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College Students' Reactions to Sexual Assault Disclosure

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Abstract

A total of 60 Augsburg University undergraduate students took part in a survey to examine reactions to sexual assault disclosure among college students. College students were asked to either respond based on personal experience (i.e., reflective) or, when they lacked personal experience with sexual assault disclosure, to respond hypothetically. The hypothetical group indicated significantly higher unsupportive acknowledgement than the reflective group. Preliminary analyses also revealed that gender did not significantly impact the reactions to disclosure, though male college students reported higher rape myth acceptance than female college students. Given that more than half of the college students experienced a sexual assault disclosure from a friend, it is important to better understand factors associated with positive responses to a sexual assault disclosure.

Introduction

Sexual assault survivors tend to disclose sexual assault experiences to friends and family more often than with health care providers and law enforcement, and to report that reactions from friends are generally positive and healing (Ahrens, Cabral, & Abeling, 2009; Ullman, 2010). In a study focusing on young adult women, 55.2% had disclosed their assault to peer, with nearly twice as many disclosing the assault to a female rather than a male friend (Orchowski & Gidycz, 2012).

Many factors can influence reactions to sexual assault disclosure, including gender of the person providing support, the relationship between the survivor and support provider, and personal experiences. Additionally, the *defensive attribution hypothesis* (Workman & Freeburg, 1999) posits that people who relate to a victim by "recognizing a common vulnerability" (Untied et al., 2012, p. 958) will respond in a more empathetic fashion than those who cannot identify with the experience.

