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Sexual Victimization Experience Predicting Empathy with an Unspecified or Date Rape Victim

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine empathy with a rape victim in two experimental conditions (date rape; unspecified rape) based on personal sexual victimization experience (nonvictim; date victim; nondate victim). Undergraduate women ($n = 212$) completed the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987), and one of two versions of the Rape Victim Empathy Scale (Smith & Frieze, 2003). Results showed that all victims reported greater empathy than nonvictims, and a potential interaction ($p < .10$); date victims tended to report greater empathy with a date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim, but nondate victims tended to report greater empathy with an unspecified rape victim than a date rape victim. Similarity in experience may influence empathy.

Keywords: victimization, empathy, date, rape

Sexual Victimization Experience Predicting Empathy with an Unspecified or Date Rape Victim

Rape and other types of sexual victimization committed by a dating partner among college women is prevalent (Edwards, Sylaska, & Gidycz, 2014; Gross, Winslett, Roberts, & Gohm, 2006; Koss, Dinero, Seibel, & Cox, 1988; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). For example, in samples of U.S. college women, 41.1% of those with rape or other types of sexual victimization experience reported that their perpetrator was a dating partner (Gross et al., 2006), 53.4% of rape victims indicated that they had been raped by a date (Koss et al., 1988), 23% reported sexual victimization experience with a dating partner (Harned, 2005), and 77.6% reported sexual victimization by a date, including 14.7% who were raped (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). In more recent studies, 37.3% of U.S. college women who were in a dating relationship with a man reported sexual victimization perpetrated by that dating partner (Edwards et al., 2014), and 31.7% of female Israeli university students reported experiencing coerced sexual victimization on a date, including 6.1% who were raped (Bitton & Ben-David, 2014). Furthermore, women raped (Ogunwale & Oshiname, 2017) or coerced into sexual acts (Bitton & Ben-David, 2014; Katz & Myhr, 2008) by dating partners report negative outcomes (e.g., depression, suicidal thoughts, lower sexual satisfaction), similar to women raped by strangers, family members, and nondate acquaintances (e.g., co-worker, friend, neighbor; Koss et al., 1988). However, although prevalent and harmful, date rape and other types of dating sexual violence among college students is often not taken seriously (Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Burnett, Mattern, Herakova, Kahl, Tobola, & Bornsen, 2009). For example, date rape victims are attributed more blame and responsibility than victims raped by strangers or family members (Bell et al., 1994; Bridges & McGrail, 1989; Koss et al., 1988). Students have also shown a lack of clarity in their understanding of date rape, and difficulty talking about it, which may contribute to a date rape-tolerant culture on college

campuses (Burnett et al., 2009). This culture may silence victims and make it challenging for women to assertively communicate their non-consent to sexual advances by a date (Anderson, Brouwer, Wendorf, & Cahill, 2016), but when they do assertively resist (e.g., say “no”) it is sometimes misconstrued as consent (Osman, 2003). This culture may also lead women to minimize their own sexual victimization experiences with dating partners and not recognize them to be victimization (Harned, 2005). Given the prevalence, harmfulness and trivialization of rape and other types of sexual victimization committed by dating partners, it is important to study factors that may increase understanding of date rape.

In order to better understand rape and sexual violence in general, some researchers have studied rape victim empathy. Rape victim empathy is the ability to deeply understand the perspective, emotions, and reactions of a rape victim (Dietz, Blackwell, Daley, & Bentley, 1982; Smith & Frieze, 2003), and has been linked to rape-related factors. For example, greater empathy with a rape victim has been associated with rape jury-related judgments, including more certainty of perpetrator guilt, longer suggested prison sentences, and lower rape victim responsibility (Deitz et al., 1982; Smith & Frieze, 2003). In addition, greater rape victim empathy among police officers has been associated with rape victims being more likely to take their cases to court (Maddox, Lee, & Barker, 2011). Empathy with one’s rape victim has also been associated with rapist rehabilitation strategies (Brown, Harkins, & Beech, 2012; Fernandez & Marshall, 2003). Finally, rape victim empathy has been linked with rape prevention education programs (Schewe & O’Donohue, 1993). Given these potential applications, it is important to continue to expand our knowledge about factors that may influence rape empathy. However, the study of factors that may specifically relate to empathy with a date rape victim has not been given much attention in the literature.

