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MSU-M Social Work Students' Perceptions of Sexual Assault Reporting

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College students, specifically female college students, are one of the most victimized populations of sexual assault, being three times more likely to experience sexual assault than women as a whole (Victims, 2016). Sexual assault is also a crime that is highly underreported (Potter, 2016). Many studies have explored the reasons individuals choose to report or not report a sexual assault (Feldman-Summers & Ashworth, 1981; Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016). Multiple studies suggest that the most significant factor on whether a college student, in particular, chooses to report a sexual assault is the type of assault experienced. If the sexual assault was violent in nature, there is a higher chance that the student will report the incident (LeMaire, Oswald, & Russell, 2016).

These studies also suggest that many college student sexual assaults are not reported due to misinformation about what constitutes a rape. Barriers to reporting include rape myths, negative perceptions, and misinformation about reporting rights.

The purpose of this research is to learn more about factors influencing whether or not students choose to report a sexual assault. This research will specifically be looking at the reporting perceptions of MSU-M Social Work students at two different levels in their education to also compare the differences in reporting preferences based on education level.

Definitions

For the purposes of this research, the terms 'sexual assault' and 'rape' are used interchangeably to refer to:

a series of sexually aggressive acts which range from the nonviolent (obscene phone calls, verbal harassment, or indecent exposure) to violent acts or attempted acts within intimate or familial relationships (date rape, marital rape, sexual abuse, incest, or

statutory rape) as well as violent acts outside intimate relationships (gang rape, stranger

rape, sexual homicide, ritual abuse) (Postmus, 2008, para. 4).

According to Strain, Hockett, & Saucier (2016), 'rape culture' refers to a culture:

in which rape is condoned, accepted, and perpetrated at an alarming rate; an estimated

25% of women will be raped during their lives. Rape culture also refers to rape-

supportive psychosocial environments in which normative beliefs, behaviors, and

customs increase the risk of sexual violence (para. 2).

Literature Review

Rape Myths

There is much misinformation surrounding sexual assault in terms of who is assaulted,

who assaults others, and what constitutes an assault. LeMaire et al. (2016) explains:

Some myths about rape include ideas that women 'ask for rape,' victims actually wanted

to be raped, the perpetrator 'didn't mean to' rape the victim, and many of women's claims

of being raped are false accusations. Although men tend to accept rape myths more

readily than women, both men and women adhere to beliefs about rape myths (LeMaire,

et al., 2016).

A common myth is that a rape is only a 'true rape' if the victim was violently assaulted

by a stranger (LeMaire et al., 2016). Another myth that many people believe is that if the victim

was under the influence of alcohol, the assault was at least partially their fault. A study by

Hockett et al. (2015) found that college students perceive a victim more positively if they were

not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the assault. Only 35.6% of colleges and

universities have information on victim-blaming, which occurs when people blame the victim for

being assaulted due to how they dressed, what they said to the perpetrator, or other factors (Lund & Thomas, 2015).

When there is not sufficient information about victim-blaming, the culture of rape persists and rape myths continue to define the circumstances under which an individual will choose to report the assault. Fisher et al. (2003) explains that people are more likely to report a rape if the assault had characteristics that made it more 'believable,' such as violence. Du Mont, Miller, & Myhr's (2003) study also supports this with findings that indicate that there is a positive association between reporting assault to police and two overtly violent components of the 'real rape' myth. These studies suggest that due to a lack of education about the different forms in which a rape can occur and how to avoid victim-blaming, many rapes go unreported. Stereotypes and victim-blaming are significant myths to contend with when discussing sexual assault.

Perceptions of Reporting

Research suggests victims have two major concerns regarding reporting an assault. Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallaher (2007) describe these as concerns about confidentiality and a fear of not being believed (if the rape did not follow the rape myth that a high degree of violence was used). Other barriers such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and not wanting family or friends to know also contribute. Paul, Kehn, Gray, & Salapska-Gelleri (2014) describe other factors in sexual assault perceptions as gender and history. Individuals who identify as a female and individuals who have a personal victimization history are more likely to be empathetic towards a sexual assault victim (Paul et al., 2014). People who are more likely to report a sexual assault also have less confusion about what actually constitutes 'rape' (LeMaire et al., 2016). Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner (2003) identify the role alcohol and drugs play in reporting. Fisher et

al. (2003) used a random sample of 4446 female college students that looked at determinants of victims' willingness to report sexual victimization to show that the use of alcohol or drugs made people more likely to disclose to friends but less likely to report to police.

