were coded 1). The odds of disclosing were predicted in the logistic regressions (i.e., participants who disclosed to a given person were coded 1, and those who did not disclose to that individual were coded 0).

Results

Results of the chi-square tests are presented in Table 1. When looking at informal supports in general, ($OR = .283, p = .005$; 95% CI for OR : .117, .689). The odds of a woman disclosing to at least one informal support were 3.53 times the odds of a man disclosing to an informal support. There were no significant differences between men and women when looking at disclosure to male informal supports, which included male friends and fathers. However, men and women did significantly differ in their likelihood of disclosing to female informal supports ($OR = .205, p = .001$; 95% CI for OR : .083, .504), with women's odds of disclosing to female informal supports being 4.88 times higher than men's odds. In particular, ($OR = .147, p = .000$; 95% CI for OR : .057, .380). The odds of a woman disclosing to female friends were 6.80 times the odds of a man disclosing to female friends. Chi-square tests could not be conducted for formal supports and individual parents due to low endorsement of disclosure among both men and women.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to examine whether sexual assault survivors' gender affects to whom they disclose their sexual assault. Results of the current study did not support the hypothesis that male survivors would be less likely than female survivors to disclose to formal supports due to the low frequency of endorsement of disclosure to formal supports. Results of the current study also did not support the hypothesis that male survivors would be more likely than female survivors to disclose to male informal supports. Specifically, no significant gender differences were found in likelihood of disclosing to male informal supports. However, significant gender differences were found between male and female survivors' likelihood of disclosing to female informal supports and informal supports in general. Specifically, men were less likely than women to disclose to informal supports in general, which seemed to be driven by male survivors being less likely than female survivors to disclose to female friends.

When looking at the findings regarding disclosure to formal supports, analyses could not be run due to the notably low amount of endorsement for formal support disclosure among both male and female survivors. These findings are consistent prior research that has demonstrated low rates of formal support disclosure among men and women (Demers et al., 2017; Fisher, et al., 2003). The current findings could possibly suggest that, despite greater stigmatization of male sexual assault (Hvalka, 2017), there may be no major differences in men's and women's likelihood to disclose to formal support providers. Future research should examine what contributes to men and women disclosing to formal supports; factors such as severity of the sexual assault, physical injuries, and beliefs about stigma about male sexual assault among formal support providers should be considered.

When looking at male and female informal support disclosure, these findings seem to only partially support prior research that suggests men and women may feel more comfortable emotionally disclosing to supports of the same sex (Sultan & Chaudry, 2008) by demonstrating that male survivors were less likely than female survivors to disclose to female informal supports. The current findings on male informal support disclosure do not seem to support prior research that suggests male survivors are more likely to emotionally disclose to other men (Allen & Haccoun, 1976; Douglas & Hines, 2011). One possible explanation for these results is that, since prior research on who men emotionally disclose to does not typically look at the disclosure of sexual assault experiences, disclosure of sexual assault may differ from disclosure of other sensitive information. Our finding that male survivors were less likely than female survivors to disclose to informal supports was consistent with prior research that suggests fewer informal support disclosures come from men (Banyard et al., 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

One of the major limitations within the current study was the uneven ratio of male to female survivors. The small number of male survivors who had disclosed may have limited our power to detect significant gender differences. The low rates of endorsement among men also limited our ability to conduct chi-square analyses for formal supports and individual parents. Furthermore, it is possible that some survivors of sexual assault did not disclose on the survey due to concerns about disclosing. Additionally, the SES-SFV has only demonstrated limited reliability and validity within college men (Anderson, Cahill, & Delahanty, 2018). Furthermore, the SES-SFV does not assess experiences that involve being pressured or forced to penetrate another person orally, vaginally, or anally. Therefore, these limitations may have resulted in an

underestimation of sexual assault among the men in this sample. The present study may also have limited generalizability to other populations due to its exclusive use of college students.

