Rape Acknowledgement and Perceptions of Social Systems

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Introduction

Mary Koss (1985) used the term “unacknowledged rape” victim to describe women whose experience legally qualifies as rape but who do not label their experience as such (p. 195). Despite the prevalence and traumatic impact of rape, studies have shown that as few as 5% of female college student rape victims sought assistance services or reported their experiences to authorities (Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Bachman, 1998).

The present study looks to qualitatively examine how social influences construct the perspectives of women who do not acknowledge their unwanted sexual experiences as rape. An ecological framework was used to explore labeling decisions within a complex social environment. The construction of knowledge was examined through victims’ perceptions of their surrounding social systems and the emotional impact associated with these perceptions. Victim’s expectations for social reactions can be viewed as influenced by rape culture’s integration into the individual level, the microsystem level, and the interaction between these two levels of social ecology.

Method

The target sample for this study consisted of the female undergraduate students enrolled in the Psychology Participant Pool at the University of Windsor. A survey was administered online through The Psychology Participant Pool. The Modified Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982) was a pre-screen measure of eligibility. Eligible participants received an email inviting them to participate in the study.

Participants responded to a short demographics questionnaire, a series of open-ended qualitative items, and several mood neutralizing questions. Participants received one bonus point for 60 minutes of participation.

Disclosure as a Platform for Communication

• Reactions Shape Disclosure Decisions: both predicted and experienced reactions – salient reactions include anger, disappointment, invasive questions, and empathic attunement
• Disclosure Shapes Reactions: how respondents conveyed their disclosure influenced others’ reactions (i.e. respondents exerted some control over how disclosures were attended to)

Labelling as a Function of Support Systems

• Nurturing Awareness: interactions with ecological system supports were reported as gradually change respondent perceptions through trusting relationships
• Loss of Autonomy: expressed in both respondent fears and experiences of being misunderstood, losing control over labelling their experience, and decisions moving forward

“The Taken Advantage Of”

• Respondents often labelled their experiences as “being taken advantage of”
• Majority of respondents were intoxicated and unable to consent
• Some respondents regarded their coercive experiences as part of being sexually active

References

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I was only comfortable with telling close friends [...] because I was in fear of being judged.”

“I have told people recently and no one takes it seriously because I don’t.”

“The way I told them was in a joking way and I don’t think they took it as seriously as I think it was.”

“It took my friends telling me, for me to really realize what was happening.”

“I think the worst case scenario would be that they blame me and they put it all on me.”

“[Others] wouldn’t respond in a bad way because he is my boyfriend and they expect that.”

“He [knew] I would not have had sex with him sober cause I already said no before.”