Reporting Rights

88.2% of colleges and universities offer information about sexual assault to their students (Lund et al. 2015). All schools receiving government funding are required to comply with Title IX (part of the Education Amendments of 1972), which requires schools to:

> Respond promptly and effectively. If a school knows or reasonably should know about sexual harassment or sexual violence that creates a hostile environment, the school must take immediate action to eliminate the sexual harassment or sexual violence, prevent its recurrence, and address its effects (Know Your Rights: Title IX Prohibits Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Where You Go to School, 2011, para. 2).

In Minnesota, when a student who was under the influence of drugs or alcohol and underage when an assault occurred chooses to report, they are granted amnesty from the state and cannot be charged for their consumption. The Minnesota Sexual Harassment and Violence policy (2017) states "that a witness or victim of an incident of sexual assault who reports the incident in good faith shall not be sanctioned by the institution for admitting in the report to a violation of the institution's student conduct policy on the personal use of drugs or alcohol" (135A.15 USC Subd. 3, 2017). It is the responsibility of each institution to educate students on this policy.

MSU-M Resources

Minnesota State University, Mankato (MSU-M) has multiple organizations that provide education and support to students in the event of a sexual assault. One such organization, the Violence Awareness and Response Program (VARP), is designed specifically to address sexual

assault and related issues. VARP is part of the Women's Center and both provide services to all

students, regardless of gender (Mission, 2018). MSU-M has information on its website about

sexual assault policies, reporting procedures, rights, rape myths, and resources (mnsu.edu, 2018).

MSU-M has other resources such as an LGBT Center and a Counseling Center that support

students in the event of a sexual assault (Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2018).

Methodology

Design

This research study followed a quantitative, explanatory approach in which information

from the above literature review was used to develop a cross-sectional survey to examine the

perceptions of students at MSU-M regarding sexual assault reporting. The survey included six

socio-demographic questions and six questions about sexual assault. The questions about sexual

assault were framed around themes in the above literature review. Questions targeted the

participants' adherence to rape myths, tested their knowledge of reporting rights, measured how

confident they are in their knowledge of sexual assault policies and resources, and asked from

where they learned the most information about such policies and resources.

Sample

The online, anonymous survey was distributed to students from two different Social

Work classes: SOWK 212 Introduction to Social Work (generally sophomore or early junior

students considering a major in Social Work who may have had one prior Social Work class) and

SOWK 450/455 Social Work Practicum (students about to graduate from the undergraduate

Social Work program). These two classes were chosen in order to analyze the differences in

perceptions of entering Social Work students and graduating students. The survey was sent to the

individuals over email to link them to a Qualtrics survey. The email that the participants received was forwarded to them by their professors.

Due to the subject matter of the survey, a trigger warning was attached as the first question. This trigger warning explained that due to the type of content, the survey could trigger an emotional or physical response from participants with prior experience on the subject matter. Several campus and community resources were listed should students require additional support.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the Qualtrics survey was analyzed in SPSS using descriptive statistics.

Results

Socio-Demographic

The survey was sent to over one hundred individuals: sixty-seven students enrolled in SOWK 212 and thirty-five enrolled in SOWK 450 (N=102). There were eleven (N=11) responses to the survey. Five participants were in SOWK 450 and four were in SOWK 212. Two participants did not select a course. All but one respondent selected "Social Work" as their major. Ten respondents identified as females, while the remaining individual preferred not to answer. Eight respondents identified as heterosexual or straight, three identified as bisexual, and one identified as lesbian. Nine respondents were white, one was Hispanic or Latino, and one selected both prior ethnicities. Four respondents were 18-20 years old, five were 21-23 years old, one respondent was 27 years or older, and one preferred not to answer.

