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Bystander Responses to Women's Sexual or Physical Assault: Moderating Effects of Personal Victimization History

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ABSTRACT

Bystanders are more likely to respond to clearly dangerous situations. Based on the concept of altruism born of suffering, those who have experienced victimization also respond and view situations differently. The first hypothesis was that bystanders would have an increased intent to intervene in a physical assault over a sexual assault. The second hypothesis was that bystanders with past victimization would report higher intent to intervene regardless the type of assault. Undergraduate women of a northeastern U.S. college (N=240) were assigned to read either a sexual assault or physical assault hypothetical situation and then self-reported their responses to the situation and past experiences of victimization. Results showed support for both hypotheses about intent to intervene. Overall, women were more likely to intervene in response to physical assault over a sexual assault. However, for women of past victimization, intent to intervene was higher in the sexual assault condition. Findings also supported the concept that bystanders view physical violence as more dangerous than sexual assault, and they provided evidence for altruism born of suffering.

Violence against women encompasses a range of intrusive and harmful behaviors including catcalling, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and physical assault (Vera-Gray, 2017). In general, the effects of sexual assault victimization tend to be seen as less severe than the effects of physical assault. Compared to physical assault,

sexual assault may seem less dangerous or harmful, and more ambiguous because observers often focus on whether the target “invited” or “wanted” it. Because bystanders are less likely to respond to situations that do not clearly involve physical danger, they may be less likely to intervene to help a target of sexual rather than physical assault (Chabot, Tracy, Manning, & Poisson, 2009; Fischer, Greitemeyer, Pollozek, & Frey, 2006).

Despite this general trend, there may be individual differences in responses to assault based on one’s own personal history of victimization. Some research done on college students suggests that bystanders with a personal history of intimate physical or sexual victimization may be more likely to intervene as bystanders (Woods, Shorey, Strauss, Cornelius, & Rowland, 2016). In studies of altruism born of suffering (ABS), people who have faced personal hardships showed greater compassion and willingness to help others who also experience hardship (Vollhardt, 2009). Lim and DeSteno (2016) found that level of past suffering from a variety of adverse events led to empathic concern, compassion, and prosocial behavior in the form of charitable donations (Study 1) as well as time spent helping another (Study 2). In addition to promoting concern for others, hardship may increase danger perceived by bystanders. Blum, Silver, and Poulin (2014) found that past experiences of violence based on human intent were associated with elevated perceived risk for a variety of hazards. Overall, personal experiences of interpersonal violence may affect beliefs about the world that foster prosocial bystander intervention.

HYPOTHESES

We hypothesize that bystanders will report greater intent to intervene to help a victim of apparent physical assault than sexual assault (Hypothesis 1a). We also believe that respondents will perceive physical assault as more severe than sexual assault (Hypothesis 1b).

Bystanders with personal histories of either physical or sexual assault victimization will report greater intent to intervene (Hypothesis 2a), and they will perceive the assault as more severe (Hypothesis 2b), regardless of the type of victimization observed.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate women ($N = 240$, mean age 18.7, 87% white) were randomly assigned to read a hypothetical incident involving either physical or sexual assault. Afterward, they completed self-report measures of their responses to the incident and about their own past experiences of victimization.

Manipulation

Sexual Assault Situation. “It is a Saturday afternoon. You’re at the mall waiting for a friend. You sit at a table in the nearly empty food court when you notice a young couple about your age (Steve and Sarah) arguing nearby. You can’t see or hear everything, but

you see the guy (Steve) try to grab his girlfriend's (Sarah) butt and call her 'a whore.' You see Sarah brush his hand away and turn around, as if to leave. In response, Steve continues to grab at Sarah's butt and then starts to kiss Sarah's neck. Sarah winces, notices you, and the two of you make eye contact."

Physical Assault Situation: "It is a Saturday afternoon. You're at the mall waiting for a friend. You sit at a table in the nearly empty food court when you notice a young couple about your age (Steve and Sarah) arguing nearby. You can't see or hear everything, but you hear the guy (Steve) yell and call the girl (Sarah) 'a whore.' You see Sarah pick up her tray and turn around, as if about to leave. In response, Steve grabs her arm to pull her back and then raises his hand as if he's about to slap Sarah. Sarah winces, notices you, and the two of you make eye contact."

