




Helping Responses by Indirect Bystanders of Coercive Sexual Harassment in Academia: Friendship Status With Source of Information


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Abstract

Coercive sexual harassment (CSH) by faculty is a risk factor for women in higher education. Bystander intervention and support for a victim are critical. Social networks can influence peers' social reactions to victims of sexual violations. This is the first study to explore the responses of peers who learn about CSH of a peer indirectly, thus becoming indirect bystanders. In this scenario, a peer classmate learns of CSH of a classmate from another classmate who witnessed the CSH. The 181 participants (52.8% female) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where a written vignette described an interaction between the instructor faculty member and a student; the interchange involved either moderate or severe CSH (severity). The peer informant who witnessed the CSH and shared the information with the potential indirect bystander was described as either a close friend in the same class or only a classmate (friendship status). The vignette was followed by a series of items with Likert-type scales that measured cognitive appraisals (offensiveness of interaction, harm to victim, the believability of information, personal responsibility to act), emotional reactions (fears of negative consequences for taking action, emotional reactions to perpetrator and victim), and behavioral intentions (helping peer victim, social responses to victim, behaviors towards professor/perpetrator). Results indicated that the severity of CSH was a critical factor in cognitive appraisals and both positive emotional reactions to the victim and negative emotions towards the perpetrator. Yet, the main effects for the severity of CSH were moderated by friendship status of the informant: when the source was a close friend in the moderate CSH condition, participants were more likely to act to support the victim, less likely to avoid/exclude the victim, and more likely to avoid/exclude the professor than when the source of the information was simply a classmate. Results support training programs that focus on peer social networks as sources of deterrence and enhanced support regarding SH.

Keywords: *indirect bystanders, coercive sexual harassment, bystander intervention, social networks*

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Introduction

Sexual misconduct in academia continues to be a threat to female college students (Young & Wiley, 2021). Fully 62% of female undergraduates, 44% of female graduate students, and 70% of women in research and other field activities experience sexual harassment (SH; Moylan & Wood, 2016; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). Often, this SH is at the hands of male faculty and staff (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; McClain et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2016; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019).

Experiences of faculty–student SH can cause emotional, psychological, physical, and other setbacks, including limitation of educational, professional, and career opportunities (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Diekmann et al., 2013; Laird & Pronin, 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine [NASEM], 2018; Pinchevsky et al., 2020). Female victims are further at risk of retaliation from faculty, staff, and administrators if they report, and there is the possibility of adverse reactions or silence by their peers who become aware of the SH (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Hershcovis et al., 2021; Weiss & Lalonde, 2001). Indeed, Dixon (1997) described the risks of rejection by peers due to jealousy of targets of faculty sexual interest. In the workplace, fear of social ostracism has been a principal inhibitor of both victim reporting and peer support of victims of SH (Brown & Battle, 2019). In a qualitative study of six adults from various backgrounds, Flecha (2021) documented processes of second-order sexual harassment towards those who support the victim, often by the same individual who had harassed the original victim. What is not known is how students respond when they learn from a peer about another student who is a victim of faculty–student sexual misconduct. Is their response influenced by the severity of the reported victimization and/or by their social relationship with the peer from whom they learn indirectly about the abuse?

Literature Review

Bystander intervention is an important tool for reducing the ongoing prevalence of faculty–student coercive sexual harassment (CSH) on college campuses (Karami et al., 2020). Dyadic faculty–student CSH is characterized by the higher status faculty member engaging in quid pro quo manipulations for sexual favors from the lower status student (Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; NASEM, 2018; Tata, 2000). Moderate CSH involves unwanted sexual attention with suggestions of quid pro quo, while severe CSH also includes physical violation in the form of groping or more invasive physical actions, threats, or other sexual aggression during the interaction (Gelfand et al., 1995; Heretick & Learn, 2020; Northwestern University, 2018; Swarthmore College, 2019). Whether information about an event is informally or formally reported by the victim, witness, victim support person, or another secondhand bystander, informal or formal investigations may be initiated against accused perpetrators of moderate CSH, who may be subject to university policies and sanctions and/or civil actions, while perpetrators of severe CSH also may be liable to criminal investigations and penalties for criminal offenses (e.g., American University, 2021; Ohio University, 2022).

Types and Severity of Coercive Dyadic SH

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (n.d.) generally defines SH as follows: Unwelcome

sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment (para. 2). In the quid pro quo form of SH, one member of the dyad has higher status over the other member and uses this status to exchange outcomes for sexual favors (NASEM, 2018). Quid pro quo SH may involve unwanted sexual attention or sexual coercion (Gelfand et al., 1995). Sexual coercion specifically includes behaviors that either overtly or implicitly link sexual compliance to job or academic outcomes for the lower status member (Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Tata, 2000). University policies (The State University of New York, 2018) describe coercive SH behaviors as ranging in severity from "seeking sexual favors or a sexual relationship in return for the promise of a favorable grade or academic opportunity" (para. 12) to intentional and undesired physical contact, sexually explicit language or writing, lewd pictures or notes, and other forms of sexually offensive conduct by individuals in positions of authority, coworkers, or student peers that unreasonably interferes with the ability of a person to perform their employment or academic responsibilities (para. 14). This range also extends to physical acts of a sexual nature, such as: touching, pinching, patting, kissing, hugging, grabbing, brushing against, or poking another person's body; rape, sexual battery, molestation or attempts to commit these assaults (para. 15). Many universities list coercive SH with inappropriate touching or physical invasion ("direct contact with an intimate body part"; *Worth v. Tyer*, 2001) as "sexual contact" (e.g., Swarthmore College, 2019) or "sexual assault" (e.g., Northwestern University, 2018). College student samples have rated sexual coercion as more severe than peer-initiated unwanted sexual attention (Fitzgerald & Ormerod, 1991; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018).

For some time, there has been a call to enhance knowledge and readiness to respond among bystanders in cases of unwanted physical sexual gestures and harassment on college campuses (e.g., Banyard et al., 2009; Christensen, 2014; Edwards & Ullman, 2018; Edwards et al., 2020; NASEM, 2018). American female college students have expressed more negative and punitive attitudes towards sexual harassment and harassers than their male counterparts (Nodeland & Craig, 2019). Bystander roles have also received more attention since the beginning of the #MeToo movement (Azimi et al., 2021; Kessler et al., 2020; Pengelly, 2017).

As noted by the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund (n.d.), in compliance with Title IX, colleges and universities have policies and procedures for reporting, responding to, and resolving reports of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination in a timely and equitable manner. There is an official, typically designated as the Title IX coordinator, who is the principal agent to receive complaints and coordinate investigations and resolutions. A complaint of sexual harassment may be made by victims or anyone, including third parties with knowledge. The report may be made by the victim. However, others who become aware of the violation may report it as well. In fact, research indicates that most employees directly or indirectly become aware of sexual harassment at work (Senapati, 2021).