Sexual Assault Knowledge and Perceptions

Reporting. When asked who they are likely to report a sexual assault to under various circumstances that represented common rape myths- in which the rape was not a 'true' rape (you were under the influence of alcohol, you were under the influence of drugs that were either illegal or not prescribed to you, you were friends with the perpetrator, you never said 'no' but did not say 'yes,' the assault was not physically violent, the perpetrator identifies as the same gender as you, the perpetrator was your significant other, and the perpetrator was a family member), four respondents indicated they would not report a sexual assault at all if the perpetrator was their significant other. This number is higher than any other listed circumstance that people chose not to report. On the opposite end of the spectrum, respondents were most likely to report a sexual assault to their friends than to any other entity listed for all the listed circumstances except if the perpetrator was a family member. In that situation, seven respondents were most likely to report the incident to law enforcement than any other entity.
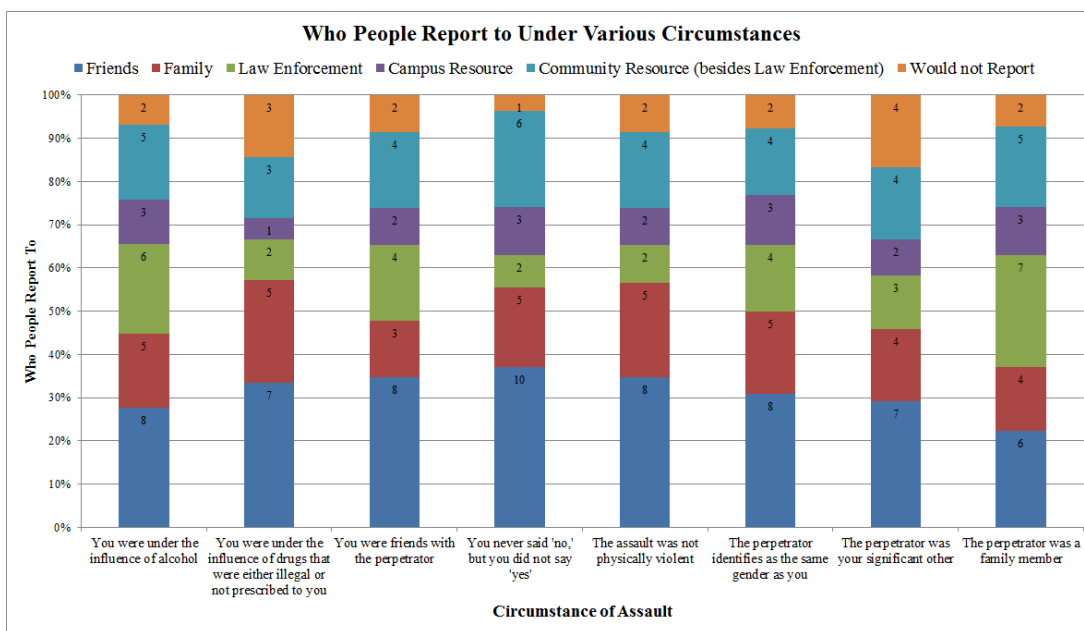

Figure 1. Who people report sexual assault to under various circumstances.

When asked how likely they were to report a sexual assault (on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being "extremely likely) under various circumstances (without regard to whom they would report to), respondents averaged 3.46 for how likely they were to report a sexual assault that was not physically violent. This shows that of the listed circumstances (the same for the question asking to whom respondents would report to), an assault that was not physically violent was the least significant barrier to reporting. Conversely, being under the influence of drugs that were either illegal or not prescribed to the respondent presented the largest barrier to reporting a sexual assault as respondents averaged only 2.22 for how likely they would be to report that kind of sexual assault.
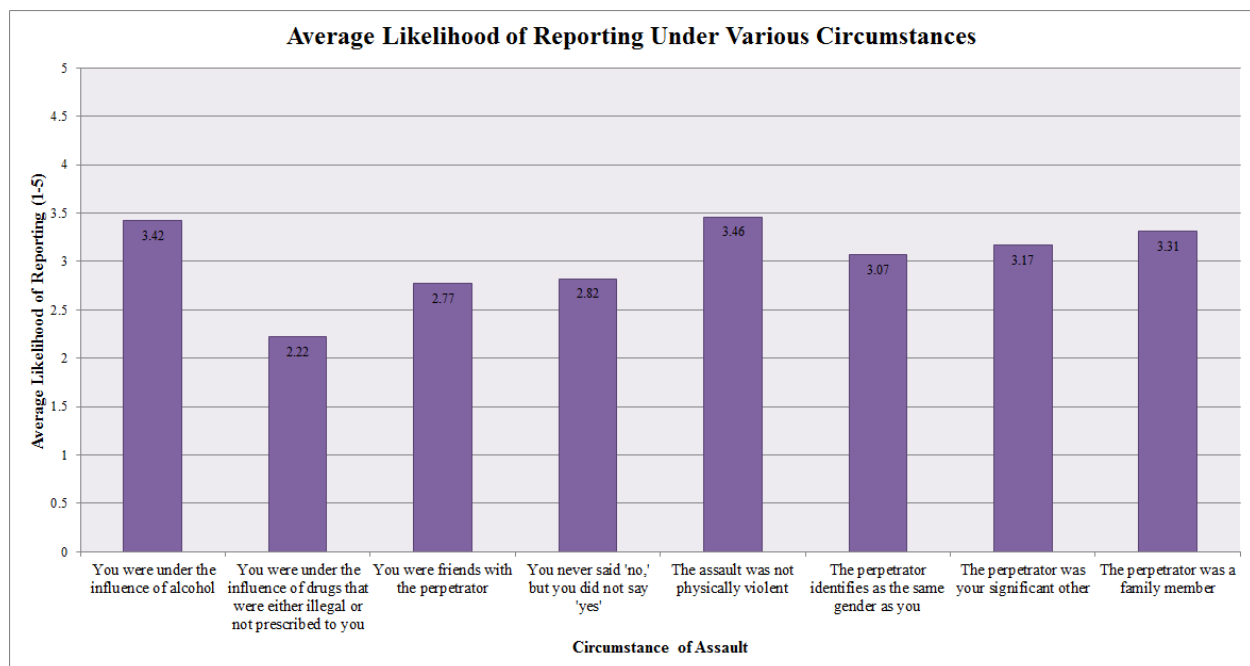

