When Too Many Bystanders Are Not Enough: Predictors of Bystander Intervention Involving Anti-Gay Aggression

Key Terms Defined

- **Traditional masculine gender role beliefs** – a traditional set of beliefs about the way men should behave; includes anti-femininity as a component
- **Anti-femininity** – the belief that feminine traits should be avoided
- **Confederate** – an individual who participates in a psychological experiment who works for the researcher, but pretends to be a participant

Background

The bystander intervention approach has recently received attention from researchers as a promising approach to stopping problematic behaviors, such as bullying, sexual violence, and aggression (Coker & Cook-Craig, 2011; Gidycz, 2011; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Little research, however, links the current applied research on bystander interventions with the basic social psychological research on helping behavior, such as the effect of diffusion of responsibility – whereby each individual is less likely to intervene as the total number of bystanders increases (Darley & Latane, 1968; Fischer & Krueger, 2011). It is currently unknown whether aspects of the situation (e.g., number of other bystanders) or individual-level factors (e.g., personality characteristics or individual attitudes) significantly affect bystanders’ decisions to intervene in situations involving violence. This study aimed to bridge the gap between the two literatures on bystander intervention and to assess how individual-level and situational characteristics contribute to the decision to intervene to stop anti-gay aggression.

Study

A laboratory experiment was conducted in which participants were exposed to a staged, yet realistic, scene of anti-gay aggression. In this scenario, a male confederate (the aggressor) threatened another, ostensibly gay, male confederate (the victim). Sixty undergraduate male participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions with: (1) the participant as the only bystander, (2) one other bystander in addition to the participant, or (2) two other bystanders in addition to the participant (n’s = 19, 22, and 19, respectively). The experiment was conducted in a research laboratory set up like a waiting room (See Figure 1 for layout). The naive participant was left alone with the confederates while the experimenter left, ostensibly to make photocopies. The aggressor, victim, and participant were present in all conditions, and all confederates closely followed a script wherein the aggressor slowly escalated verbal aggression toward the victim over approximately six minutes. The script culminated with the aggressor standing up and behaving in a physically intimidating manner toward the victim, after which the experimenter returned to the room. All interactions were recorded with a hidden camera.

After the conclusion of the six-minute scenario, the experimenter took the naive participants to another room to perform a 15-minute reaction-time task, a distractor task intended to disguise the true purpose of the research. After the distractor task, participants completed surveys of traditional masculine gender role beliefs, attitudes toward gay men, and a thorough probe for suspicion. All protocols were approved by a local institutional review board. Participants were fully debriefed immediately after the session and allowed to opt out from having their videos retained by the research team. Participants who expressed suspicion about the staged altercation were not counted in the final sample size and their data were excluded from analyses. Videos of the staged scenario were coded for time to intervention, using Darley...
and Latane’s, (1968) computation strategy, as well as type of intervention (e.g., directed at aggressor or victim).

Results of a regression analysis indicate that attitudes toward gay men significantly predicted intervention speed ($r = .35, p < .05$), with participants who are more accepting of gay men being quicker to intervene, on average. The traditional masculine trait of anti-femininity also significantly predicted time to intervention ($r = -.31, p < .05$), with participants who reported higher levels of anti-femininity being generally slower to intervene. Each additional bystander corresponded with an increased intervention time of approximately 30 seconds, suggesting diffusion of responsibility at a degree evoking real-world significance. However, the effect of number of bystanders on time to intervene did not reach conventional statistical significance.

Participants in the condition with two additional bystanders were the least likely to intervene overall: 32% intervention compared to 40% and 41% for the zero and one-bystander conditions, respectively. Interestingly, although about 60% and 75% of participants in the zero and one-bystander conditions, respectively, chose to intervene directly with the aggressor, 100% of participants in the condition with two bystanders chose to intervene with the victim, and did not intervene directly with the aggressor.

Figure 1. Layout of the laboratory
Implications for Violence Prevention

Results of the present study support diffusion of responsibility in situations involving anti-gay aggression. However, the results also suggest, in addition to situational characteristics, personality and attitudinal factors predict time to intervention. Furthermore, factors that predicted time to intervene in this experiment--anti-femininity and attitudes toward gay men--have previously been established in the anti-gay aggression literature as predictors of anti-gay aggression.

This study has implications for bystander intervention programs seeking to stop homophobic bullying and anti-gay aggression. The study demonstrates that individual-level attitudes, such as anti-gay stigma and traditional beliefs about masculinity, affect individuals’ willingness to stop anti-gay aggression in a timely manner. Training bystanders how to intervene may therefore not be enough, and underlying attitudes known to predict anti-gay aggression, such as anti-gay stigma, must also be considered as targets for intervention.

Other resources for information on this topic


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