

G8.2 Conwy 1 Thursday 6 December 9.00-11.00

Exploring Consequences of Bystander Action in Higher Education: Implications for Sexual Violence Prevention (0190)

Victoria Banyard¹ *University of New Hampshire, Manchester, United States of America*

High rates of sexual assault (SA) and dating violence (DV) among college students is a significant public health problem that interferes with students successfully achieving their academic goals (Banyard, Demers, et al, 2017). Research in communities suggests that many incidents are witnessed by a third party who had the potential to help (Banyard et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). These bystanders, or “actionists” have been well-studied on college campuses. Researchers have also documented the promise of prevention strategies that train college students to be active bystanders. Less studied are the potential consequences of these actions – both how the actionist themselves feels afterward, but also what reactions (positive or negative) they receive.

Recent research suggests that the experience of negative consequences for bystander action is not uncommon (Krauss et al., 2017; Witte, Casper, Hackman, and Mulla, 2017) Such findings are a cause for concern. Although many college campuses have instituted programs to encourage bystander intervention and teach students how to take action, little research has examined the extent to which these programs might put individuals in harm’s way, and what actual costs and benefits bystanders experience if they step in.

Models of bystander behavior describe how bystander action is mediated by internal attitudes and processes. Thus, we tested such a model using structural equation modeling. Specifically, we built on previous work to model how bystander consequences as perceived by the actionist impacts two key correlates of future bystander prevention actions: bystander efficacy and intent to help. We hypothesized that each of the 6 forms of bystander consequences, that measured how other reacted to the actionist, would explain unique and significant variance in bystander efficacy and intent to help. Specifically, greater positive and fewer negative bystander reactions from victims, perpetrators, and other bystanders would be related to greater bystander efficacy and intent to help. We further hypothesized that these relations would be mediated by bystanders’ feelings about what happened when they stepped in.

Participants were recruited through a university psychology subject pool ($N = 674$) and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $N = 717$). The university subject pool produced a fairly homogenous sample in terms of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender and therefore, we collected additional data using MTurk to expand the diversity of the sample. Participants completed surveys asking questions about the types of incidents and actions they took and what they perceived happened next – how they felt about helping and their perceptions of others’ reactions. Comparisons of consequences by types of helping were computed and structural equation modeling was used to examine the relationships among bystander consequence variables and outcomes including confidence and future intent to help.

Interestingly, several dimensions of bystander consequences explained significant variance in two key bystander attitudes that are related to bystander behavior: efficacy and intent to help. Specifically, positive reactions from victims and other bystanders were related to higher efficacy and intent, while negative reactions were associated with lower efficacy and intent. Further, bystanders’ feelings (particularly negative feelings) about having taken action mediated these relationships. This extends current theories of bystander action, suggesting that bystanders

attend to reactions from others which, when positive, are associated with greater positive evaluations of their actions and lower negative evaluations, which in turn are associated with greater efficacy and intent to help. If a goal of higher education prevention efforts that train bystanders to help, is to promote ongoing and future action, then more work needs to be done to help bystanders feel supported when they act and to promote positive feelings and reduce negative perceptions of what they did.

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- Taylor, E., Banyard, V., Grych, J. & Hamby, S. (2016). Not all behind closed doors: Examining bystander involvement in intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.
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