Further research using larger samples is needed in order to determine whether our findings are reliable and also to gain further understanding on how exactly survivor gender plays a role in to whom survivors decide to disclose. Future studies may want to expand upon this area of research by including genders for formal supports as well as informal supports. Assessment of barriers to disclosing to various support providers could also aid future research. A qualitative approach could also be utilized within further research in order to gain an understanding of what specific reasons or factors influenced a survivor's decision to disclose to a specific form of support. Future should also aim to look at whether sexual orientation could moderate the relationship between survivor gender and to whom survivors disclose. Future assessment of sexual assault victimization history within men could be improved with the use of measures that include more experiences oriented toward male victims, such as questions concerning being pressured to perform sexual acts on others. Educators could also utilize the results of the current study in order to improve existing educational resources involving trends sexual assault disclosure.

Conclusion

Results indicated that there is a possible relationship between survivor gender and to whom they decide to disclose. Further research on the topic is needed in order to fully understand how survivor gender influences to whom survivors disclose. Gaining insight into how likely different forms of support are to receive a disclosure from different survivors can help identify which groups could most benefit from educational resources. Research on this topic could also be important in improving our understanding of what factors influence a sexual

assault survivors' decision to disclose and could also possibly help to increase rates of disclosure among survivors of sexual assault. The results of the present study are important in that they expand upon the limited research on sexual assault disclosure trends based on gender

APPENDIX A
TABLES

Table 1*Chi Square Gender Differences in Disclosure to Formal and Informal Supports*

Disclosure Recipient	Women	Men	χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)		
	<i>N</i> = 135	<i>N</i> = 25		
Informal Supports	107 (79.3)	13 (52.0)	8.36	.004
Siblings	13 (9.6)	5 (20.0)	2.27	.132
Male Friends and/or Father	63 (46.7)	11 (44.0)	.06	.806
Male Friends	61 (45.2)	10 (40.0)	.23	.632
Father	6 (4.4)	2 (8.0)	N/A	
Female Friends and/or Mother	99 (73.3)	9 (36.0)	13.40	.000
Female Friends	98 (72.6)	7 (28.0)	18.59	.000
Mother	24 (17.8)	3 (12.0)	N/A	
Formal Supports	19 (14.1)	4 (16.0)	N/A	
Academic Professional	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	N/A	
Title IX Coordinator	2 (1.5)	0 (0.0)	N/A	
Office of Student Conduct	1 (0.7)	0 (0.0)	N/A	
Medical Professional	6 (4.4)	0 (0.0)	N/A	
Police/Law Enforcement	5 (3.7)	1 (4.0)	N/A	
Psychologist/Therapist/Counselor	14 (10.4)	3 (12.0)	N/A	

Note: Bolded values were significant. N/A = χ^2 tests were not conducted because fewer than five individuals of a given gender disclosed to a type of individual

APPENDIX B
DEFENSE ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcing the Defense of Thesis of Christian Clevenger For Honors in the Major Psychology

Date: April 10, 2019

Time: 2:00 p.m.

Virtual Thesis Defense

Thesis Title: Sexual Assault Disclosure and Gender: Relationship between Survivor Gender and Disclosure

The purpose of this thesis was to explore whether the gender of a sexual assault survivor influenced to whom they disclosed the sexual assault. Previous research indicates that barriers to disclosure could differ based both on the gender of a sexual assault survivor and characteristics of the disclosure recipient. Examining how disclosure is influenced by survivor gender could help better identify which groups could benefit most from educational resources.

Participants ($n = 135$) were college students who experienced a sexual assault in adolescence or adulthood. Disclosure to a range of different formal and informal supports was assessed. Findings indicated that male survivors were significantly less likely to disclose to female friends than female survivors. Both male and female survivors reported low rates of disclosure to formal support providers (such police, therapists, medical professionals).

These findings suggest that both men and women who experience sexual assault are unlikely to report the incident to police and campus offices, and they are unlikely to disclose the incident to medical and mental health providers. Therefore, it is important that barriers to disclosure to formal support providers be examined in future research.

Major: Psychology

Committee in Charge:

Dr. Amie Newins

Dr. Brian Fisak

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