While victims and direct witnesses are considered primary sources, other reports based on indirect information may trigger an investigation. For example, the University of Texas at Dallas has the following Title IX policy:

Any individual who believes they have experienced sexual misconduct or retaliation in violation of the University's Sexual Misconduct Policy (UTDBP3102) may file a complaint with Institutional Compliance, Equity, and Title IX Initiatives (ICET). *Individuals who are aware of someone else who may have experienced sexual misconduct should submit an Incident Report to ICET.* (italics added; <https://institutional-initiatives.utdallas.edu/reporting/>)

As members of a social network (Edwards & Ullman, 2018), indirect bystanders, that is, those who learn

about the CSH from another direct witness, are an understudied resource in higher education for potential interventions.

Bystander Responses

Latané and Darley (1970) and Latané and Nida's (1981) early work on helping behavior led to a stepwise model of positive bystander response: the bystander (1) perceives an event as requiring help; (2) experiences self as responsible for acting; (3) disregards or does not perceive personal costs for intervening; (4) believes the intervention would be effective; (5) identifies specific ways to offer aid. More recently, Banyard et al. (2010, 2014) and Bennett et al. (2014) noted that bystander intervention in cases of sexual assault increased when they were aware that something happened, believed something should be done, accepted personal responsibility, and intended/decided to act.

In addition to supporting the stages and elements proposed by Latané and Darley (1970) and Latané and Nida (1981), more recent work has considered other factors as predictors/stages in the process towards helping behaviors in cases of social-sexual behavior. These additional dimensions include ethical evaluations (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001) and emotional responses (e.g., Wiener & Hurt, 2000).

Bowes-Sperry and Powell (1999), O'Leary-Kelly and Bowes-Sperry (2001), and Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) proposed a causal cognition-emotion-behavior sequence for how people evaluate socio-sexual behaviors in the workplace: once judgments of responsibility for harm are made, emotional reactions follow, and these emotional reactions influence the observer's reaction, such as help-giving or aggression. For example, the less the perceived responsibility of the victim for the wrong, the more positive the emotional reaction towards the victim and the higher the likelihood of a helping intervention. Following earlier work by Jones (1991) and Rest (1986), Bowes-Sperry and Powell (1999) described ethical evaluations by bystanders who are potential helpers. Accordingly, they envisioned helping responses as more likely when observers first interpret an event as an "imposition of the initiator on the target" (pp. 782–783); next, they consider the motivation of the initiator; finally, observers evaluate the perceived harm to the victim. The greater the perceived harm to the victim ("magnitude of consequences"), the greater the probability of observers' intentions to intervene (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999, p. 780). As predicted, Chui and Dietz (2014) found that among students who read a vignette describing uncivil behavior, when they ascribed more malicious intent to the perpetrator, they also perceived a greater necessity to intervene. Similar findings were observed by Heretick and Learn (2020) when investigating relationships between perceptions of harm and intentions to intervene in a situation of faculty–student CSH.

Emotional responses by observers also are now considered predictors of intentions toward helping behaviors (e.g., Nickerson et al., 2014). Anger and disgust are predictable emotional responses both to taboo sexual acts and to violations of personal rights (Cameron et al., 2015; Gibbs, 2019; Giner-Sorolla & Chapman, 2017). Indeed, anger and disgust towards the perpetrator have been noted as reliable predictors of actual or intended intervention behaviors (Halmburger et al., 2015; Heretick & Learn, 2020).

Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) have described two dimensions for intended/actual helping behaviors: immediacy of intervention and level of involvement. Applying their descriptions to SH, high immediacy/high involvement responses may include actions by witnesses as the SH is occurring, such as actively interrupting the encounter to remove the victim and/or to confront the perpetrator. Low immediacy bystander helping responses occur outside of the actual SH encounter, such as proactively warning or otherwise trying to keep the potential or actual victim away from the situation where SH may occur or, after the SH has occurred, offering the victim emotional support, helping the victim to avoid the perpetrator, encouraging the victim to report the harassment, actively reporting the SH themselves, and/or trying to enlist support for the victim by peers and others. Using this model, low immediacy

intervention may be available to indirect witnesses, that is, those who learn about CHS after the event from another person other than the perpetrator or victim. As with victims and direct witnesses, indirect witnesses may provide support to victims and/or report the infraction to peers, other faculty, school administration, and/or outside agencies, including the police.

Social Factors and Helping Behaviors for Victims of Sexual Harassment

Coworkers may learn about sexual harassment in the workplace by being direct witnesses or being told about it by peers. Unfortunately, coworkers who learn about the harassment may respond with ostracism, public humiliation, and retaliation toward the victim (Brown & Battle, 2019). Patterns of ostracism can occur on a social level, where peers socially distance themselves from the victim, but also through exclusion from other work interactions, such as by withholding work-related information, excluding from group tasks, and other behaviors that can then have further consequences to the victim's adjustment and employability (Hart, 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2016).

Edwards and Ullman (2018) have stressed the importance of social networks in understanding peers' responses to victims of sexual assault and intimate partner danger. As they note, it is critical to identify factors that may influence peers' social reactions to victims of sexual violence. In fact, when a college student victim of SH/aggression seeks support and shares information about the harassment, it most likely may be with a family member, friend, coworker, or romantic partner (Scarduzio et al., 2018).

Supportive responses that offer validation and real-world assistance often reduce stress and boost the self-worth of the victim (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2015; Orchowski et al., 2013), while blaming, dismissal of the report, or attempts to take control of the victim's responses have been found to interfere with the victim's self-care (Ullman, 2010). In general, having a relationship with the victim or perpetrator increases the chance of intervention (Burn, 2009). Among college students, friendship status with the victim of sexual aggression may increase supportive responses towards the victim (e.g., Katz et al., 2015; Hennelly et al., 2019). Conversely, Nicksa (2013) found that when the offender was described as a friend, college students were less likely to report the offense. In cases of CSH, we do not know whether second-hand reports by friends (versus nonfriends) of sexual harassment of another student increase the credibility of the report differentially and the probability of a supportive response by a secondary bystander.

Bystander Options

As noted earlier, university programs typically provide guidelines for those who witness or become aware of sexual harassment. For example, for witnesses of the act, the University of Southern Indiana (n.d.) describes direct and indirect helping: direct help involves taking responsibility, such as speaking with the abuser directly; indirect help could involve informing and/or seeking assistance for intervention by someone else. Other colleges and universities may recommend direct interventions developed by the Hollaback Movement and Green Dot: direct, distract, delegate, delay, and document (Alteristic, n.d.).

Consistent with Title IX, most colleges and universities require or support all members of a college or university, including students, to "report events and behavior that is perceived as or can be construed as gender or sexual discrimination, harassment, misconduct or assault" (University of Texas, n.d.).

