The Effects of Social Influence on Perceptual and Affective Reactions to Scenes of Sexual Violence

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In 2 experiments, we examined the effect of social influence (discussion and modeling) on men's and women's perceptual and affective reactions to a sexually violent film scene depicting gang rape. In Experiment 1, women who discussed the film rated the perpetrators as more responsible compared to participants in all other conditions. Men who did not discuss the film reported higher levels of positive affect compared to participants in all other conditions. In Experiment 2, men and women were affected by the social influence manipulation similarly. As predicted, participants differed in their attributions of responsibility depending on a confederate's response to the film scene. Participants who heard a confederate say that the men in the film were responsible for the rape rated these men as relatively more responsible than did participants in a neutral confederate condition or in a condition in which the confederate said that the woman in the film was responsible for the rape.

Experimental research on pornography for 25 years primarily has emphasized the reactions of individual men to portrayals of sexually explicit material. Outside the laboratory, however, sexual violence is often depicted in R-rated movies that are viewed in groups and seen by audiences of both men and women (Pals, 1986). The social environment could conceivably affect viewers' perceptual and affective reactions to the scenes of sexual violence (Pfeffer, 1985). In the two experiments reported here, we explore whether social influence affects people's reactions to a scene of sexual violence. In the first experiment, we examine the role of discussion; and in the second, we examine social modeling as an influence in reactions to a scene of sexual violence. Characterizing the conditions under which changes in perceptual and affective reactions to sexual violence are likely

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to occur is an important theoretical as well as practical issue, as these variables are often viewed as mediators of aggression and might influence the support for sexual-violence survivors provided by friends, clinicians, and, ultimately, the legal system.

An Overview of Research on Erotic and Violent Erotic Material

An important distinction made in research on pornography is between erotic and violent erotic (or sexually violent) materials. Although both kinds of material contain sexually explicit scenes, erotica depicts consenting individuals, while violent erotic material depicts overt or covert coercion and unequal power among individuals (Steinem, 1993). There is not a consistent relationship between non-experimental exposure to erotic or violent erotic material and sexual aggression (Bauserman, 1996). Furthermore, in laboratory experiments, erotica has little direct or indirect effect on sexual aggression (Davis & Bauserman, 1993; Fisher & Barak, 1991; Linz, 1989). Generally, one finds an increase in levels of sexual arousal and positive affect in laboratory experiments on erotica, but these changes are fairly short-term and normative.

In contrast, several harmful effects of violent erotic material have been demonstrated in experimental settings (Allen, D’Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995; Allen, Emmer, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995; Davis & Bauserman, 1993; Donnerstein & Linz, 1998; Fisher & Barak, 1991). Exposure to violent erotic material produces physiological, perceptual, emotional, and behavioral changes among men, especially when the female victim shows some sign of pleasure. For example, men report increased sexual arousal (Malamuth & Check, 1981; Malamuth, Haber, & Fesback, 1980; Malamuth, Heim, & Fesback, 1980), increased acceptances of rape myths (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1984, 1988; Malamuth & Check, 1981, 1985), and altered perceptions of the rape victim, such that she is viewed as experiencing less pain and injury, and the rape is perceived as less serious relative to individuals who have been exposed to erotic or neutral scenes (Intons-Peterson, Roskos-Ewoldsen, Thomas, Shirley, & Blut, 1989; Linz et al., 1988; Malamuth & Check, 1980, 1985; Malamuth et al., 1980). Men also administer more shock to female confederates (usually following provocation by a confederate or in the presence of a disinhibitory cue) after exposure to violent pornography (Donnerstein, 1980, 1984; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981). Participants show lower heart rates and less self-reported anxiety and negative affect following repeated exposure to violent erotic material, and indicate feeling less sympathy and less empathy for victims (Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989; Linz et al., 1984, 1988).