Theory and data suggest that greater familiarity with and similarity to another's situation may increase empathy (Barnett, Tetreault, & Masbad, 1987). For example, those who have any type of personal sexual victimization experience report greater empathy with a hypothetical rape victim than people without such experience, women with any type of sexual victimization experience report greater empathy with a female than a male rape victim, and those who have any type of sexual victimization experience committed by an acquaintance report greater empathy with an acquaintance than a stranger rape victim (Osman, 2011; 2014; Smith & Frieze, 2003). These findings suggest that relaying specific details of a hypothetical victim's situation (e.g., raped by a date) may influence empathy depending on an individual's own commonalities in experience (e.g., personal sexual victimization experience committed by a date). Thus, perhaps those who have personally experienced any type of sexual victimization by a dating partner may be able to better take the perspective of and empathize with a date rape victim. The primary purpose of the present study was to examine rape victim empathy based on experimentally manipulated type of hypothetical rape victim (i.e., date rape specified condition; rape unspecified condition) and participant's personal sexual victimization experience (none; sexually victimized by a date; sexually victimized by someone other than a date).

We predicted 1) that all victims would report greater empathy than nonvictims, 2) that those sexually victimized by a date (date victims) would report greater empathy with a hypothetical date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim, and 3) that those sexually victimized by someone other than a date (nondate victims) would report less empathy with a hypothetical date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim.

Method

Participants

Participants were 212 female college students taking a general psychology course at a mid-sized public university. A majority of the sample (79.2%) identified themselves as either White, European, or European American. Of the remaining participants, 13.2% identified themselves as African or African American, 1.4% as Hispanic or Hispanic American, 3.3% as Asian or Asian American, and 2.8% as biracial. The mean age for participants was 18.7 with a standard deviation of .98. A majority of the sample were college freshman (59.4%), and 29.2% were sophomores, 7.1% were juniors, and 4.2% were seniors. Participants volunteered for the study, which was one option offered to earn extra credit for their psychology course. This research study followed APA ethical guidelines and standards, and was approved by an Institutional Review Board.

Materials

Participants completed the 10-item Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987) to measure personal sexual victimization experience. This survey was designed to be a self-report instrument that measures experience with various types of sexual victimization (i.e., sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, rape) (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987). A sample of one of the three items measuring sexual contact was, “Have you given into sex play (fondling, kissing, or petting but not intercourse) when you didn’t want to because you were overwhelmed by someone’s continual arguments and pressure?” A sample of one of the two items measuring attempted rape was, “Have you ever had someone attempt sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to by giving you alcohol or drugs, but intercourse did not occur?” A sample of one of the two items measuring sexual coercion was, “Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to because someone used their position of authority (boss, teacher, camp counselor, supervisor) to make you?” Finally, a sample of one of the three items

measuring rape was “Have you had sexual intercourse when you didn’t want to because someone threatened or used some degree of physical force (twisting your arm, holding you down, etc.) to make you?” Participants were asked to respond *yes* or *no* to each of the 10 questions on the survey. If participants responded *yes* to any of these questions, they were considered to have reported victimization experience and were asked to indicate their relationship to the perpetrator(s), with “date” as an option.

To measure empathy with a date or unspecified rape victim, participants completed Smith & Frieze’s (2003) 18-item Rape-Victim Empathy Scale (REMV). Participants randomly received either the original version of the scale, which measured empathy with a rape victim whose relationship to the perpetrator was unspecified, or a modified version in which the rape victim was specifically described to be the victim of a “date.” Sample items from the original “unspecified rape” version were, “I find it easy to take the perspective of a rape victim,” “I can feel a person’s humiliation at being forced to have sex against their will,” and “I imagine the anger a person would feel after being raped.” Sample items from the modified “date rape specified” version were, “I find it easy to take the perspective of a date rape victim,” “I can feel a person’s humiliation at being forced to have sex with a date against their will,” and “I imagine the anger a person would feel after being raped by a date.” The REMV is a Likert type scale that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scores were summed and then divided by 18, so final scores could range from 1 to 5. Smith and Frieze (2003) reported a Cronbach alpha of .92 for the REMV, and the Cronbach alpha in the current study was .84. Smith & Frieze (2003) also demonstrated validity for the REMV, as it was positively correlated with a well-known general empathy instrument called the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy, and negatively associated with perceptions of victim responsibility for rape.

Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire packet in a lecture hall setting and were asked to sit “at least every other seat away from each other, with as much space as possible between them.” Participants were first given a consent form to sign, which assured them that their responses would be anonymous and that their participation was completely voluntary. Following the consent forms, participants received the questionnaire packets, which included demographic questions, one of the two experimental versions of the REMV, and the SES. After the participants completed their packets, they were asked to slide them into an anonymous drop bag as an extra measure of anonymity. Before participants left the room, they were handed referral forms with counseling options they could pursue if needed.

Results

Participants with missing data ($n = 18$) were dropped from data analysis. Of the women included in the analysis, 51% ($n = 99$) reported sexual victimization experience. (Of these 99 participants, 26% reported rape and the remaining 74% reported other types of sexual victimization experience). Those who indicated “date” as a sexual perpetrator were categorized as “date victims” ($n = 46$; 33% reported rape and the remaining 67% reported other types of sexual victimization experience). Those who did not indicate “date” as a sexual perpetrator were categorized as “nondate victims” ($n = 53$; 21% reported rape and the remaining 79% reported other types of sexual victimization experience). If participants indicated no sexual victimization experiences on the SES, they were categorized as “nonvictims” ($n = 95$).

A 2x3 (experimental condition x sexual victimization experience) ANOVA was performed on the rape victim empathy scores. There was a main effect for sexual victimization experience, $F(2, 191) = 4.38, p = .01, partial \eta^2 = .044$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that

nonvictims ($M = 3.66$, $SD = .48$, $n = 95$) reported lower rape empathy than both nondate victims ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .54$, $n = 53$), $p = .01$, $partial \eta^2 = .043$, and date victims ($M = 3.89$, $SD = .50$, $n = 46$), $p < .01$, $partial \eta^2 = .048$, but the latter two groups did not differ. The interaction between experimental condition and victimization experience approached significance, $F(5, 188) = 2.37$, $p = .096$, $partial \eta^2 = .025$. See Figure 1 for means, standard deviations and cell sizes.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to test whether relaying specific details about a victim's relationship to a perpetrator (i.e., "date" or "unspecified") and similarities in personal sexual victimization experience (none; sexually victimized by a date; sexually victimized by someone other than a date) would influence empathy with a hypothetical rape victim. We predicted that all victims would report more empathy than nonvictims. Results supported this hypothesis. As expected, and consistent with theory and past research (Barnett et al., 1987; Deitz et al., 1982; Osman, 2011; Smith and Frieze, 2003), those with sexual victimization experience (date and nondate) reported greater empathy than nonvictims.

We also predicted that those sexually victimized by a date (date victims) would report greater empathy for a hypothetical date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim, and that those sexually victimized by someone other than a date (nondate victims) would report greater empathy for an unspecified rape victim than a date rape victim. Means followed the predicted patterns, such that those sexually victimized by a date tended to report greater empathy with a date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim, but those sexually victimized by someone other than a date tended to report less empathy with a date rape victim than an unspecified rape victim. Although this potential interaction between experimental condition and sexual victimization experience reached a level ($p < .10$) that has been considered marginally significant by some past

researchers (Oswald, Franzoi, & Frost, 2012; Pritschet, Powell, & Horne, 2016), follows the patterns predicted by the hypotheses, and is consistent with theory and past research regarding empathy increasing based on similarities in experience (Barnett et al., 1987; Osman, 2011; 2014; Smith & Frieze, 2003), it is imperative to be cautious about drawing conclusions from the present results regarding how empathy with a hypothetical date rape and unspecified rape victim is impacted based on sexual victimization experience committed by a date or nondate perpetrator. Future research may elucidate these potential findings, and can address current limitations.