Institutions that receive federal funds are required to have a Title IX coordinator on a continuous basis. This is the office that coordinates training and compliance with Title IX regulations, including investigating grievances such as reports of sexual harassment (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). In fact, the complainant may be someone other than victim ("third party" reporter; U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Peers Who Learn About Faculty–Student CSH From Another Peer

Beyond institutional safeguards, others' responses to victims of sexual harassment may have positive or negative effects on the victim (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Hill, 2018; Phillips et al., 2019; Young & Wiley, 2021). However, very little is known about peer responses to students who are victims of sexual harassment by higher status faculty members. In CSH, the harasser targets his victims under the assumption of his invincibility (Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). While CSH may occur in a private dyadic interaction, the possibility of a witness having first-hand knowledge exists, such as a student who is present when there is a more public sexual overture to a student or if the student is in an adjoining area but not known to be there. Indeed, this second scenario for a student witness was presented successfully by Heretick and Learn (2020) to participants who read vignettes describing a male faculty member who was the perpetrator and a female student victim during the interaction in the faculty member's office. The CSH that was described was either an example of moderate or severe CSH. Here, the witness was in an adjoining room and not known to be there. In addition to direct witnessing, knowledge of faculty–student harassment may come from other sources, such as online postings by the harasser and/or victim on social networking sites, and/or from other students or even faculty who have witnessed or learned about the CSH.

In addition, a student peer who did directly witness all or part of an incident may share this information with someone else who was not present, who then becomes an indirect or secondary witness. Both direct and secondary indirect witnesses of CSH may then share this information with another peer, offer support to the victim, and/or report the incident to the trusted faculty member, university student counselor, and the Title IX and Office of Equal Opportunity (or Gender Equity Office; U.S. Department of Education, 2022). While the possible roles of indirect witnesses can be valuable, to date, no research has explored reactions and possible helping responses from students who become indirect witnesses after learning from a direct peer witness of CSH by a faculty member toward a fellow student.

Further, no research has considered possible differences in responses and intervention intentions of such indirect witnesses in relation to their social relationship with the direct witness peer who is the source of this information. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), social relational factors, such as friendship or sharing similar values and interests, can influence believability of information and considerations for behavioral responses (Cohen et al., 2013; Kleinsasser et al., 2015; Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008). Self-categorizing as a “close friend” accentuates “the similarities of the people belonging to their in-group” (Trepte & Loy, 2017, p. 3). In-group members tend to be treated better than out-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). The #MeToo movement also showed that an increase in numbers and types of supporters makes it easier for victims and their friends to report sexual misconduct and crimes (Peters, 2020).

Relatedly, when the source of information about CSH is a classmate and a close friend, research would suggest that an indirect witness would consider the friend source as more trustworthy, believable, and of good moral character (Hornsey, 2008; Wu et al., 2015) when compared with assumptions about a source who is only a classmate. In addition, the friend source should have more influence on the indirect witness's tolerance towards the aggression and actual behavioral intentions than if the source is not a friend (Iñiguez-Berrozpe et al., 2021; Kleinsasser et al., 2015; Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008). Also, individuals tend to treat their peers more favorably than people from other groups (Hornsey, 2008). Friendship or sharing similar values and interests, can influence believability of information and considerations for behavioral responses (Cohen et al., 2013; Kleinsasser et al., 2015; Rieh & Hilligoss, 2008).

Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) also proposed that bystander intervention with respect to sexual harassment is more likely when the observer and the victim are members of the same identity group. Further, intersectionality assumes that social identities, such as race, gender, ethnocultural, and

socioeconomic status, influence bystanders' perceptions and responses to sexual violence (Bang et al., 2016; Katz et al., 2017; Palasinski et al., 2012). Christensen and Harris (2019) have applied an intersectionality framework to explore helping behaviors among college students. In response to sexual harassment, they found that sociodemographic identities were especially meaningful among women concerning helping responses for sexual harassment. In general, bystanders are more likely to intervene if they know other bystanders and/or the victim (Coyne et al., 2019; Hennelly et al., 2019; Levine et al., 2002; Levine & Manning, 2013; Liebst et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2020). Katz et al. (2015) found that undergraduates who read a scenario and imagined themselves to be friends of the potential victim of rape were more empathetic, felt responsible to help, and expressed more intention to help than those who were not put in the friend role. Further, Batson et al. (2007), Bennett and Banyard (2016), and Coyne et al. (2019) have noted less blame, more empathy, more inclination toward helping, and a greater sense of safety in intervening when the victim is a friend.

However, as noted, no research has explored whether *friendship status with the source of the information about CSH* will influence factors such as the believability of the secondhand report or responses by such secondhand bystanders.

Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, and Hypotheses

Only one published study to date has examined peers' recognition, sense of personal responsibility, fears of consequences, emotional reactions, and intentions for behavioral helping responses with dyadic CSH by a male faculty member toward a female student. Using vignettes, Heretick and Learn (2020) manipulated severity in a description of faculty–student CSH. College student participants were instructed to take the role of a peer who directly witnessed the interaction. When compared with students who read of a non-CSH professional exchange between the faculty member and the student, those direct witnesses who read descriptions of moderate or severe CSH conditions recognized more inappropriate and harmful behaviors in the CSH groups, with the highest ratings for the severe CSH group. However, direct witness students who witnessed the moderate CSH were more fearful than those in the severe group of adverse consequences if they intervened. These findings for moderate CSH appear to support proposals by Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) regarding the possible mitigating effects of relative ambiguity of a situation on helping responses.

The current study replicated Heretick and Learn (2020) but with the goal of examining peer reaction when learning indirectly about CSH by a male professor of a female student from another peer who was a direct witness. In addition to the severity of the CSH, the friendship status of the peer informant was varied to explore whether this social factor affects an indirect bystander's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral intentions. The research questions and hypotheses for this study were as follows:

Research Question 1: Are responses of bystander peers who learn indirectly about faculty–student CSH different for moderate and severe levels of CSH?

Research Hypothesis 1: Following results of previous research by Heretick and Learn (2020), we predicted that these bystander peers who learn indirectly about faculty–student CSH would express significantly more supportive evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the victim, but more significantly negative evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the perpetrator, when reading about severe CSH than when reading about moderately severe CSH.

Research Question 2: Does friendship status with the peer who was the direct witness and provides the information about the CSH influence indirect bystander peers' responses toward the victim and perpetrator?

Research Hypothesis 2: We predicted that bystander peers who learned indirectly about faculty–student CSH from a classmate who also is a friend would express more supportive evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the victim, but more negative evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the perpetrator, than those who learned about the CSH from a classmate who is not a friend.

Research Question 3: Is there an interaction effect between the severity of CSH and friendship status with the peer who provides the information on indirect bystander peers’ responses toward the victim and perpetrator?