In their review of the literature, Davis and Bauserman (1993) concluded that most researchers have failed to find a consistent gender-of-viewer main effect for arousal reactions in response to erotic and violent erotic material. These mixed findings might be a result of the different stimuli (erotic vs. violent erotic) presented to participants. For example, rape scenes that produce arousal in male viewers have not produced similar arousal in female viewers (Malamuth & Check, 1980, 1983), whereas portrayals of normative sexual activity among consenting adults have (Norris, 1989). Gender differences in perceptual responses indicate that after viewing violent erotic material, men report increased acceptance of rape myths and women do not (Check & Malamuth, 1983).

Sexual Violence and Social Influence

One of the most pervasive themes in social psychology is the power of social influence on individuals’ behavior (Asch, 1955, 1956; Crutchfield, 1955; Milgram, 1977; Myers & Bishop, 1971; Sherif, 1935). From a social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), people are adaptive organisms who adjust or anchor their behaviors and beliefs to their social context and to their own social learning history. The impact of social influence on responses to erotic and violent erotic material has been examined with both physiological and self-report measures in which participants are usually given bogus peer feedback (Coyne & Cross, 1988; Norris, 1989, 1991; Saunders & Naus, 1993). Coyne and Cross exposed men to nude erotic slides and told them that their peers experienced either high or low levels of arousal to the images. They found that the men experienced erections associated with the bogus peer arousal feedback. Men exposed to slides of explicit intercourse, however, were not consistently influenced by the manipulation; participants had robust erections regardless of high or low peer arousal feedback. In addition, men’s subjective ratings of disgust were not consistently influenced by peer response. Specifically, there was a rise in disgust ratings in response to erotic slides across both bogus feedback conditions as compared with controls. For intercourse, disgust ratings were lower for low arousal feedback men as compared to the control and high arousal feedback conditions. Thus, Coyne and Cross provide a mixed pattern of findings for whether social influence affects men’s physiological and self-report responses to nonviolent sexual material.

Norris (1989) conducted a similar experiment in which men and women were given a written bogus research report indicating whether a male or female peer group found a specific sexually explicit story arousing. Self-reported general arousal, but not positive or negative affect, was influenced by normative information about nonviolent sexually explicit material. Specifically, she found that participants in the high-arousal group reported a higher level of genital and nongenital sexual arousal than did participants in the low-arousal group. In addition, males reported significantly more arousal than did females.

Norris (1991) extended the previous findings to sexually violent material by manipulating both story outcome (woman expressing pleasure vs. no pleasure)
and the social influence message (high vs. low arousal). She found that participants in the high arousal peer-feedback group reported more positive affect and significantly more arousal than did those in the low arousal peer-feedback group. In addition, story outcome had a significant impact on people's perceptions of the situation. Those reading a rape-myth outcome perceived less force, greater acceptability, greater enjoyment, and more desire to have sex by the female as compared with those reading the no-pleasure outcome.

Saunders and Naus (1993) asked men to view sexually explicit film segments alone, with another man, or with a woman. In this experiment, audience presence did not influence perceptual or affective reactions to the erotic material. These findings are difficult to interpret, however, because Saunders and Naus did not record whether participants conversed before, during, or after exposure to the film clip.

Overview of Present Experiments

Previous research provides encouraging evidence that social influence might be an important determinant of people's reactions to erotic and violent erotic material. Of the four experiments, three were conducted using erotic materials without violence, with only Norris (1991) extending the findings to sexually violent material. Moreover, these experiments produced mixed findings. The goal of the present investigation, therefore, is to examine further the role of social influence in people's responses to a scene of sexual violence. Most of the research on sexual violence has employed an individual, rather than a group paradigm. The individual paradigm exposes men to sexually violent material with virtually no interpersonal interaction among participants. In the group paradigm, interaction with others is crucial. Although both the individual and group paradigms are ecologically valid, each offers a unique contribution to research on sexual violence. In the present investigation, we utilized group interaction to investigate social influence. Same-gender groups of men and women were exposed in two experiments to a sexually violent film scene from an R-rated movie followed by a social-influence manipulation.