There are a number of limitations in the current study. For example, this sample of victims reported a variety of sexual victimization experiences (i.e., sexual contact, sexual coercion, attempted rape, and rape), with 33% of the date victims reporting rape experience and 21% of nondate victims reporting rape experience. However, those with rape experience may have the most similar experiences to and empathy with a hypothetical rape victim. Therefore, obtaining a larger sample size, particularly with a greater number of rape victims, may be important. Another limitation of this study that could be addressed in future research stems from using the original “unspecified rape” version of the REMV as the control condition. With this, it is unknown what the participants were imagining in terms of the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator in the unspecified rape condition, but what they imagined could have impacted the results. For example, date victims in the unspecified rape condition may have imagined that the victim was raped by a date, which could have weakened the current findings. Asking participants what type of relationship they imagined in future studies may address this limitation. It may also be useful to test other specific types of relationships between the rape victim and the rapist in experimental conditions (e.g., neighbor, co-worker, friend) to compare to a date rape specified

condition. Furthermore, the current study was limited to college women who reported being mostly white, European, or European American. They were also mostly freshman with a traditional average age. Therefore, we have to be cautious not to generalize the current findings beyond this population. Expanding diversity in future research samples may elucidate findings about gender, ethnicity, education level, age, and empathy.

Addressing these limitations and conducting future research is important to clarify the direction of the means and potential interaction found in the current study. If the potential interaction is supported in future research, such that empathy with a rape victim may be influenced by specifying the dating relationship between a victim and a rapist, it could have important implications for many areas, including rape prevention programs, jury decision-making, and media campaigns. For example, some rape prevention education programs targeting college students have had success at impacting rape victim empathy (Bradley, Yeater & O'Donohue, 2009; Schewe & O'Donohue, 1993; Stephens, & George, 2009), but other programs have failed to do so (Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Berg, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Gidycz et al, 2001). Among those program studies that have failed to impact empathy, Gidycz et al. (2001) noted that their participants rated the program content as having little personal relevance to them, and other researchers have suggested that framing content to be specific and relatable may improve outcomes (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). Consistent with this, the potential interaction in the current study suggests that tailoring specific word choices (e.g., "date" rape) in the content of rape prevention education programs on college campuses may make the content more personally relevant to date victims who are exposed to the program. The similarity of their own sexual victimization experience committed by a dating partner to the date rape content of the program

may have a greater impact on their empathy with other victims as compared to not having date rape specified in the program content.

Likewise, the potential interaction suggests that specific word choices may influence rape victim empathy of jurors listening to rape cases brought to trial. For example, if a jury member has been a victim of sexual violence by a dating partner, their empathy with the trial victim may be greater if that victim's rapist is described as a date, and lesser if that victim's rapist is described as someone other than a date. Therefore, if a lawyer uses words that highlight the dating relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, it may influence a juror's empathy level with the victim in the case, which in turn can influence the juror's judgments of perpetrator guilt, sentencing and responsibility (Deitz et al., 1982).

Furthermore, the potential interaction suggests that using specific words in media campaigns aimed at increasing empathy with rape victims may be important. For example, relaying details about a rape situation (e.g., rapist was a "date") might increase empathy among individuals in the general public who hear the campaign and have similarly been sexually victimized by a dating partner. If future research shows that this extends to other relationships (e.g., empathy for a victim raped by a co-worker is greater among those individuals who have themselves been sexually victimized by a co-worker), then these media campaigns may benefit by specifying various types of relationships in their messages to influence empathy among a wider audience.

Regardless of specific types of victim-perpetrator relationships and related word choices, the current study found that all victims reported more empathy than nonvictims. Given the estimation that at least one in four women will experience sexual violence (Gross et al., 2006; Koss et al., 1987), it is likely that many victims are students attending rape prevention programs,

members of a jury, or members of the general public exposed to media campaigns. The current findings imply that they may be able to identify and empathize with other victims more than nonvictims may be able. However, if one in four women are sexually victimized, then there are also many nonvictims who are students, jurors and exposed to media. Thus, more efforts are needed to investigate ways to increase empathy among nonvictims. Future research can address these efforts. Overall, gaining any amount of empathy from all students, individuals involved in rape trials, and the general public may play a crucial role in bringing awareness to and understanding of the prevalence, harmfulness and seriousness of rape and sexual violence perpetrated by dating partners or others.

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Figure 1. Ms, SDs, and cell sizes for empathy scores. Nonvictims scored lower than nondate and date victims, p 's $\leq .01$.