Measures

Intent to intervene was assessed with three items from Katz and Nguyen (2016): *Try to talk to the girl*, *Ask the girl if she is okay*, and *Offer to walk the girl away from the situation*. Responses range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and were averaged so higher scores reflect greater direct intervention ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Perceived severity was assessed with three items from Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, and Reicher regarding how *serious*, *violent*, and *dangerous* the situation was for the target of the assault (2002). Responses range from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) and were averaged; higher scores reflect greater perceived severity ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Personal victimization by an intimate partner was assessed with the twelve-item physical assault subscale from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) and the seven-item Sexual Experiences Scale (Koss et al. 2007). Any endorsement of either type of assault during one's lifetime was coded as reflecting past personal victimization.

RESULTS

The study hypotheses were tested with 2 (type of assault; sexual or physical) x 2 (personal victimization; present or absent) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with intent to intervene and perceived severity as the DVs. This research partially supported Hypothesis 1a. There was a significant main effect of type of assault on intent to intervene, $F(1, 235) = 5.42, p < 0.05$. Intent to intervene was greater for those assigned to the physical assault situation ($M = 5.67, SD = 1.51$) than those assigned to the sexual assault situation ($M = 5.31, SD = 1.67$). There was also a trend for an interaction effect, $F(1, 235) = 3.70, p = 0.05$. As shown in Figure 1, and consistent with Hypothesis 1b, post hoc comparisons with a Bonferroni correction showed that women in the sexual assault situation with no personal history of victimization reported significantly less intent to intervene than those with a history of victimization.

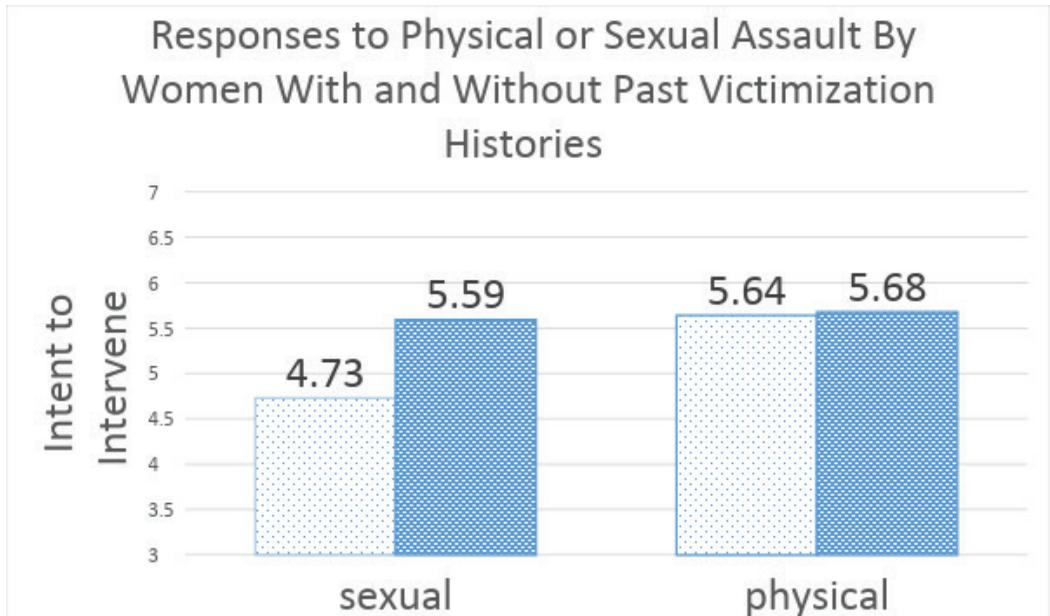


Figure 1 shows the mean intent to intervene of participants in the physical condition alongside with the mean of participants who had previously experienced victimization. The figures for the sexual condition also display the mean of participants who had and had not experienced victimization.

Hypothesis 2a was also supported. There was a significant main effect of type of assault on perceived severity, $F(1, 235) = 24.78, p < 0.001$. The physical assault condition was perceived as more severe ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.12$) than the sexual assault situation ($M = 4.36, SD = 1.02$). Unexpectedly, there was no type of assault by personal victimization interaction, $F < 1, ns$. Because perceived severity of sexual assault did not differ as a function of women's own victimization (see Figure 2), this study did not support Hypothesis 2b.

