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

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INTRODUCTION CONT.

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 55.2% male and 44.8% female and the mean participant age was 28.7 years (SD=9.4).

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, seeking psychotherapy or medical attention, filing a police report). Victim and perpetrator labeling were manipulated between subjects in a 2x2 fully-crossed design, involving the use of either reductive or non-reductive descriptions in questions referring to victims or perpetrators in the structured interview.

DISCUSSION

Our results, in light of the theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991) and Liang et al's (2005) 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 offender in messages about sexual abuse existing in the individual's 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 preexisting attitudes about PAA 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 labeling by judicial system (Weiss, 2011), as well as perceptions of a general lack of victim sensitivity when seeking police assistance after traumatic events (Alaggia, Lambert, & Regehr, 2009).

These results imply that, 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.

Additional Information

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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, Ullman, & Sarah, 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 sexual abuse. For instance, the terminology or other verbal framing used in describing sexual assault can influence whether the incident is reported (Abbey, Parkhill, & Koss, 2005; Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002). Labeling theory (Scheff, 1966) posits that using reductive labels in communications about individuals (e.g., "victim" or "offender") can affect perceptions of those labeled, though there is disagreement about whether this labeling has universally negative consequences (Colarossi, 2005; Link, Struening, Cullen, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989; Holguin & Hansen, 2003) or may have positive effects (McMullin, 2007; Wright, Jorm, & Mackinnon, 2012).

Little research has addressed the potential effects of communication—especially labeling—on perceptions of the helpfulness of PAAs, though labeling of psychological disorders is known to influence observers' judgments about need for (continued on right)

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 ($X^2_{1df}=0.42$, $p>.025$) but, in the absence of victim labeling, perpetrator labeling reduced PH ($X^2_{1df}=12.77$, $p<.025$). With Bonferroni adjustment ($\alpha=.02$), no other effects were significant in single-PAA analyses except in PH of filing a police report, which replicated the interaction seen in the omnibus analysis (P. Labeling @ V. Labeling Yes: $X^2_{1df}<0.01$, $p>.025$; P. Labeling @ V. Labeling No: $X^2_{1df}=12.21$, $p<.025$).
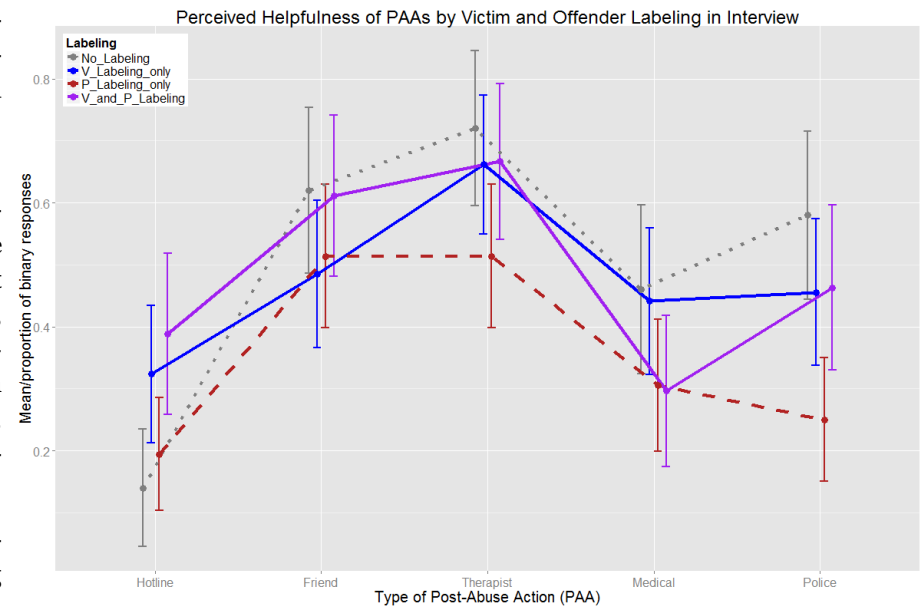

Figure 1. Effects of labeling combinations in interview text on perceived helpfulness of PAAs (note: binary response).
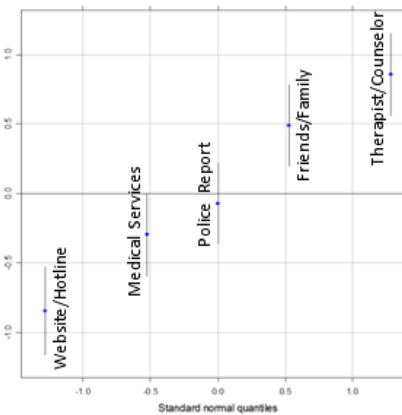

Figure 2. Caterpillar plot of random effects of PAA types (95% confidence intervals).
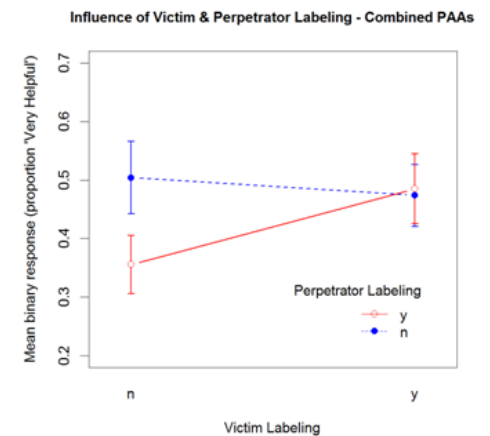

Figure 3. Interaction of victim and perpetrator labeling on perceived helpfulness of combined PAAs.