Research Hypothesis 3: We predicted that bystander peers who learn indirectly about faculty–student CSH from a classmate who also is a friend would express more supportive evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the victim, but more negative evaluations and behavioral intentions towards the perpetrator, in the moderate CSH condition, where there may be more ambiguity about the severity, than in the severe CSH condition, the friendship status was more relevant.

Methods

This study employed an experimental design with nonprobability sampling and random assignment to condition for systematic manipulation of two variables: severity of CSH and friendship status of the classmate who provided the information about the faculty–student CSH. Dependent variables included cognitive appraisals, emotional reactions, and behavioral intentions regarding bystander intervention both towards the victim and the perpetrator.

Participants

After receiving approval from our university’s Institutional Review Board, we recruited a total of 181 volunteer adults through Prolific Academic. Sampling included those 18 or older, who currently were undergraduate or graduate students at primarily on-campus programs of college or universities in the United States or Canada, and fluent in English. Prolific Academic is a reliable online crowdsourcing service that identifies individuals who volunteer to participate, for compensation, in online surveys for scientific research (Peer et al., 2017). Volunteers who provided informed consent were forwarded to the online survey that was posted at [freeonlinesurveys.com](https://www.freeonlinesurveys.com). The full survey took a maximum of 20 minutes to complete. Completers were compensated \$1.63 for their time (following guidelines from Prolific).

We randomly assigned participants to one of four vignette conditions. The vignette appeared after the demographics questionnaire and was shown again at the beginning of each new page of the survey so that it was always available for review. Data were downloaded from the survey site and transferred to an SPSS (v. 26) data file for analyses.

Vignettes to Manipulate Independent Variables

Similar to previous studies that have employed vignettes to study bystander intervention related to SH among students (e.g., Bennett & Banyard, 2016; Bennett et al., 2014; Bursik & Geftter, 2011; Heretick & Learn, 2020; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Weiss & Lalonde, 2001), we created four vignettes to present a situation where a classmate reported witnessing the CSH of another classmate by the professor of a course they both are taking. According to the vignette’s description, the witness “said they were outside Professor Brooks’ office while he was meeting with Karen” and “they could see everything that was going on, but nobody knew they were there.” This peer witness who is the source of the information also is described either as a “close friend” or only as a classmate of the participant classmate.

In addition, the witness described behaviors that are representative of either moderate or severe CSH

between a male faculty member and a student. The descriptions of the CSH were taken directly from Heretick and Learn's (2020) study to vary the severity of CSH. Consistent with legal definitions, the moderate CSH condition depicted an interchange where the faculty member is personable, flirtatious, and touches the student's knee and her shoulder, while the severe condition also included intrusive physical violation of the body (fondling her breast, moving her hand to his groin). In both the moderate and severe CSH conditions, the professor ends the exchange by asking the female student to meet him for dinner later in the week and says, "that's one sure way not to fail my course."

Instrumentation: Dependent Variables

After completing the demographic questionnaire, and reading the vignette, the survey participants were presented several items for assessing various elements of response (adapted from Heretick and Learn, 2020).

Cognitive Appraisals

Offensiveness of the Interactions. Heretick and Learn (2020) developed the first five items in the survey to evaluate perceived offensiveness of the situation. The dimensions of offense that were selected are compatible with college and university policies regarding professional conduct, legal definitions of sexual misconduct, sexual behaviors, SH, sexual assault, sexual coercion, and sexual hostility. Items began with the following question: "In your opinion, how would you characterize the interaction between Professor Brooks and Karen in this story for each of the following items?" We presented the items with an 8-point Likert scale that labeled conceptual variations from low-risk to moderate-risk to high-risk forms of that particular behavioral element (Chyung et al., 2017): *Very Professional* to *Very Unprofessional*, *Absolutely Nonsexual* to *Very Sexual*, *Appropriate Interaction* to *Sexual Assault* (with the midpoint of *Sexual Harassment*), *No Sexual Coercion* to *Extreme Sexual Coercion*, *No Sexual Hostility* to *Extreme Sexual Hostility*. We provided no definitions for the terms. The internal reliability for the current sample for the five items was $\alpha = .78$. The mean score for the ratings on the five items was used for analyses.

Perceived Harm to Victim. One item evaluated the perceived level of harm to the student along a continuum (Schein & Gray, 2018): we again presented an 8-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 (*no harm*) to 4–5 (*moderate harm*) to 8 (*extreme harm*). In addition to these first two sections, the following scales were presented with a 7-point Likert scale with anchors of *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. The unweighted mean of the ratings for items in each scale was used for further analyses.

Believability of the Information. We created one item to evaluate the perceived believability of the information from the classmate: "I believe that what this other student told me is true."

Personal Responsibility to Act. We used three items previously developed by Chui and Dietz (2014) to apply the Bowes-Sperry model to bystander responses to workplace incivility. The items were: *I feel compelled to do something about the situation*; *I feel something should be done about this situation*; *I feel I should mind my own business and not get involved*. We believe that the first item indicates a sense of personal responsibility, the second connotes general responsibility, and the third expresses no responsibility to act. The third item's ratings were reverse scored. Chui and Dietz reported internal reliability of the three items at $\alpha = .72$ and Heretick and Learn (2020) reported $\alpha = .80$. The current data indicated internal reliability of $\alpha = .74$.

Emotional Responses

Fears of Negative Consequences. Two items were taken from previous work (Hellemans et al., 2017; Heretick & Learn, 2020) to assess two types of fears of negative consequences of intervening among peer bystanders of bullying in the workplace. The first item evaluated fear of personal cost: *I would be afraid to*

intervene in the situation for fear of negative consequences for me as a student. The next statement evaluated fears regarding intervention self-efficacy: *I would be afraid to intervene in the situation for fear of making the situation worse.* Heretick and Learn observed an internal consistency of $\alpha = .76$ for these two items and the same internal reliability was observed for the current sample's data.

Emotional Reactions to Perpetrator and Victim. We used items from Heretick and Learn (2020) to evaluate four emotional responses toward both the professor and the student: anger, worry, disgust, and sadness. All eight items began with, *While the incident between Professor Brooks and Karen is occurring, I...* The same item was presented twice, once referring to the professor and once referring to the student. For example, a pair of separate items were, *I would be angry at Professor Brooks for his actions* and then *I would be angry at Karen for her actions*. Further, two of the four items for each referent were more negative (angry, disgusted) and two were more caring (worried or sad) towards the referent. Internal reliabilities for each pair were as follows: professor/negative, $\alpha = .84$; professor/caring, $\alpha = .80$; victim/negative, $\alpha = .86$; victim/caring, $\alpha = .54$. Mean ratings were computed for each of the four items, but the positive ratings towards the victim are interpreted with caution due to the unacceptable internal reliability of this measure.

