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Social Influence and Crime Victim Decision Making

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Citizens, rather than the police, are the gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, in that over 97% of all police investigations result from citizen notifications (Harlow, 1985). And because victims themselves report 70% of these crimes (Van Kirk, 1979), it is reasonable to say that victims are primarily responsible for the reporting decision.

However, often victims do not make the reporting decision by themselves. A series of NIJ-funded studies indicated that crime victims are likely to consult with others before notifying the police. Interviews in Kansas City with victims and bystanders who had reported indicated that, before calling the police, 48% delayed by talking face-to-face with another person, and an additional 10% delayed by speaking to someone else over the telephone (Van Kirk, 1978). Similar, although lower, percentages were found in a four-city replication (Spelman & Brown, 1981).

The following sections present the findings of a series of our research studies on the nature of social influence and its effects on reporting. First, we discuss the nature and effects of advice. Second, we describe commonly held expectations or "scripts." Finally, we discuss the nature and effects of shared cultural values or norms.

Advice as a Means of Social Influence

In our investigations of advice we have focused on whether victims talk with others, whether they receive advice from

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others, and whether this advice affects victims' subsequent decisions. We have investigated these questions using archival analyses, interviews, and experiments.

Archival analyses. To determine if victims talk with others before deciding what to do, we analyzed the records of 2,526 adult women who had visited the Rape Crisis Center at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia during a three-year period (Ruback & Ivie, 1987b). Almost all of these women had called the police.

Only 28% of the victims said calling the police was the first action they took. In contrast, 41% said their first behavior was to talk to someone: family, friends, or strangers. About 31% of the women took some other action, such as going home.

To see if talking to someone had an effect on reporting, we looked only at those individuals who said they did not call the police immediately (72% of the sample). For this group, we found that speaking to someone else was positively related to reporting and negatively related to delay in reporting. That is, among this group of initial nonreporters, women who talked to someone first were significantly more likely to call the police and to call the police sooner than were women who took some other action.

For the slightly over one-fourth of the crime victims who called the police immediately after the crime was over, the decision to call the police appears to be "rule-governed." That

is, this group seems to be following the sequence "if you are a victim of rape, then you call the police." In contrast to this group, most of the victims delayed before calling the police. And for this group, talking with others increased the likelihood that the police would be called. When this result is combined with the fact that in 45% of the cases someone other than the victim called the police (see Amir, 1971), it is clear that others can have a major impact on whether or not a crime is reported to the police.

The data archive from the Rape Crisis Center contains only victims' first actions after the rape had ended. We do not know how many of the victims who took some other action first later—spoke with someone before deciding whether or not to call the police. Thus, the 41% figure who talked to the police is probably a conservative estimate. However, because most of the victims called the police, we do not know from this study the extent to which nonreporting rape victims might have been influenced by others.

Interviews

Given that a sizable percentage of victims talk with someone before deciding to call the police, the next question is whether these others give victims advice about whether or not to report. To answer this question we interviewed a sample of victims in Pennsylvania and Georgia.

Our interviews with 58 theft, burglary, and robbery victims, all of whom had reported to the police, indicated that sixty

percent had spoken with at least one person prior to calling the police, and about one fourth had spoken with at least two persons prior to calling the police (Greenberg, Ruback, & Westcott, 1983). Over half of those who talked with someone said that these other individuals had given them advice about what to do. In only one case was the victim advised not to notify the police. In essence then, the victims acted in a manner consistent with the advice given them.

However, because we interviewed only victims who had called the police, we do not know how many victims were advised to report but did not or how many were advised not to report and actually did not. Moreover, the interviews involved retrospective accounts that may have been distorted by the passage of time. Thus, a research methodology is needed that would allow for studying both victims and nonvictims and that would eliminate the problem of memory loss. Both of these requirements are met by using experiments in the controlled setting of a field laboratory.

Experiments

Given that many victims talk with others about the reporting decision and that these others give victims advice, the next question is whether victims follow this advice. We addressed this question using an experiment in which we placed participants in a phenomenologically "real" situation and observed their responses to systematically manipulated variables.

In a series of studies, we created "victims" who believed

that a thief had stolen some of their work and thereby their money (Greenberg et al., 1983). The participants ranged in age from 17 to 59 and represented a wide variety of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of the possible stress involved in the study and in accord with ethical requirements, all participants were screened twice for any health problems.