In the first experiment, we manipulated whether there was a peer-group discussion following exposure to the film clip. Based on previous research involving exposure to a rape scene, we predict that men and women will differ in their reactions to the R-rated video scene. Female participants will express more empathy for the victim and rate the victim as experiencing more pain relative to male participants. We also expect that women will report more negative and less positive affect relative to men. Importantly, we expect that these gender differences will be larger for individuals participating in a peer-group discussion following film-clip exposure, as compared with people who have no opportunity to discuss their reactions. Because gender differences in interactions are magnified in same-gender groups (Carli, 1989; Hall, 1984; Maccoby, 1990; Piliavin & Martin, 1978), participants discussed the video with same-gender peers.

In the second experiment, we manipulated attributions of responsibility for the rape by adding a confederate to the same-gender peer-group discussion. The confederate expressed one of three responsibility attributions: (a) the men were responsible for the rape; (b) the woman was responsible; or (c) no one was explicitly responsible (neutral). We predict that the confederate will influence people's private ratings of responsibility.

Experiment I

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants. Undergraduate students (n = 225) were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in an experiment for General Psychology course credit. Of these, 188 (86 males, 102 females) students agreed to participate in the experiment. The sample population had a mean age of 19.4 years and was primarily single (98%, n = 184), White (81%, n = 152), Christian (74%, n = 139), and in the first year in college (85%, n = 160).

Lab Procedure. Participants were told at the beginning of the 35-min session that the experiment concerned people's reactions to violence in commercially released R-rated movies. They were told that the scene they were about to see might be offensive to some and that they could leave the experiment at any time without penalty. They were assured that their responses would be anonymous, identified only by a code number. All participants signed a standard consent form prior to participation that explained they would be seeing a scene of sexual violence and might be asked to discuss their reactions with other people in the session.

Participants watched the video, had a 5-min discussion or spent 5 min in silence not discussing the film with anyone. Participants then completed the measures without the presence of the same-gender experimenter, except to give instructions. Groups of 3 to 6 same-gender participants watched a 10-min scene of a gang rape taken from a commercially released R-rated movie. Following exposure, “discussion” participants had a 5-min discussion with their same-gender peers regarding their reactions. “No-discussion” participants were asked not to talk with anyone in their group, but to write down their reactions to the film for 5 min (see Appendix A for instructions). After 5 min, all participants privately rated their affective and perceptual reactions to the film scene. After completing the measures, participants were debriefed, thanked, and excused.

Stimulus Material. The videotape used in the experiment came from the movie The Accused. The scene showed a woman in the back room of a bar with
several men. The people were dancing, smoking marijuana, drinking alcohol, and engaging in some consensual sexual activity (i.e., kissing). The scene developed into forced sexual intercourse with the woman by a man. It then escalated into several men raping the woman on top of a pinball machine amid cheers, encouragement, and support from the other men in the room.

There are a number of reasons why we chose to use this particular film clip. First, the scene fits the definition of sexually violent material according to the United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986). Second, it appears to be representative of R-rated commercially released films containing sexual violence (Linz et al., 1989; Palys, 1986). Third, this particular rape depiction (and the debriefing that followed) challenges a number of popular rape myths involving factors such as previous consensual sexual contact, “provocative” attire, a woman in a bar alone, and the use of alcohol and other drugs. The film clip counters one of the most widely held misbeliefs about rape, that rape is perpetrated by a stranger hiding in a dark alleyway who surprises a woman walking alone in the middle of the night. The reality is that women are more likely to be raped by an acquaintance than by a stranger (Fairstein, 1993; White & Sorenson, 1992). Fourth, the scene was chosen because commercially released movies of this type are likely viewed in a social situation by consenting adults (e.g., with family, friends, or a dating partner).