Behavioral Intentions

Following descriptions in Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly's (2005) model, we constructed items to evaluate behavioral intentions of the bystander's activities towards the student witness, the victim, and the professor. Again, the 7-point response scale (1 *Strongly Disagree* to 7 *Strongly Agree*) was presented with each item.

Helping Peer Victim. Eight items were developed to evaluate intentions regarding helping responses that are considered important for bystander responses (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Nickerson et al., 2014): provide emotional support for the victim (approach the victim to discuss the situation, encourage her to make a formal complaint), inform/motivate others for action (tell other students, create a coalition of students, help to gather evidence), and personal actions to protect the victim (defend victim if saw it happen again, cover for the victim if needs to be absent, not leave the victim alone again with the professor). The survey questions presented each of the eight items with one focus on how they *would encourage the witness* to respond and another focus on what their own (*I would*) intentions were on these behaviors. Observed internal reliabilities for the two sets of items were $\alpha = .80$ for "I would encourage the witness to..." and $\alpha = .80$ for the "I would..." items.

Social Responses to Peer Victim. Two major areas of intentions regarding social responses were considered: avoiding and including the victim in future behaviors. We constructed items to measure avoiding behaviors: avoiding socializing in class, avoiding taking classes with, avoiding socializing outside of class with the victim ($\alpha = .75$; 3 items). Inclusion behaviors included: volunteer to work with the victim on class projects (in the perpetrator's classroom), spend more time with the victim in class (in the perpetrator's classroom), suggest to friends to include the victim in class work, and suggest to friends to include victim when socializing ($\alpha = .86$; 5 items).

Behaviors Towards the Perpetrator (Professor). Avoidance of the professor also was evaluated in three items: avoid taking classes, avoid socializing outside of class, and avoid meeting individually with the professor ($\alpha = .66$). Due to a "questionable" Cronbach's alpha value, mean scores are interpreted with caution.

Results

Characteristics of the Participants

Among those who provided responses to the demographic questionnaire item, our sample had a relatively even representation for gender (female = 52.8%). The majority were Caucasian (50.3%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (28.2%), Non-White Hispanic/Latino/a (7.2%), Multi-Racial American (6.1%), African

American (5.0%), Not American/Other (1.7%), Native American (1.1%), Middle Eastern American (.6%). The majority (84.4%) attended college in the United States and the remainder were in Canada, were undergraduates (77.2%), studying full-time (79.4%), and studying on campus (58.3%) versus a mixture of on-campus and online. Chi-Square and factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) indicated that the distribution of demographic characteristics of participants in the four vignette groups did not deviate from chance.

Data Cleaning and Screening

Prior to conducting the planned analyses, mean score data were evaluated for outliers and the assumptions of a 2 x 2 factorial ANOVA. Four variables had outliers, three with only one or two cases and one with approximately 5% of the 181 scores. Following Winsor adjustments (Reifman & Keyton, 2010), continuous variables were evaluated for normality. Skewness and kurtosis values were not beyond limits. Evaluations of the assumptions of homogeneity were made during the statistical tests of the research questions.

Group means and standard deviations are reported in Table 1. Results of the 2 x 2 factorial ANOVAs are summarized in Table 2. As may be seen from the analyses, the severity of the CSH was the predominant factor in the responses of the participants: 10 of the 15 analyses resulted in a statistically significant main effect for the severity of CSH, while only four resulted in a main effect for friendship status, and two of these also resulted in a statistically significant interaction of severity and friendship status. Tests for heteroscedasticity indicated that this assumption was not violated.

Factorial ANOVA Results

Table 1. Group Means and Standard Deviations for Participants in Each of the Four Experimental Conditions

Dependent variable	Experimental Condition			
	High severity, friend (n = 45)	High severity, not friend (n = 39)	Low severity, friend (n = 45)	Low severity, not friend (n = 52)
Cognitive/moral appraisals				
Characterization of interaction	7.07 (.92)*	7.03 (1.01)	5.83 (1.24)	5.83 (1.05)
Credibility of Information	6.09 (.793)	5.85 (1.04)	5.71 (1.04)	5.23 (1.04)
Harm to Karen	6.64 (1.32)	6.72 (1.38)	5.49 (1.75)	5.44 (1.61)
Emotional reactions				
Fear of negative consequence of action	3.76 (1.61)	3.44 (1.65)	3.97 (1.66)	4.56 (1.36)
Positive emotions				
–Karen**	6.53 (.72)	6.59 (.62)	6.46 (.65)	6.13 (.96)
–Professor	1.91 (1.44)	1.74 (1.21)	1.77 (1.10)	1.61 (.97)
Negative emotions				
–Karen	1.44 (.90)	1.12 (.57)	1.28 (.62)	1.38 (.95)
–Professor	6.81 (.51)	6.63 (.71)	6.50 (.78)	6.33 (1.00)
Responsibility to Act	6.26 (.70)	6.07 (.97)	5.86 (.97)	5.37 (1.15)
Behavioral intentions: helping victim				
I would...				
–Protect victim	6.38 (.88)	6.40 (.92)	6.21 (.88)	5.73 (1.13)
–Support victim	5.27 (1.10)	5.67 (.93)	5.36 (1.12)	5.01 (1.07)
I would encourage witness to...				
–Protect victim	6.06 (1.00)	6.23 (.97)	5.82 (1.10)	5.36 (1.37)
–Support victim	6.08 (.95)	5.89 (.92)	6.01 (.87)	1.04)
Social responses				
Approach/include Karen in social group	5.06 (1.60)	4.97 (1.48)	5.18 (1.29)	4.64 (1.14)
–Avoid/exclude Karen	1.24 (.49)	1.37 (.77)	1.26 (.71)	4.72 (.73)
–Avoid/exclude professor	6.67 (.90)	6.53 (.92)	6.42 (1.05)	4.11 (.66)

Notes. * mean (standard deviation) **The results for this outcome are to be interpreted with caution because of the unacceptable internal reliability for responses to the 2 items used for the mean score.