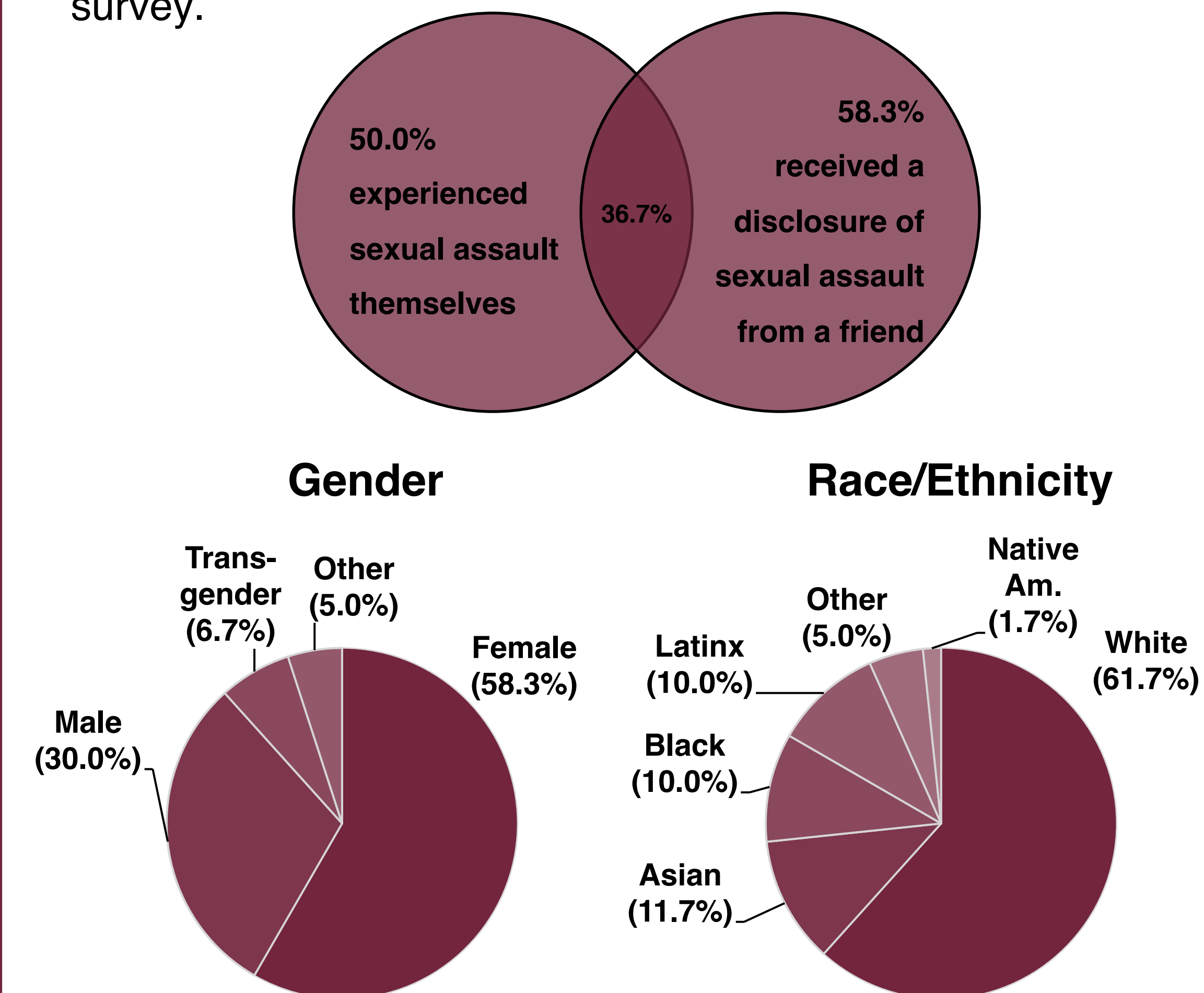
Hypotheses

- Male friends would report more negative reactions and higher rape myth acceptance than female friends
- Higher rape myth acceptance would be associated with more negative reactions to disclosure than lower rape myth acceptance
- Friends who could relate to the survivor's experience would respond in a more positive manner than those who did not have a common experience
- Participants responding hypothetically would report more extreme reactions than participants responding reflectively

Method

Participants

- 60 Augsburg University college students participated in the survey.



Measures and Procedure

- Personal Experience:
 - One item reporting whether or not they have had a personal experience with sexual assault and one item reporting whether or not they have ever been the recipient of a sexual assault disclosure.
- Social Reactions Questionnaire:
 - 48-item scale measuring positive and negative reactions to sexual assault disclosure on a five-point Likert scale.
- Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) scale:
 - Twenty-item scale measuring respondents' preconceived ideas and implicit acceptance of rape myths using a five-point Likert scale.

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Results

- Preliminary *t*-tests revealed no significant gender differences for social reactions categorized as "Turning Against" reactions, $t(50)=1.88, p=0.15$, "Unsupportive Acknowledgement" reactions, $t(51)=2.35, p=0.14$, or "Positive Support" reactions, $t(51)=-1.89, p=0.79$.
- Male college students reported significantly higher rape myth acceptance scores ($M=38.14, SD=6.55$) than female college students ($M=33.46, SD=3.41; t(51)=3.44, p<0.001$).
- There was a significant positive correlation between rape myth acceptance and both "Turning Against" reactions, $r=0.500, p<0.001$, and "Unsupportive Acknowledgement" reactions, $r=0.498, p<0.001$. There was a significant negative correlation between rape myth acceptance and "Positive Support" reactions, $r=-0.305, p=0.018$.
- ANOVA analyses revealed no significant differences between reflective and hypothetical responses for "Turning Against" reactions, $F(1,57)=3.05, p=0.09$, or "Positive Support" reactions, $F(1,58)=0.48, p=0.49$, but revealed a significant difference between groups for "Unsupportive Acknowledgement" reactions, $F(1,58)=9.98, p=0.003$ (see Figure 1).