Figure 2. The likelihood of reporting a sexual assault under various circumstances.

University response and justice. Respondents averaged 3.03 (somewhat agree) on a scale from 1-5 (5 being "extremely likely") for how much they agree that the university would respond in a positive manner if they chose to report a sexual assault. When asked how much they

agree that reporting a sexual assault would bring them justice if they were a victim of an assault, respondents averaged only 1.60 on the same scale. This information suggests that the MSU-M campus and larger community has not provided students with a strong sense of confidence that reporting a sexual assault would help their situation.

Knowledge. Among participants, volunteer experiences contributed the least amount of knowledge (averaged 1.36 on a scale from 1-5, with 5 being "extremely") of sexual assault policies and/or resources since starting college, while campus resources (averaged 2.75) contributed the largest growth in knowledge. Three participants selected "other" as the most significant source of their knowledge, with two people listing "media," and one listing "CADA"-though this can be considered a community resource.

When asked how well-informed they think they are about sexual assault policies and/or resources on a scale from 1-5 (with 5 being "extremely"), respondents from the SOWK 212 class averaged 1.93, whereas respondents from the SOWK 450 class averaged 2.74. The average of all respondents to the survey was 2.12.
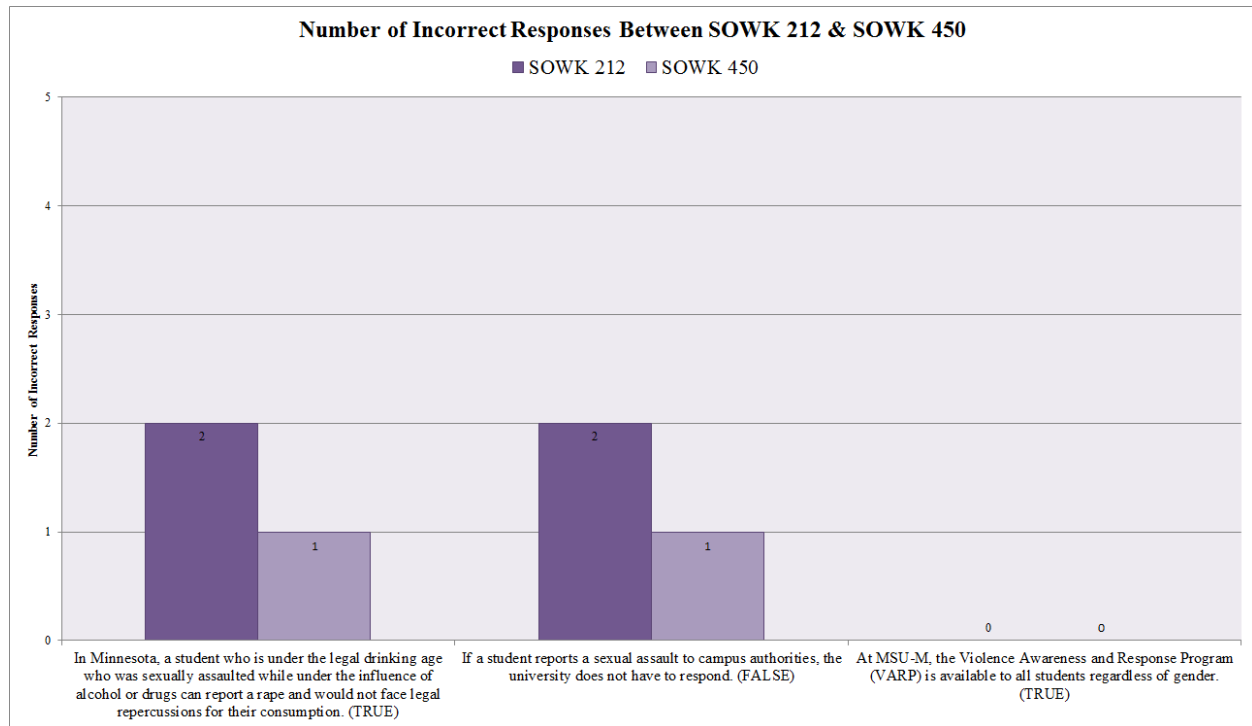
Figure 3. The number of incorrect responses to knowledge-based questions from respondents in either SOWK 212 (N=4) or SOWK 450 (N=5).