Table 2. Results of 2 x 2 Factorial Analyses to Evaluate Research Hypotheses

Dependent variable	Main effect of severity of CSH	Main effect of friendship status	Interaction of severity X friendship status
Cognitive/moral appraisals			
Characterization of interaction	$F(1, 177) = 58.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .250$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Credibility of Information	$F(1, 177) = 11.42, p = .001, \eta^2 = .061$	$F(1, 177) = 6.05, p = .015, \eta^2 = .033$	<i>n.s.</i>
Harm to Karen	$F(1, 177) = 28.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .137$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Responsibility to Act	$F(1, 177) = 14.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = .075$	$F(1, 177) = 5.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .030$	<i>n.s.</i>
Emotional reactions			
Positive emotions	$F(1, 177) = 5.51, p < .02, \eta^2 = .03^*$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s. (p < .10)</i>
- Karen	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
- Professor	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Negative emotions	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s. (p < .07)</i>
- Karen	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
- Professor	$F(1, 177) = 6.82, p < .01, \eta^2 = .037$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Helping behaviors			
I would...			
- Protect victim	$F(1, 177) = 8.44, p = .004, \eta^2 = .077$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s. (p < .08)</i>
-Support victim	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	$F(1, 177) = 5.53, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$
I would encourage witness to...			
- Protect victim	$F(1, 177) = 10.80, p = .001, \eta^2 = .058$	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s. (p = .066)</i>
-Support victim	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s. (p = .062)</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Social responses			
Approach/include Karen in social group	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
Avoid/exclude Karen	$F(1, 177) = 270.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .606$	$F(1, 177) = 360.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .635$	$F(1, 177) = 263.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .600$
Avoid/exclude professor	$F(1, 177) = 101.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .365$	$F(1, 177) = 85.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .327$	$F(1, 177) = 9.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .277$

Notes. * The results for this outcome are to be interpreted with caution because of the unacceptable internal reliability for responses to the 2 items used for the mean score.

η^2 values in bold are high to very high effect sizes, those in italics are medium effects sizes, and those in regular font are smaller effect sizes.

Cognitive/Moral Appraisals

Although the participants were learning about the report of CSH from another student who had witnessed the interaction, they appeared to accept it as credible. Similar to Heretick and Learn (2020), when compared with those in the moderate severity condition, those in the higher severity condition characterized the interaction more negatively ($F(1, 177) = 58.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .250$), reported more credibility of information from the witness ($F(1, 177) = 11.42, p = .001, \eta^2 = .061$), perceived more harm to Karen ($F(1, 177) = 28.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .137$); and assumed a higher responsibility to act ($F(1, 177) = 14.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = .075$).

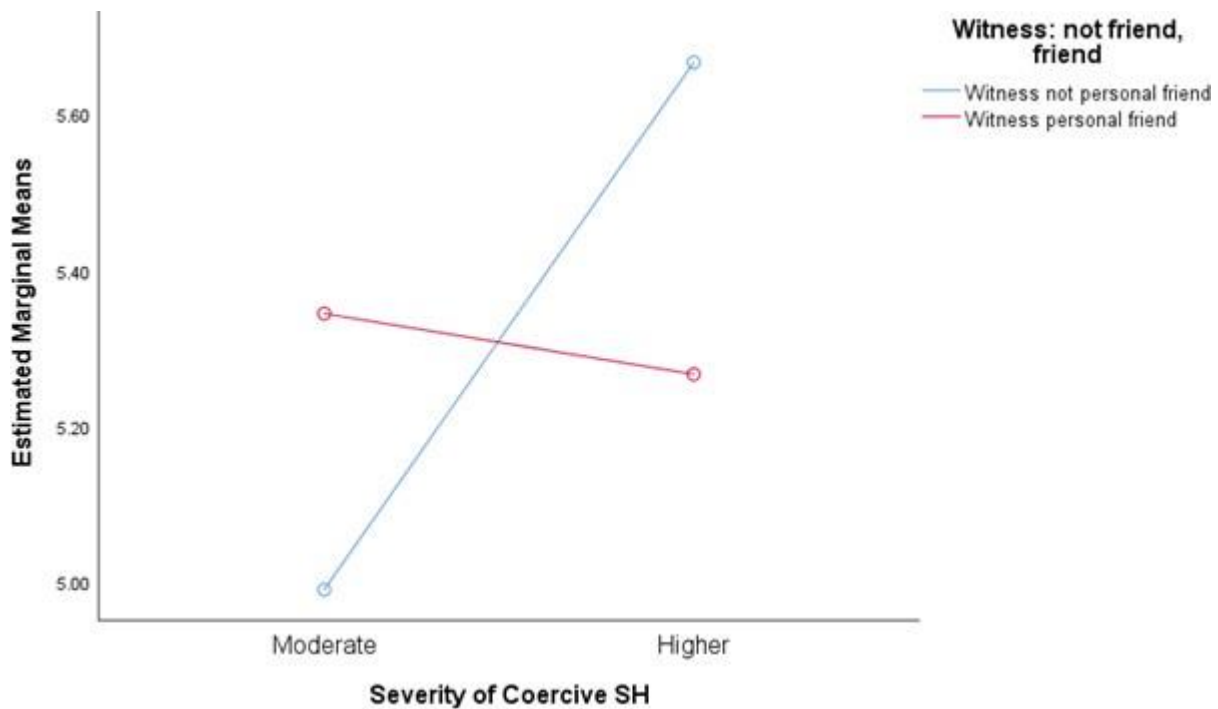
There also was a main effect for friendship status: those in the personal friend of the witness condition reported higher credibility of information from witness ($F(1, 177) = 6.05, p = .015, \eta^2 = .033$) and greater responsibility to act ($F(1, 177) = 5.51, p < .001, \eta^2 = .030$) than in non-friend condition. All of these effect sizes ranged from medium to large.

Emotional Reactions

When compared with those in the moderate severity condition, higher ratings were noted among those in the severe CSH group for negative emotions towards the professor ($F(1, 177) = 6.82, p < .01, \eta^2 = .037$) and for positive emotions towards the victim ($F(1, 177) = 5.51, p < .02, \eta^2 = .03$). However, it should be noted that the latter results were based on the scale where the internal reliability for this sample was below the acceptable level. Effect sizes also were small for these statistically significant results.

Helping Behaviors

Two dimensions of helping behaviors were evaluated: protect victim and support victim. Again, those in the severe CSH condition expressed higher intentions to protect the victim themselves ($F(1, 177) = 8.44, p = .004, \eta^2 = .077$) and to encourage the witness to do the same ($F(1, 177) = 10.80, p = .001, \eta^2 = .058$). There was an interesting interaction between the severity of CSH and friendship status for intention to support the victim ($F(1, 177) = 5.53, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$; see Figure 1): when the witness was a personal friend, there were relatively similar (moderate range) ratings in both the moderate ($M = 5.36, SD = 1.12$) and severe CSH conditions ($M = 5.27, SD = 1.10$); however, when not a personal friend, the intention to support the victim in the moderate severity condition was the lowest of all four groups ($M = 5.01, SD = 1.07$), while in the severe condition, the intention was the highest for all four groups ($M = 5.67, SD = .93$). Although not statistically significant ($p < .08$), a similar interaction was suggested where there were greater differences based on the severity of the CSH when the witness was not a friend. This was one of the first indications of the possible effect of friendship status on direct victim support by the bystander across the severity of CSH conditions. No significant results were noted for encouraging the witness to protect or support the victim.