Debriefing. A special debriefing was designed to address our concern that antisocial attitudes and negative affect generated by the film scene (and discussion) could persist in situations outside the laboratory (e.g., Sherif, 1980). A debriefing script that points out the violent nature of rape and attempts to dispel rape myths actually has a beneficial impact on participants’ attitudes (Check & Malamuth, 1984; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1984). For this reason, we debriefed participants following the suggestions of Aronson, Brewer, and Carlsmith (1985), using specific debriefing information for sexual-violence experiments (e.g., Malamuth & Check, 1984). The experimenter sensitively explored the feelings and experiences of the participants in a gradual manner (Aronson et al., 1985), thanked the men and women for participating, and aimed to educate the participants about the desensitizing nature of portrayals of sexual violence. Importantly, it attempted to address the specific rape myths portrayed in the film clip.

Measures

Manipulation check. Participants were asked to record how much they shared their true reactions to the film with other people in the room on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). Participants were also asked if they had seen the film clip on a previous occasion (Yes or No).

Perceptions. All participants completed a 16-item questionnaire concerning their perceptions of the male(s) and the female in the film clip. Ratings were made on 9-point Likert-type scales. A principal components analysis was conducted on the scale scores of the participants’ perceptual responses. There were four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 58.7% of the total variance. A four-factor solution was also consistent with the scree criterion (Cattell, 1966). The four factors and sample items are: (a) victim pain (4 items; Cronbach’s α = .80), “How injured was the woman?”; (b) empathy for perpetrator (5 items; α = .78), “As I watched the film, I could easily put myself in the man’s (men’s) shoes”; (c) empathy for victim (3 items; α = .74), “To what extent did you identify with the woman?”; and (d) perpetrator responsibility (3 items; α = .57), “How responsible were the men for what occurred?” The perpetrator responsibility factor was retained because of its theoretical importance, despite the somewhat lower internal consistency of the scale based on it.

Affect. There were two measures of affect: (a) the Feeling Scale (Byrne, Fisher, Lamberth, & Mitchell, 1974), and (b) two specific questions regarding how much the participant enjoyed or was disgusted by the film. For all affective items, using a 9-point Likert-type scale, participants indicated the degree to which the adjectives described their current feelings (1 = not at all how I feel to 9 = very much how I feel). A principal components analysis on the items for both affect measures combined revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for 56.6% of the total variance. A two-factor solution was also consistent with the scree criterion (Cattell, 1966). The negative affect items were afraid, disgust, nauseated, angry, depressed, and disgusted specifically by the film scene (α = .88). The positive affect items were excited, entertained, anxious, curious, and enjoyed the film (α = .66; but see Green, Goldman, & Salovey, 1993).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Participants were 188 people across 43 sessions, averaging 4 people per experimental session. There were no differences on the demographic variables (i.e., age, year in school, ethnicity, religion, marital status, and citizenship) across conditions (all ps > .10). Conditions did not differ in the number of people who had previously viewed the movie (n = 138). Consistent with the aim of the social-influence manipulation, people in the discussion group reported talking significantly more with members of their group (M = 5.96, SD = 2.35) relative to people in the no-discussion group (M = 1.62, SD = 1.58), F(1, 186) = 219.49, p < .001.

Primary Analyses

We conducted a 2 × 2 (Social Influence: Discussion/No Discussion × Gender) between-subjects MANOVA followed by univariate ANOVAs on each of the
factor scores. The MANOVA included the six scales created from the two principal components analyses: victim pain, empathy for perpetrator, empathy for victim, perpetrator responsibility, negative affect, and positive affect. The combined dependent variables were significantly different for men and women (Wilks's $\Lambda = .77$), $F(1, 184) = 8.74, p < .001$; for social influence (Wilks's $\Lambda = .93$), $F(1, 184) = 2.39, p < .05$; and for the Social Influence x Gender interaction (Wilks's $\Lambda = .92$), $F(1, 184) = 2.60, p < .05$.