These participants came to a suite of offices in a middle-class neighborhood of Pittsburgh in response to a newspaper advertisement for volunteers for research on clerical efficiency. Each participant was joined by two confederates pretending to be subjects in the research project; one played the role of "thief," and the other played the role of "bystander."

After being paid the money that was promised them in the advertisement, participants were told by a secretary that they would be working on two tasks and that there would be the opportunity to earn money in addition to that which they had already received. On the first task, alphabetizing cards, participants were told they had performed above the norms for their age group and that they would receive an additional 12 dollars, which they were given and for which they signed a receipt.

The second task involved copying numbers from a card to a sheet of paper, adding the numbers, and filing the card and paper in an envelope and then into an outbox. At then end of this task, participants were told they had performed poorly and that they had lost 11 of the 12 dollars they had earned earlier. A

few minutes later, while completing some final administrative forms, participants learned that the "thief" had stolen their work and had received credit for it.

At this point the secretary, who appeared to be new to the organization, left the office to look for her supervisor. It was during this period that the experimental treatments were delivered. When the secretary returned, she gave the participant the option to call the police about the theft. If the participant took the phone receiver from the secretary, we assumed that he or she was ready to report the crime to the police. If the participant refused to take the receiver, we assumed that he or she would not report the crime. No report was actually made, as the phone was not connected. At this point in the experiment, all participants learned of the true purpose of the study and of the nature and reasons for the deception.

The major purpose of these studies was to investigate the role of social influence in victims' decision to call or not to call the police. To manipulate social influence, we had the persons playing the bystander (women in most of the studies) give different types of advice to the victim. The questions investigated and raised by the five studies described here are summarized in Table 1.

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Table 1. Summary of the Experimental Studies

Study Number	Question Investigated	Result	Questions Raised
1	Does advice to "do something" or "not to do anything" affect victims' decision to report?	Victims advised not to do anything were unlikely to report. Victims advised to do something were no more likely to report than were victims received no advice.	Was the difference in the effects of the advice due to the difference in the specificity of the advice?
2	Does specific advice "to report" or "not to report" affect victims' reporting decision?	Victims advised to report were significantly more likely to report than were victims who received no advice.	What does specific advice imply? Does the person who gives the advice have to be similar to the victim? Is the advice to call the police influential even if a fellow victim is present?
3	How do a bystander's presence, offer of future support, and ability to testify as an eyewitness affect victims' reporting decision?	Victims were likely to report if the bystander was present <u>and</u> if she offered to be of help in the future.	
4	Are victims more likely to follow the advice of a bystander of the same than of the opposite sex?	Victims were as likely to report whether the bystander was male or female.	
5	Are victims likely to follow the advice of a bystander if a fellow victim is present?	Victims were significantly likely to follow the fellow victim's behavior but were not likely to follow the bystander's advice.	

In our first study, we found that victims who were advised "not to do anything" about the crime were significantly less likely to call the police than were individuals who received no advice. In contrast, victims who were advised "to do something" were no more likely to call the police than were individuals given no advice.

We were surprised that victims advised to do something about the crime did not seem to be affected by that advice while victims who were advised not to do anything were significantly less likely to call the police than were victims who received no advice. One reason for the difference, we reasoned, was the fact that the advice "to do something" was fairly diffuse and unspecific, while advice "not to do anything" was clear and unambiguous. To test this notion, in the second study we had the bystander give one of two types of specific advice: "I think you should call the police" or "I don't think you should call the police." As we hypothesized, victims advised to call the police were significantly more likely to report than were victims who received no advice. In contrast, victims who were advised not to call the police were no less likely to report than were victims who received no advice. The three remaining studies investigated the implications and possible limitations of a bystander who gives specific advice to report a crime.

In the third study we were concerned with how a victim might interpret a bystander's specific advice to call the police. We thought such advice might mean three things: (a) that the

bystander would be present when the police came, thus serving as a source of immediate support; (b) that the bystander would be available at some later time, thus serving as a source of future support; and (c) that the bystander would be an additional eyewitness to the crime, thus making the evidence against the thief stronger.

Each of these three variables was systematically manipulated in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design experiment in which all victims were advised to call the police. First, the bystander was either present or not present when the victim was actually deciding whether or not to call the police. Second, the bystander expressed her willingness or unwillingness to help the victim in his or her future interactions with the criminal justice system. Third, the bystander said she either saw or did not see the thief steal the victims' work.