Figure 1. Interaction Effect for Intentions to Support the Victim

Social Responses

In addition to significant main effects for both severity (avoid/exclude victim: $F(1, 177) = 270.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .606$; avoid/exclude professor: $F(1, 177) = 101.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = .365$) and friendship status (avoid/exclude victim: $F(1, 177) = 360.83, p < .001, \eta^2 = .635$; avoid/exclude professor: $F(1, 177) = 85.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .327$), the results indicated significant interactions between severity of the CSH and friendship status with the witness source (avoid/exclude victim: $F(1, 177) = 263.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .600$; avoid/exclude professor: $F(1, 177) = 9.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .277$) for these responses. All of these results indicated strong effect sizes.

Essentially, the significant differences between severity groups and friendship groups were magnified in the interactions. As figures 2 and 3 illustrate, once again, the friendship status of the witness significantly modified the effect of CSH severity on avoidance/exclusion responses: when the witness was a personal friend, for both avoidance/exclusion of the student and the professor, severity of CSH did not affect respondents' ratings. Here, across both CSH conditions, there were lower levels of avoidance/exclusion responses of the student and higher avoidance/exclusion of the professor. On the other hand, in the moderate CSH condition, the responses of those where the witness was not a personal friend were diametrically opposite from those where the witness was a friend: they were significantly higher than all other groups for avoidance/exclusion of the student victim, and significantly lower for avoidance/exclusion of the professor perpetrator. They did not differ from those in the personal friend condition for these responses in the severe CSH group.

Figure 2. Interaction Effect for Avoidance/Exclusion of the Student Victim

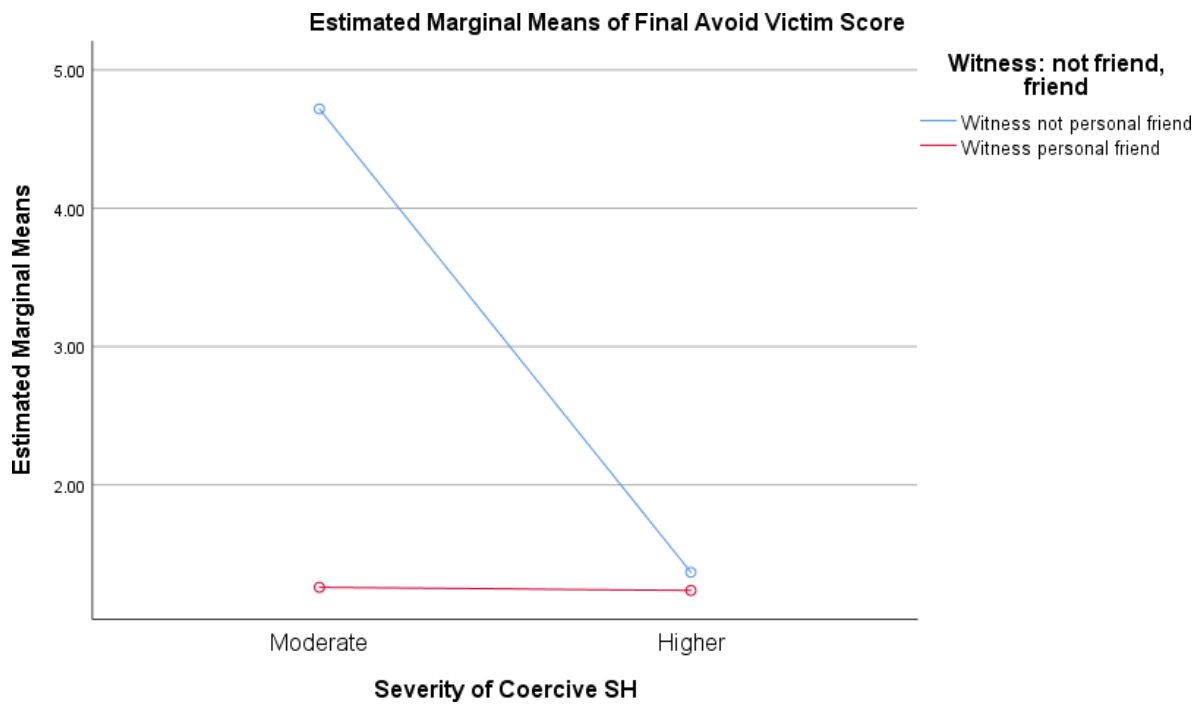
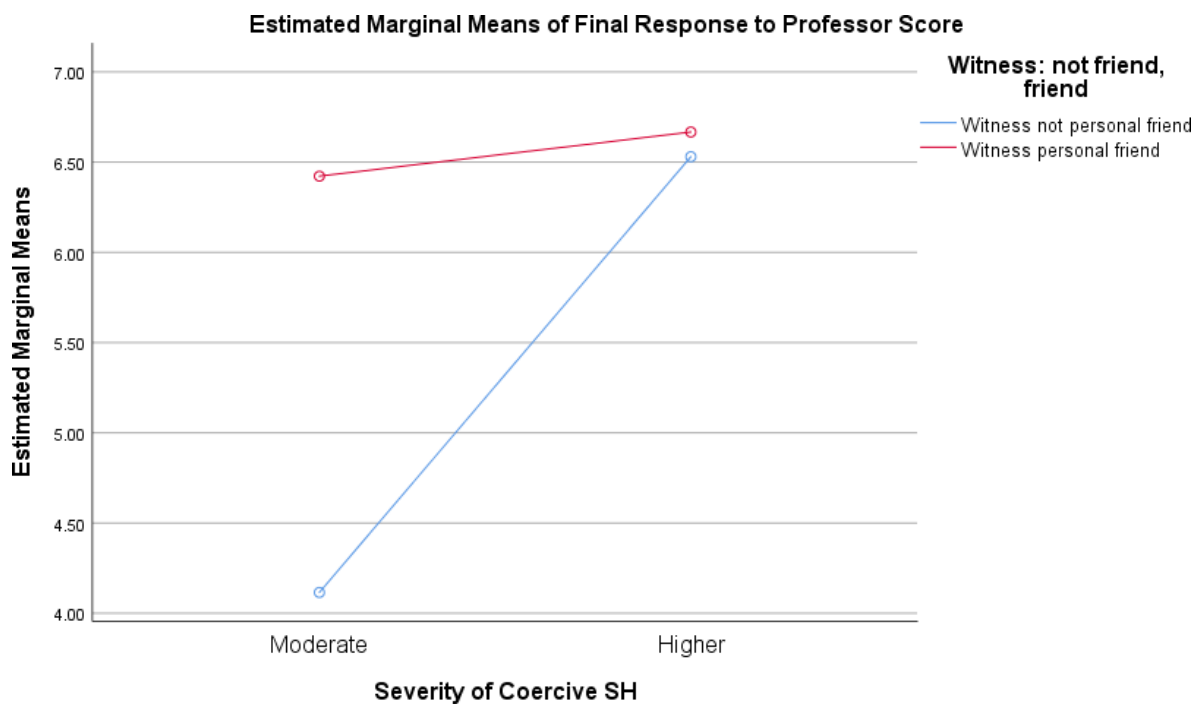


Figure 3. Interaction Effect for Avoidance/Exclusion of the Professor Perpetrator



Discussion

Integration Into the Current Literature

Peer groups are an important resource for counteracting the culture of silence surrounding SH (Banyard et al., 2010; Hershcovis et al., 2021; Peters, 2020). Our current research offers the first consideration of factors that may influence peers who are *indirect bystanders* regarding CSH. Indirect bystanders are defined here as those who learn about CSH through a secondary source. In the written vignettes, the source of the information was a peer who was described either as simply a classmate of the participant or as a classmate who also is a friend. The behaviors that were described by the direct witness between their class professor and another classmate illustrated either moderate or severe levels of CSH.