Follow-up univariate analyses for the gender main effect are reported in Table 1. Female participants perceived the victim in the film as experiencing more pain, reported more empathy for the victim, and rated themselves as experiencing more negative affect relative to male participants. This pattern of gender differences was reversed for the empathy-for-perpetrator factor and for the positive affect factor. Men reported having more empathy for the perpetrator in the film relative to women, and also reported experiencing more positive affect following the film.

Follow-up univariate analyses for the social influence main effect are reported in Table 2. Men and women who discussed the film with their peers reported less empathy for the man in the film than did men and women who did not discuss the film with their peers. Participants who discussed the film rated the men as being more responsible for what occurred than did people who did not discuss the film. Participants who discussed the film also reported somewhat less positive affect relative to those who did not discuss the film.

These main effects were qualified by an interaction between gender and social influence. Follow-up univariate analyses for the gender and social-influence interaction were conducted; differences were found for perpetrator responsibility, $F(1, 184) = 4.73, p < .05$, and positive affect, $F(1, 184) = 5.83$, $p < .05$. These interactions are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, respectively. To understand these interactions, simple effects tests were conducted. Men who discussed the film with their peers did not differ significantly in their evaluations of responsibility compared to men who did not discuss the film, $F(1, 184) < 1$. Women who discussed the film, however, judged the men to be significantly more responsible for the rape compared to women who did not discuss the film, $F(1, 184) = 10.36, p < .005$. Women who discussed the film with their peers did not differ significantly in their subjective experience of positive affect compared to women who did not discuss the film, $F(1, 184) < 1$. Men who did not discuss the film, however, reported experiencing more subjective positive affect than men who discussed the film, $F(1, 184) = 8.34, p < .005$.

Figure 1. Perpetrator responsibility ratings by gender and social influence.

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Discussion

The results of Experiment 1 provide some support for the hypothesis that social influence affects judgments of sexual violence. Simply discussing the film...
produced different private judgments of it, which differed unexpectedly for men and women. Women who talked with other women about their reactions rated the men in the film as more responsible (and the woman in the film as less responsible) for the rape compared to people in all other conditions. Men who did not talk about their reactions with other men reported higher ratings of positive affect compared to participants in all other conditions.

In Experiment 1, participants engaged in a discussion, but we had no control over the content of the 5-min conversations. All we know is that when they were left alone to reflect on the video, participants reported different responses than did their socially interactive counterparts. To address this concern, a second experiment attempted to gain greater control of the social environment by manipulating a targeted portion of the peer-group discussion.

Experiment 2 focused on whether social influence could have an impact, specifically, on attributions of responsibility for rape. We attempted to manipulate social influence directly by adding a confederate into the peer-group discussions that expressed one of three responses to the film: (a) the men were responsible for the rape; (b) the woman was responsible; or (c) no one was solely responsible. Enlisting a confederate as part of the experiment procedure allowed for an experimental manipulation within the context of a realistic peer-group discussion. We expected that participants' private ratings of responsibility of the men and women in the film would parallel those expressed by the confederate.

Experiment 2

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants. Participants were 92 undergraduates (29 males, 63 females) attending an Ivy League college. Volunteers responded to posters displayed across campus advertising the experiment in exchange for $5. The sample population had a mean age of 19.0 years. Of the participants, 40% (n = 37) were White, 33% (n = 30) were Asian, 16% (n = 15) were Black, and 10% (n = 9) were Hispanic. Most reported being Christian (52%, n = 25), 27% (n = 48) reported no religion, and 9% (n = 8) reported Judaism.