The results of this study indicated that the third variable, the bystander's direct knowledge of the theft, did not affect victims' reporting decision, probably because the amount of evidence against the thief was already so great. The other two variables, presence/absence and future support/nonsupport significantly interacted with each other, such that victims were most likely to call the police when the bystander was physically present _and_ offered to be of help in the future. If one or both factors were absent, victims were significantly less likely to call the police.

In the fourth study, we investigated whether a bystander's

specific advice would be more likely to be followed if the bystander were more similar to the victim. We tested this hypothesis by seeing whether victims would be more likely to follow the advice of someone of the same rather than the opposite sex. This variable turned out not to be important, as victims were equally likely to report whether the bystander was male or female.

In the fifth and final study, we tested whether a bystander's specific advice would still be followed even if a fellow victim were present. In this study, there was a fourth confederate, a covictim, in addition to the thief, bystander, and secretary. Ostensibly, the thief had taken some of the covictim's work as well as some of the victim's work. In this study, in counterbalanced order across participants, the covictim said that she would either call or not call the police and the bystander advised the victim either to call or not to call the police. The results clearly showed that victims were significantly likely to follow the covictim's behavior but were not likely to follow the bystander's advice.

<u>Summary of findings on advice</u>. One of the strengths of our research program is that it has used multiple methods to investigate the effects of others on victims' decisions to report or not to report crimes to the police. Across methods, our findings suggest that many victims do talk with others after the crime, that these others are likely to give victims advice about what to do, and that victims are likely to follow this advice. The fact

that we have obtained consistent results from the interviews, experiments, and archival analyses suggests that this influence is pervasive and powerful.

That crime victims can be influenced by the advice of others is not surprising. Whenever people make important decisions, they are likely to receive advice from others. Furthermore, because victims are likely to be distressed and confused, they are especially susceptible to the advice they receive.

"Scripts" as a Means of Social Influence

Although specific advice is an important way in which crime victims can be influenced by others, our research suggests that it is not the only way victims are influenced. Another way that crime victims can be influenced is through the cuing of "scripts." Scripts are the expectations people have about stereotyped sequences of events. For example, a person's "eating in a restaurant script" would begin with receiving the menu and placing one's order and would proceed through eating the meal, asking the waitress for the bill, leaving a tip, and exiting the restaurant.

To test the notion of "crime reporting scripts," we asked college students to list in chronological order the typical events that would occur following a report to the police of a $5 or a $300 theft. We found that, compared to the $5 theft script, in the $300 theft script, subjects believed that the police were more likely to come to the victim's home, to ask the victim questions about the theft, to fill out a report, and to inves-

tigate the crime. In response to a question following the script task, subjects judged that the police were more likely to recover the stolen money when the theft was $300 than when it was $5.

Thus, as a means of social influence, others might affect a victim's decision to report or not to report a crime by cuing victims to a particular script. Thus, these individuals might argue that it is not very serious (e.g., a $5 crime) and the police will not do very much about it or that it is serious (e.g., a $300 crime) and the police will do something.

Norms as a Means of Social Influence

Another way in which others can influence victims is through normative pressure. All groups have certain rules or norms, some explicit and some not, that group members are expected to follow in given situations. These norms specify appropriate beliefs, attitudes, and actions, and they prescribe a punishment -- including both rejection and loss of status -- for violation of the norm.

We assume that norms exist with regard to how a crime is defined, how serious it is believed to be, and how the victim should respond. Others can bring normative influence to bear on a crime victim in one of two ways, either by applying the pressure themselves or by reminding the victim of the norms of some group to which the victim belongs and to which the victim feels strongly enough committed that a negative reaction from that group would be aversive. For example, a gang member might refuse to call the police after being knifed in a fight because

there are clear gang norms that the police should not be called.

In order to find out more about the normative climate in which victim decision making takes place, we administered a questionnaire to students in the United States, Nigeria, Thailand, and India. The questionnaire was designed to examine normative beliefs about reporting crimes and the extent to which such beliefs vary as a function of the nature of the crime and the culture studied. Subjects were asked to rate 49 offenses on 10-point scales ranging from 1 "very strongly approve of dealing with the matter privately" to 10 "very strongly approve of calling the police". The 49 offenses were taken from a list of 204 used by Wolfgang, Figlio, Tracy, and Singer (1985) to study the perceived seriousness of crimes in the United States. In Nigeria, Thailand, and India we also had subjects rate the seriousness of each of the crimes. To represent seriousness for the sample from the United States, we used the seriousness ratings obtained by Wolfgang et al. (1985).

Examples are shown below. The numbers represent the average rating score for the particular sample on the item in question.