To obtain information about respondents' knowledge of sexual assault policies and/or resources, a series of three true/false questions were asked. Respondents from SOWK 450 had more correct answers than respondents from SOWK 212 (two people from SOWK 212 each answered incorrectly to two questions, whereas only one person from SOWK 450 answered incorrectly to two questions) on these knowledge-based questions, suggesting that students do learn more about sexual assault policies and/or resources during their time in the undergraduate Social Work program.

Limitations

Due to the low response rate (N=11), the data is not generalizable. There were 67 students enrolled in SOWK 212 and 35 enrolled in SOWK 455 (=102), showing that the survey response rate was just under 11% (N=11) for the classes combined.

There may be a few factors related to low response rate. One such factor could be the topic of the survey. In order to protect participants from an unwanted emotional response, a trigger warning was placed at the front of the survey. This may have deterred students from taking the survey.

The research was also focused on a small, specific group of people: undergraduate Social Work students at a medium-sized university in a Midwestern state. Therefore, the results cannot reliably predict similar results for other disciplines or educational institutions.

Another limitation of this research is the assumption that students in SOWK 450 had higher levels of knowledge on reporting rights due to educational and community opportunities. As this was not a longitudinal study, it could be that these students had a higher level of knowledge on this topic when they were in the SOWK 212 class than the students currently in that class.

Due to time constraints, the survey was only open to participants for twelve days. A reminder was sent to students two days before the survey closed. Participants were also not able to be offered extra credit in their courses or any other sort of positive reinforcement due to the level of IRB approval.

Recommendations

The results indicate that many of the students surveyed do not feel comfortable reporting a sexual assault to most sources, such as law enforcement and campus resources. Students also

do not feel that the university to would respond positively on their behalf if they chose to report the incident. This information suggests that there is a need to increase students' level of comfort with reporting to various institutions. This can be done by further educating local law enforcement officers, campus community advisors (CAs), and other agencies or organizations on how to properly respond to a sexual assault report that makes sure the victims feel their experience is believed and their dignity and worth is valued.

The results also suggest that the students surveyed may have learned more about sexual assault reporting rights during their time in the undergraduate Social Work program. However, it cannot be assumed that the change in knowledge was due to the program as this knowledge growth could have taken place in a variety of methods.

Students listed multiple sources, such as campus resources, friends/family, and academic classes as the most significant sources of their knowledge on sexual assault reporting policies and/or resources. This suggests that community resources are not providing a significant amount of knowledge about sexual assault reporting policies for Social Work students. While such agencies are a valuable asset to providing support for victims, it is recommended that advocacy efforts be increased to expand students' knowledge about the agencies and organizations that can provide support in the event of a sexual assault as well as what rights and protections victims have when reporting. It is also recommended that professors take more opportunities to discuss reporting rights with their students so as to continue to dispel rape myths and promote knowledge of reporting policies and resources.

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