Procedure. As in Experiment 1, participants viewed a scene from The Accused. The procedure used in Experiment 2 was similar to Experiment 1, with a few exceptions. Following film-clip exposure, all groups engaged in a 5-min discussion of the film. Unbeknownst to the participants, however, a same-gender confederate took part in the peer-group discussion. Confederates followed the same procedure as the participants in the experiment, except during the peer-group discussion when they expressed a specific opinion regarding the film. The confederate expressed one of three reactions to the peer group at the beginning of the discussion: (a) a perceptual and affective response consistent with the men being responsible for the rape; (b) a perceptual and affective response consistent with the woman being responsible for the rape; or (c) a response consistent with neither the men nor the woman being solely responsible. These scripted opinions are described in Appendix B. Following the discussion, participants privately completed the pencil-and-paper questionnaire, followed by a debriefing.

Measures

The perception items were the same as in Experiment 1. In Experiment 2, however, the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) was used to assess positive and negative affective reactions to the film scene. Participants indicated the degree to which the adjectives described their current feelings on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The positive affect items were attentive, interested, alert, excited, enthusiastic, inspired, proud, determined, strong, and active (α = .78). The negative affect items were distressed, upset, hostile, irritable, scared, afraid, ashamed, guilty, nervous, and jittery (α = .90).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The average group size for the same-gender peer sessions was 3 (not including the confederate). There were significant age differences among participants assigned to the three social influence groups, and consequently age was covaried in all analyses. There were no differences on the demographic variables (i.e., age, year in school, ethnicity, religion) across conditions (all ps > .10). Conditions did not differ in the number of people who had previously viewed the movie (n = 79).
Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women (n = 63)</th>
<th>Men (n = 29)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<td>Victim pain</td>
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<td>Perpetrator responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>26.02</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>6.25</td>
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</table>

Primary Analyses

A 3 × 2 (Social Influence × Gender) between-subjects MANCOVA was conducted for the six dependent variables: victim pain, empathy for perpetrator, empathy for victim, perpetrator responsibility, positive affect, and negative affect.\(^3\) The combined dependent variables were affected somewhat by social influence (Wilks’s $\Lambda = .84$), $F(2, 90) = 1.84, p = .07$; and by gender (Wilks’s $\Lambda = .81$), $F(2, 90) = 4.47, p < .005$; but not by their interaction (Wilks’s $\Lambda = .90$), $F(2, 90) = 1.09$. Follow-up univariate analyses for the gender main effect are reported in Table 3. Women reported higher ratings of victim pain compared to men, and higher ratings of empathy for the victim than did men. Follow-up univariate analyses on the social influence main effect are reported in Table 4. Participants in the men-responsible condition rated the men as relatively more responsible than did participants in the neutral or the woman-responsible conditions.

Discussion

The findings from Experiment 2 partially support our prediction that social influence can be influential in an individual’s impression of sexual violence. Participants were swayed in their private evaluations of responsibility based on their exposure to the social-influence manipulation. Participants in the men-responsible condition placed more blame on the perpetrators relative to participants in the neutral or the woman-responsible conditions.

\(^3One alternative method of analyzing these data is to aggregate the data by group and use the group average, rather than the individual scores. We analyzed the data for Experiment 2 in this manner, and found results that were similar to those based on an individual analysis. We report the individual scores here.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent measure</th>
<th>Men-responsible condition</th>
<th>Neutral condition</th>
<th>Woman responsible condition</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Victim pain</td>
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<td>1.68</td>
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<td>2.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive affect</td>
<td>26.71</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>25.52</td>
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</table>

neutral or the woman-responsible conditions. Although the neutral and woman-responsible conditions were not statistically different from each other, they followed the expected pattern with participants in the woman-responsible condition attributing the least amount of blame to the perpetrators. Participants assimilated the confederate’s opinion, adjusting their personal opinion to be consistent with the confederate. At first, this behavior might appear to reflect conformity, but the fact that the responses were private judgments made on paper suggests that this was not a display of mere public compliance, but rather one of private internalization.