Overall, study results suggest that the severity of CSH was a predominant factor that affected cognitive/moral appraisals (credibility of information from the witness, perceived harm to the victim, responsibility to act), emotional reactions (toward the professor and the victim), helping behaviors (direct protection of the victim, encouragement of the direct witness to assist the victim), and future social inclusion/exclusion of the victim and the professor in question. The outcomes for indirect bystanders are consistent with the previous significant results from Heretick and Learn (2020) with direct witnesses: the severe CSH condition with physical violation of the female student victim evoked more sympathetic emotional responses toward the victim and more negative emotions toward the male professor, as well as more desire to protect the student victim. However, the results of the current study regarding the effect of CSH severity on emotional reactions should be interpreted with caution as the internal reliability of the scale on positive emotions toward the victim had lower than acceptable internal reliability and the results for this main effect had a small effect size.

Results of this study provide further support for previous arguments by Banyard et al. (2010) and Bennett and Banyard (2016) regarding the role of the intertwined community as an important variable for predicting the impact of SH on college student victims. Even when considering indirect bystanders, outcomes indicate that those who learn of CSH from another student who is also a friend are more invested in the welfare of the student victim in the moderate condition than when the source of the information is simply a classmate. The friendship factor appears to override other limitations to bystander help imposed by a more ambiguous form descriptive of moderate CSH (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; Heretick & Learn, 2020).

While only trends, friendship status appeared to be more relevant in the moderate CSH condition with respect to the positive emotions towards the victim and negative emotions towards the perpetrator. When the source was described as a classmate who also was a friend in the moderate CSH condition, participants were significantly more likely to support the victim than those in the same moderate severity condition who were told by a classmate. Friendship status was less relevant in the higher severity condition. The effect sizes for the social responses of the indirect bystanders were markedly highest with respect to the interaction of the severity of the CSH and the friendship status of the source witness: when compared *within the moderate CSH condition*, those who were told by a friend were significantly less likely to avoid/exclude the victim but more likely to avoid/exclude the professor going forward than those for whom the source was not described as a friend.

Thus, the friendship status between the direct witness and the indirect bystander significantly interacted to affect some aspects of bystander responses. Consistent with situations affecting bystander behavior that were researched by Katz et al. (2015), shared social group membership, including friendship status, appeared to increase a potential victim's chances for empathy and assistance by a bystander, including an indirect bystander. Effect sizes were markedly highest with respect to friendship status for those in the moderate CSH condition: within the moderate CSH condition, those who were told by a friend were significantly less likely to

avoid/exclude the victim, but more likely to avoid/exclude the professor going forward than those for whom the source was not described as a friend. No similar interaction effects were noted for the severe CSH condition. Interestingly, there were no statistically significant effects of friendship status on prosocial responses to the victim (volunteering to work with the victim on class projects, spending more time with her in class in general, and suggesting the same to other friends). These outcomes are discrepant with the results of Katz et al. (2015) study where the same group membership predicted more help for the potential student victim.

Limitations

As with most research, there are limitations that affect the generalizability and interpretations of this study and the reported findings. First, the participants were limited to those who signed up with Prolific Academic to do scientific research in an online format (Palan & Schitter, 2018). Thus, it is not known if they are truly representative of the general college student population.

In addition, research in this area of bystander response is usually limited to written vignettes. The ecological validity of this method is limited, as compared with research that might place the unsuspecting prospective participant in an actual situation where they might witness this kind of behavior. However, participation without informed consent no longer meets ethical standards for psychological research.

With respect to the data, as noted, the items to evaluate emotional responses showed lower levels of internal reliability. This limits the interpretation of the results. Further, the assumption of normality of distributions was strained as most of the scores showed skewed distributions, which may be characteristic of responses to these kinds of situations. However, as noted earlier, the relative variability across groups did not differ significantly.

Follow-up research may wish to add/manipulate the definition of “close friend” as well as include comparisons with “friend” and classmate. In addition, information may be added about the direct witness’ own bystander responses. Clearly, this may introduce additional suggestions regarding social relationships and helping behaviors.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study contributed to research on bystander understanding of CSH and willingness to intervene and support student victims. The outcomes of this study suggest the importance of friendship as one element of social networks when indirect witnesses overhear about CSH from a personal friend. In such cases where there are social bonds and relational networks, victims of CSH have a greater chance for assistance and social support, especially in moderate CSH situations that may be more ambiguous to identify the problem of CSH and/or where it may be riskier to take a chance in case it is a misinterpretation of the behavior that was witnessed/reported.

Conclusion

The current findings support college training programs’ activities that focus on social networks as part of attempts to head off SH (e.g., Wamboldt et al., 2019). Factors such as social affiliations may be targeted for interventions to counteract the current possibility of social ostracism for joining with the victim (Brown & Battle, 2019; Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Diekmann et al., 2013; Flecha, 2021), as well as an institutional betrayal of victims (NASEM, 2018; Page & Pina, 2015; Smith & Freyd, 2014). Wamboldt et al. (2019) advised that training should provide information on effective ways to address these situations where there are pressures for bystanders to conform to the group norms rather than support a victim.

Training programs and policies that emphasize responsibilities towards peers may mitigate risks of reduced helping in situations when negative consequences are possible and/or anticipated (Brown & Battle, 2019; Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018; Diekmann et al., 2013; Flecha, 2021; Heretick & Learn, 2020; Humphreys & Towl, 2020; Laird & Pronin, 2019; NASEM, 2018). The #MeToo movement has forced the larger society to discuss the problem and confront perpetrators for current and past behaviors (Hershcovis et al., 2021). Millions of people in the #MeToo movement spoke against enshrined silence and lack of support for victims of SH. The current conflicts of interests and pressures against helping may be resolved when students are guided to be supportive of their fellow students who are victims and, if necessary, to take legal actions outside of the academic institution against the inappropriate sexual behavior by faculty members (Cantalupo & Kidder, 2018).

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