

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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I Didn't Want to be that Girl: The Social Risks of Labeling, Telling, and Reporting Sexual Assault

BOTTOM LINE

Understanding the process of disclosing sexual abuse involves complex personal decisions including labeling the experience, telling someone and reporting to an official, may open unexplored opportunities to address the needs of those harmed as well as the risks of those who have caused the harm.

RESEARCH

For this study, Shamus Kahn, Jennifer Hirsch, Alexander Wamboldt, and Claude Mellins examined the experiences of undergraduate students at Columbia University and Barnard College. Examining sexual health and sexual violence among these students, the authors based their work on an ethnographic component of a larger mixed-methods study called the “Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation” (SHIFT).

The authors broke down their investigation into three activities. These included the acts of labeling, telling, and reporting. They suggest that each of these acts are important and mean something very different for students who have been harmed than to authorities or policymakers. *Labeling* is defined as categorizing the experience as a sexual assault. *Telling* is the act of communicating the experience to a friend, faculty, staff, or family. *Reporting* is the experience of informing an official who will trigger an official act (such as an investigation). Rather than take a stance on what students should do, the authors explore what they actually do and the social forces that shape their behavior, understanding, and experience.

To students who have experienced sexual assault, the acts of labeling, telling, and reporting can formalize what may have been an ambiguous experience and make the experience concrete and “real.” For some, choosing to label, tell, and/or report can be an empowering process and lead to resources that address their safety and the trauma. However, the authors point out that most situations of sexual

misconduct are not reported. They found that many whose experiences meet the definition of sexual assault do not label it in this way. Further, the authors found this formalizing process comes with significant social risks and costs for the student who was harmed. They show that not labeling the behavior can, for some students, be socially productive and offer a greater range of possibilities for future identities, relationships, and cultural projects. For example, by not labeling, talking about, or reporting the behavior, students can:

1. retain their current self-identity
2. maintain their current social relationships and group affiliations
3. avoid derailing their current or future goals

The authors also explored the gendered social risks in how they label what they do and what has been done to them. They found that heterosexual women are far more likely to use the label of sexual assault than students who identified as LGBTQ. Both were much more likely than heterosexual men to use the term sexual assault.

Overwhelmingly, the students' post assault strategies combined a desire to secure the support they needed and get back to their "normal self" and campus life. They also wanted to minimize the affective, identity, time, and social collateral damage of the experience. Not reporting was one of the most effective strategies for balancing these sometimes-competing values.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

When the majority of students who experience sexual assault are harmed by someone they know, then labeling, telling, and reporting also labels the friend or acquaintance as a "perpetrator". Labeling, telling, and reporting have dramatic consequences for the person reporting the assault, but also for the accused, and their shared social group – possibly implying some disfunction within that social circle. Not putting labels on the experience or their friend allows for at least some of the social relationships to continue without disturbance. This may align with research by Hanson and Bussière (1998) showing that denial that one has abused is not strongly linked to recidivism; their findings align with this current study and suggest that someone who has caused harm may choose to address the impact of the experience without labeling it as sexual assault or sexual abuse.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Acknowledging these social risks and costs for students who experience sexual assault are potentially in conflict with policies that encourage reporting assaults to ensure accountability for the student causing the harm and the safety of the community. In fact, the category of victim/survivor itself may be problematic for some of the individuals who experience it. This may explain, at least in part, why some people avoid the label. If this is true, this demands that we consider other ways to hold a student accountable and address behavior to ensure a safer campus. As the campus community explores the idea of equitable services for students who file a complaint and students who have a complaint filed against them, this study emphasizes the need to expand the opportunities to address the behaviors in a variety of ways. One additional option for the institutions is to provide access to services, safety planning and other opportunities to either students accused of sexual misconduct and to students who choose to come forward for help and services without a formal complaint or label on the experience.

In conclusion, this study may help professionals understand the deeply nuanced responses to sexual misconduct by all of the students involved. This further points to the need for society to understand the many aspects of sexual misconduct in order to more effectively prevent, assess, and provide treatment for it.

CITATION:

Khan, S., Hirsch, J.S., Wamboldt, A., & Mellins, C. (2018). I didn't want to be that girl: The social risks of labeling, telling and reporting sexual assault. *Sociological Science* 5: 432-460.

ABSTRACT:

This article deploys ethnographic data to explain why some students do not label experiences as sexual assault or report those experiences. Using ideas of social risks and productive ambiguities, it argues that not labeling or reporting assault can help students (1) sustain their current identities and allow for several future ones, (2) retain their social relationships and group affiliations while maintaining the possibility of developing a wider range of future ones, or (3) avoid derailing their current or future goals within the higher educational setting, or what we call "college projects." Conceptually, this work advances two areas of sociological research. First, it expands the framework of social risks, or culturally specific rationales for seemingly illogical behavior, by highlighting the interpersonal and institutional dimensions of such risks. Second, it urges researchers to be more attentive to contexts in which categorical ambiguity or denial is socially productive and to take categorical avoidance seriously as a subject of inquiry. Substantively, this work advances knowledge of why underreporting of campus sexual assault occurs, with implications for institutional policies to support students who have experienced unwanted nonconsensual sex regardless of how those students may label what happened.

Reference

Hanson, R. K., & Bussière, M. T. (1998). Predicting relapse: A meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 348-362.