General Discussion

Our findings add to the existing literature regarding the effect of social influence on cognitive and affective responses to sexually violent material. In research conducted by Norris (1991), social influence was manipulated through peer reports of arousal. The present investigation broadened those earlier findings to cognitive (i.e., judgments of responsibility) responses, suggesting that both affect and cognition are vulnerable to social influence.

The mechanism through which social influence plays a role in responses to sexual violence is still unknown. Two social psychological theories may account for the effects of social context on people’s responses in this experiment:
Informational social influence and normative social influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kaplan, 1989; Strasser, Kerr, & Davis, 1989; Thibaut & Strickland, 1956). Informational social influence occurs when perceptions of the world become socially anchored (Festinger, 1954). In ambiguous situations when people are uncertain, as may have been the case for some viewers of the film scene, they resolve the uncertainty through communication with others in which a shared social definition of reality emerges. Shifts in attitudes are attributed to the sharing of relevant information about the judged issue. Because the stimulus material used in these experiments challenged a number of popular rape myths, some participants may have felt that it was somewhat ambiguous and looked to their social surroundings (i.e., their peers) to help define the situation.

Normative social influence involves changing one’s behavior (including reported attitudes) in a direction more consistent with the prevailing norms of the reference group in a desire to conform to the expectations of others and to achieve acceptance in one’s social environment (Asch, 1956; Pfeffer, 1985; Sherif, 1935). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) include normative influence in their theory of reasoned action. They propose that to predict and understand an individual’s behavior, one needs to know both the person’s attitude and salient social pressures (i.e., subjective norms). Brownmiller (1975) suggests that sexually violent acts (e.g., rape) are mere extensions of norms that men learn in adolescence. If so, social influence may be of particular importance during these early years or among individuals who perceive sexual violence as mere extensions of typical male behavior and want to fit with the norm. Normative social influence may, for example, have motivated some participants to want to appear similar to the confederate, although opinions were recorded privately rather than publicly. Nonetheless, future research should include a social-desirability measure that would allow the researcher to examine whether social influence is particularly powerful among individuals who strongly desire social acceptance.

The findings regarding social influence and gender differences were discrepant between the two experiments, leaving some doubt as to whether and how social influence and gender of viewer interact. Because we did not control the discussion in Experiment 1, the interaction between social influence and gender is difficult to interpret. An important finding from Experiment 2, however, was that men and women did not differ in their susceptibility to the social-influence manipulation; this corroborates Norris’ (1989) findings. The main effects for gender found in Experiment 2 are also what might be expected based on previous experiments (cf. Bell, Kuriloff, & Lottes, 1994; Drout, Becker, Bukkosy, & Mansell, 1994; McLendon et al., 1994).

An explanation for the differences produced in the two experiments may be in methodological and sampling variability. One explanation may be because of the nature of the social-influence manipulation itself. In Experiment 1, no confederate was included. Participants were left on their own to discuss their reactions to the film scene. In Experiment 2, however, a confederate was included who provided a rather extreme response to the film scene. In addition, the two samples were recruited and compensated differently, thus resulting in samples with somewhat different backgrounds (i.e., ethnicity, religion). However, a closer examination of participants in Experiment 2 indicates that there were no differences in their responses as a result of ethnic or religious background.

The present research presents some limitations, possibly endemic to many laboratory experiments. First, all participants were college students and relatively young. Some researchers have cautioned about the use of college students based on their differences in cognitive and social functioning (e.g., a stronger need for peer approval) as compared to the general adult population (Sears, 1986). We should be conservative about generalizing these findings to other populations. Second, participants were asked to view only part of a commercially available film. Being exposed to just 10 min of an R-rated film might have distorted participants’ responses to the material, perhaps making them more extreme. In an artificial environment within the university setting, social influence played a role in people’s reactions to a scene of sexual violence. Although difficult to predict, given more realistic circumstances, such as being with a group of friends in a movie theater or under the influence of alcohol, social influence could play a different role.