Offense	U.S. *n*=157	Thailand *n*=109	Nigeria *n*=76	India *n*=131
A man forcibly rapes a woman. Her physical injuries require hospitalization.	9.78	9.01	8.41	7.83
A man beats his wife with his fists. She requires hospitalization.	8.34	5.92	4.55	3.95
A person trespasses in the backyard of a private home.	2.03	5.58	4.82	3.60

To determine what factors predict people's normative beliefs, we coded each of the 49 crimes in terms of 11 dimensions (e.g., the presence of a gun, the amount of money involved). We then used these factors and mean rated seriousness in a multiple regression analysis for each country. Across all four samples, the mean rated seriousness of the offense was the single largest predictor of the appropriateness of calling the police. However, even when rated seriousness was held constant, other factors about the crimes determined whether people believed calling the police was the appropriate action to take. When seriousness was held constant, across all four countries greater loss of money was positively related to calling the police, and in Thailand, Nigeria, and India the victim being related to the offender was negatively related to calling the police.

As an example of these points, compare the following three items: "A man beats a stranger with his fists. He requires hospitalization;" "A person beats a victim with his fists. The victim requires hospitalization;" and "A man beats his wife with his fists. She requires hospitalization." In all three cases, the degree of injury is the same. However, in the United States the last crime was rated between one and a half and more than two times as serious as the other two crimes. In India and Thailand, this item's seriousness rating was about equal to or greater than the ratings of seriousness for the other two crimes, and in Nigeria this item was rated less serious than the other two.

The pattern for normative expectations for reporting the

crimes were quite different. In the United States, in spite of the difference in ratings of seriousness, the three items were rated approximately equal in terms of reporting to the police. In the other countries, the spouse abuse was rated much lower in terms of reporting to the police than were the attacks on strangers.

Even though there are similarities across countries, as is apparent in the examples in the table, it is also clear that there are cultural differences in how people believe victims should act. Of the 28 offenses that did not include amounts of money, there were significant differences in ratings among the four countries on 27 items. Across those 28 items the U.S. students ($M = 7.93$) believed the police should be called more than did students in Thailand ($M = 7.03$), Nigeria ($M = 6.58$), and India ($M = 5.94$). All differences were significant.

The fact that there are cultural differences in terms of how people view the appropriateness of reporting crimes to the police suggests that people have different ideas about the role of police in society. It might be worthwhile to conduct similar studies in the United States to determine the normative standards of different regional and ethnic groups.

Post-Reporting Social Influence

To this point we have talked about social influence on the victim's decision to report or not to report the crime to the police. To discover the nature and extent of social influence on victims after they have reported the crime to the police, we interviewed 150 sexual assault victims approximately one to two

months after they had visited the Rape Crisis Center in Atlanta (Ruback & Ivie, 1987a). All but two had reported their victimization to the police. Six to nine months after this first interview, we reinterviewed 77 of these women. In these interviews, we were concerned with the kind of social influence victims had received both prior to and subsequent to calling the police.

Results from data analyses indicated that women who had been advised by more people to call the police were more likely to pursue their case through the criminal justice system. Furthermore, results suggested that women who received positive reactions from a greater number of people after the crime and women who did not receive pressure from others to drop the case were more likely to have cases that went further in the criminal justice process. In other words, our results suggest that others not only influence victims about reporting crimes, the "gatekeeping" decision, but that these others also act as "ushers" by influencing victims to continue or stop aiding the criminal justice system. We also found that women who said they had talked to more people after the crime also said they had made significantly more changes in their behavior to prevent future victimizations.

<u>Implications</u>

Consistent across all of our multimethod studies, our research indicates that social influence can have a powerful influence on the decisions made by crime victims. Our research implies that if we want victims to make rational decisions about whether or not to report crimes, we need to focus on those to whom victims turn for

advice and support.

We believe that information campaigns concerned with reporting may be more effective when they are directed at citizens in their roles as <u>sources</u> of social influence rather than as <u>recipients</u> of such influence (i.e., victims). Such reasoning is implicit in recent drunk-driving campaigns, which have been directed at the friends and relatives of potential drunk drivers.

These information campaigns should inform the public about the susceptibility of crime victims to social influence and the various forms that this influence might take. Most importantly, these campaigns should focus on what our experimental research indicates are the three factors necessary for advice to call the police to be followed. First, the advice to report the crime must be specific. Second, the advice-giver must be physically present. And, third, the advice-giver must offer to be of help in the future.

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