Discussion

Overall, women bystanders were more likely to intervene in a physical assault than sexual assault situations. In addition, bystanders perceived physical assault situations as more dangerous and severe than sexual assault situations. These findings add to the existing literature suggesting that intervention is more likely to occur in less ambiguous or more dangerous situations (Fischer et al., 2011). Similarly, in vignettes depicting the conflict between a woman and man who are presumably dating, bystanders were more likely to respond to physical aggression than they were to verbal aggression (Chabot et al., 2009). The current findings extend this pattern of response to a different type of partner conflict, showing that bystanders are more likely to respond to physical assault than sexual assault.

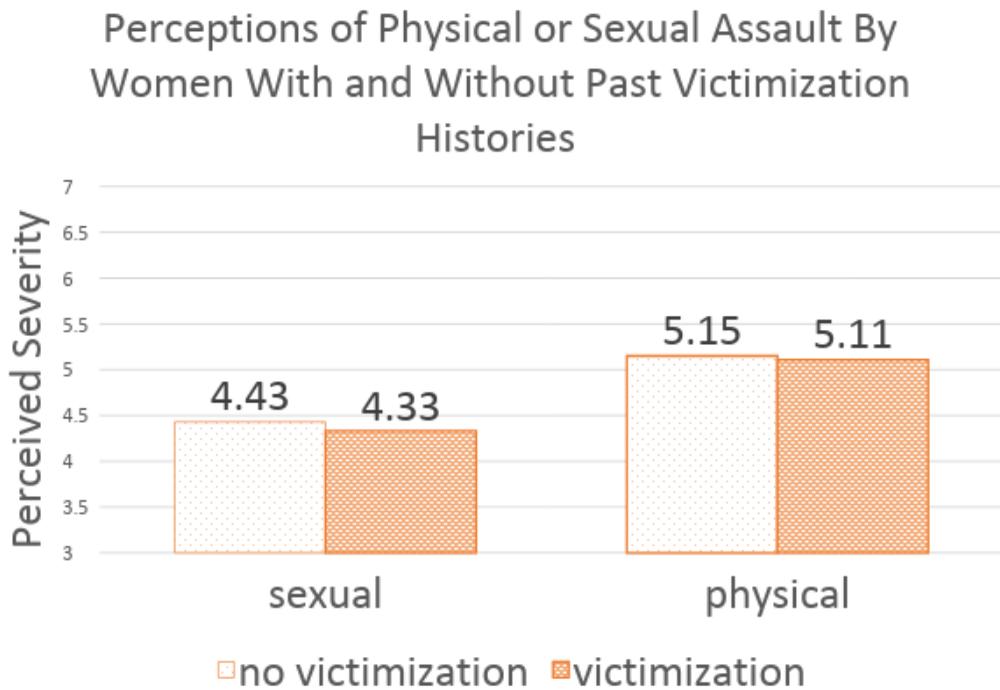


Figure 2 displays the mean of perceived severity of the scenario in which participants were asked to respond to in either the sexual or physical condition. Shaded regions distinguish levels of perceived severity amongst participants who had previously experienced victimization.

Mixed support was found for hypotheses based on the ABS literature. Among women assigned to the sexual assault condition, women with a personal victimization history were more likely to intervene than those without a victimization history. This result matches with past studies showing that people who have faced hardship show a greater willingness to help others who also experience hardship (Vollhardt, 2009). It also extends past studies showing that women with past histories of victimization more frequently engage in bystander behavior (Woods et al., 2016). However, in the sexual assault condition, personal victimization history was not related to perceiving the situation as more severe. This was contrary to expectations based on past research showing that a personal history of violence increases perceptions of risk (Blum et al., 2014). It is possible that views about risk for oneself are different from views of risk for others. Based on Lim and DeSteno (2016), women with personal victimization histories may feel more empathy towards targets of any type of partner assault, and this may explain the greater willingness to intervene in the sexual assault condition. Future research should examine other bystander attributes that predict intent to intervene and help victims of different types of assault.

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