Future experiments should examine more closely the role of social influence in people’s reactions to scenes of sexual violence. Social influence can be altered to investigate the aspects of the context that are most important and for whom. For example, one might explore the strength of the manipulation, when it is introduced, and who else responds to it. Experiments could pre-screen participants on attitudes concerning violence against women or tendency toward aggression in order to ensure that groups of like-minded individuals convene for a discussion about the material. Likewise, groups of friends or couples in romantic relationships would provide interesting data. Discussion is most likely to affect people’s attitudes when it is among individuals who hold similar beliefs. Future investigations can include physiological recordings (e.g., Coyne & Cross, 1988), rather than only self-report measures. People’s subjective private reports might be biased toward a more socially accepted response, whereas peripheral psychophysiology might be a more reliable measure of actual positive and negative affect. Finally, the mechanism through which social influence has an impact on individuals’ responses would be of theoretical and practical interest.

Hundreds of experiments have been conducted during the last three decades on the effects of media violence. The experiments reported here add to the existing evidence that social influence has the power to sway people’s reactions to sexual violence. Findings from this experiment might provide one explanation for why rape victims are blamed so often for the rape (Fairstein, 1994; Koss,
There continues to be ample opportunity to view violence against women on prime-time television and similar modes of entertainment viewed in a social context. It is easy to become habituated and desensitized to the pain and suffering that are incurred by victims. Subtle cultural beliefs that support rape may be a part of our daily interactions with neighbors, friends, lovers, and family, influencing how we interpret the news that we read in newspapers and view on television.

Conversely, the findings also imply the process through which compassion and empathy for victims of violence can be encouraged. If social influence can be instrumental among nonacquainted peers, one can only imagine its effect on a close group of friends or partners. Processing and reframing sexual assaults should allow for a healthier and perhaps more functional recovery for victims and loved ones. This investigation suggests that we need to be committed to talking about these issues in the classroom, with friends, and in our homes. Candid discussions about violence and its consequences have the potential to transform perceptual and affective reactions regarding violence and its victims.

References


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Appendix A

Experiment 1 Instructions to Participants

Discussion Condition

What we would like you to do now is to sit together as a group and watch this film. Please feel free to talk about your reactions to the film as you are watching it together. After viewing the film, we would like you to share and discuss your feelings and thoughts about the film with each other. You will have 5 minutes to discuss your reactions with the people in your group. I'm not going to be able to hear what is said during this conversation and it's not being recorded. I won't be back for a full 5 minutes.

No-Discussion Condition

What we would like you to do now is to sit together as a group and watch this film. Please do not talk or comment on the film clip at all. In fact, please do not talk with each other throughout the entire experiment. After viewing the film, we would like you to spend the next 5 minutes writing down your reaction to the film (i.e., any thoughts or feelings) on the piece of paper provided. Again, please do not discuss your reaction with anyone in the room. I won't be back for a full 5 minutes.
Appendix B

Experiment 2 Social-Influence Manipulation

Men's Responsibility Condition

I'd sum up my reaction by saying, well, that I think the men were responsible for what occurred in that bar. They raped that woman. I mean, you saw them back there holding her down, ripping off her clothes, and choking her! She told them "No." Then they started chanting—urging each other on—just like a group of animals. It was just barbaric! They must have known what they were doing was wrong!

Woman's Responsibility Condition

I'd sum up my reaction by saying, well, that I think the woman was responsible for what occurred in that bar. Whether or not she meant it, she was asking for it. I mean, you saw her—she was back there alone with those guys, totally drunk, doing drugs, and half naked! Then to start dancing in the middle of the floor like that?! It was just slutty! She must have known what she was getting into!

Neutral Condition

I'd sum up my reaction by saying I'm not sure whose fault it is. I could see how each side could be responsible for what happened. I don't think I'd blame one or the other completely. If anyone had acted differently, the whole thing could have been avoided. It's really too bad.