 Victim and Perpetrator Labeling Influence Perceived Helpfulness of Actions Following Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Sexual abuse (SA) victims’ engagement in help-seeking and other post abuse actions (PAAs) is influenced by peripheral aspects of communications about SA. Victim and perpetrator labeling interacted to influence perceived helpfulness (PH) of PAAs in general, and filing a police report: in the absence of victim labeling, perpetrator labeling reduced PH of PAAs.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual abuse (SA) victims consider post abuse actions (PAAs), such as seeking social support or therapy, calling crisis lines, seeking medical services, and reporting the abuse to the police to be helpful in dealing with the consequences of their abuse (Filipas, Henrietta, Ulman, & Saraph, 2001). Victims’ utilization of PAAs is directly influenced by social support, and the suggestions of family and friends in dealing with the assault are often followed (Starzynski, 2007; Suzuki & Yumi, 2012). The perceptions of both potential victims and those in their social networks can be influenced by peripheral aspects of communications about abuse. For instance, the terminology or other verbal framing used in describing the assault can influence whether the incident is reported (Abbey, Parkhill, & Koss, 2005; Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002). Labeling theory (Scheff, 1966) posits that using label reductive communications in about individuals (e.g., “victim” or “offender”) can affect perceptions of those labeled, though there is a disagreement about whether this labeling has universally negative consequences (Colarossi, 2005; Link, Struening, Cullen, Shroot, & Dothenwend, 1989; Holguin & Hansen, 2003) or may have positive effects (McMullen, 2007; Wright, Jorn, & Mackinnon, 2012). Little research has addressed the potential effects of communications—especially labeling—on perceptions of the helpfulness of PAAs, though labeling of psychological disorders is known to influence observers’ judgments about need for treatment (Bruce et al., 2012). We report the results of a study of the effects of victim and perpetrator labeling on public perceptions of the helpfulness of various PAAs.

METHOD

Participants: Interviews were conducted with 245 Hispanic residents (91.6% Mexican-American) of a southwestern US state regarding their attitudes and knowledge about sexual abuse and offense using a participant-driven sampling paradigm. The sample was 56.2% male and 44.8% female and the mean participant age was 28.7 years (SD=4.9).

Measures: Participants provided opinions of the helpfulness (on a four-point Likert scale) for victims of various PAAs (talking to friend/family, contacting crisis hotline or internet site, ...). Interviews were conducted with 245 Hispanic residents (91.6% Mexican-American) of a southwestern US state regarding their attitudes and knowledge about sexual abuse and offence using a participant-driven sampling paradigm. The sample was 56.2% male and 44.8% female and the mean participant age was 28.7 years (SD=4.9).

RESULTS

Due to strongly skewed distributions, helpfulness ratings were dichotomized (“Very Helpful” vs. other; Figure 1). There was significant variation in PH of PAAs (Figure 2), with seeing a therapist perceived as most helpful, followed by talking to a family member/friend, then medical and police services, and finally accessing a hotline or website.

Victim and perpetrator labeling interacted in affecting participants’ PH of combined PAAs (Figure 3), when victim labeling was present, PAAs were equally likely to be seen as Very Helpful (X=0.62, p<0.02) but, in the absence of victim labeling, perpetrator labeling reduced PH (X=0.44, p<0.02). With Bonferroni adjustment (p<0.02), no other effects were significant in single-PAAs analysis except in PH seen in a police report, which replicated the interaction seen in the omnibus analysis (F. Labeling @ V. Labeling: X=0.59, p<0.02).

DISCUSSION

Our results, in light of the theory of planned behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1991) and Long et al.’s (2000) model of help-seeking and change, suggest that individuals’ willingness to participate in PAAs could be indirectly influenced by the terminology that is used to describe the victim or the perpetrator in messages about sexual abuse existing in the individual environment. The TPB implies the possibility of complex recursive effects: for instance, usage of, and referral to, PAAs may be influenced by one’s own prior/ongoing attitudes about PAAs helpfulness and messages about helpfulness from others, both of which might be influenced by labeling.

For combined judgments of the helpfulness of PAAs and for perceived helpfulness of filing a police report, labeling reduced the perceived helpfulness of PAAs when victims—but not perpetrators—were labeled. This effect, especially for police reports, may be due to the stigma associated with victim labels in judicial system (Weiss, 2011), as well as perceptions of a general lack of victim sensitivity when seeking police assistance after traumatic events (Alaggia, Lamber, & Regeh, 2009).

These findings imply, in certain situations, labeling perpetrators but not victims in public communications or media offerings may adversely affect rates of help-seeking and assistance, due to a reduction in perceived helpfulness of PAAs.

These findings may suffer generalizability problems to the general U.S. population as data was collected in a predominantly Hispanic community, and our measure of perceived helpfulness appeared to suffer a ceiling effect: Future studies might assess attitudes toward a wider variety of PAAs in diverse samples, using measures with increased range. Variations due to culture and other demographics might also be found to interact with labeling conditions in determining perceived helpfulness of services.

REFERENCES


Table 1. Labelling Combinations in Interviews

Table 2. Results of omnibus and subsequent logistic regression analyses.

Table 3. Results of omnibus and subsequent logistic regression analyses.