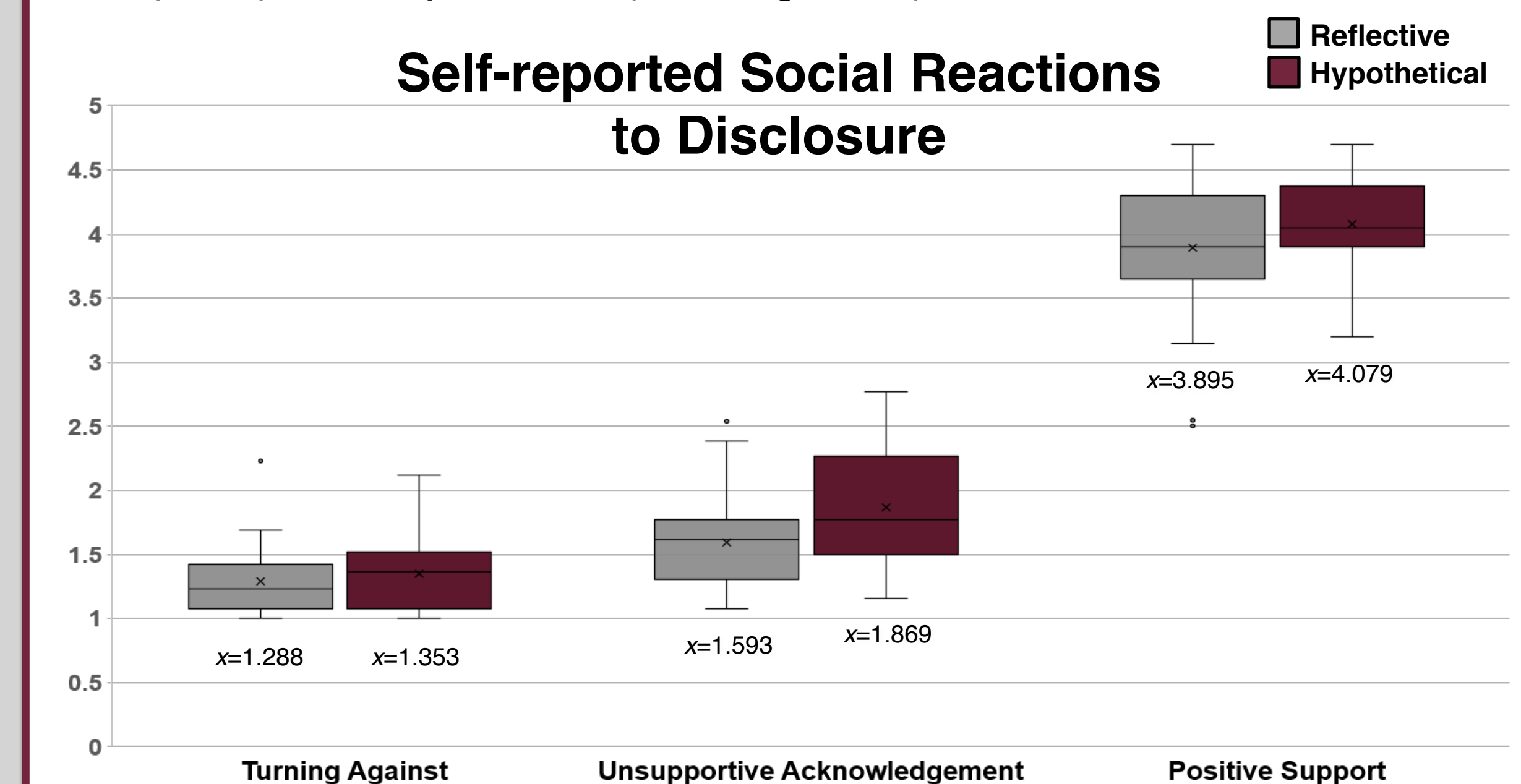


Figure 1. Ranges of average reactions to sexual assault disclosure by category and response group.

Discussion

Preliminary analyses indicated that gender does not have a significant impact on reactions to sexual assault disclosure. However, male college students reported significantly higher rape myth acceptance than female college students. Though limited research has examined informal sexual assault disclosure with friends, it is important to understand what factors promote positive responses to these disclosures—especially given the prevalence of sexual assault disclosure among college friends.