Alone in a Crowded Room: The Inhibiting Effects of Male Peers and Efficacy on Bystander Intervention for Sexual Aggression

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Key Terms Defined

- **Misogyny** – the hatred of women, often expressed through violence against women or sexual objectification
- **Bystander Efficacy** – one’s confidence to intervene in sexually aggressive events
- **Audience Inhibition** – the phenomenon in which an individual does not intervene because doing so runs the risk of embarrassment

Background

Male-to-female sexual aggression (SA) is a serious public health concern, especially among college populations. While the blame of SA should ultimately rest on the perpetrators, bystanders can play an important role in prevention, as they are estimated to be present in approximately one-third of sexual assaults (Planty, 2002). As such, bystander intervention programs aim to teach men and women how to become successful bystanders (e.g., Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Berkowitz, 2002). Research indicates that bystander efficacy is positively associated with bystander behavior for SA (e.g., Parrott et al., 2012); however, it is unknown how the situation in which a sexually aggressive event takes place influences the likelihood of bystander behavior. Bystanders may be inhibited from intervening in certain contexts due to audience inhibition. This may be especially relevant in certain situations when intervening contradicts social norms. Specific to SA, men may be inhibited from intervening due to traditional male gender norms that discourage intervening in another man’s “sexual conquest” (Carson, 2008). This may be especially true when men are among peers who appear to support violence against women.

The aim of the present study was to examine how the presence of misogynistic peers influences the relationship between bystander efficacy and bystander intervention among men.

Study

Participants were 43 undergraduate men between the ages of 18-30 recruited from a large university in the Southeast. Men filled out a survey to assess their confidence in intervening in male-to-female sexual aggression (i.e., bystander efficacy). Approximately one week later, participants came back to the laboratory for a separate session. During this session, participants engaged in a novel laboratory paradigm, which mirrored SA in that men had the opportunity to override a woman’s sexual boundaries. In the paradigm, the participants and three male actors watched a female actor, who reported a strong dislike of sexual content in the media, view a sexually explicit film. Participants could stop the woman from watching the video at any time by pressing a designated key on the keyboard. Prior to the woman viewing the film, participants were randomly assigned to an audience manipulation wherein the male actors set a group norm to reflect misogyny or non-misogyny. Bystander intervention was measured by the amount of time it took men to stop the sexually explicit film clip.

Findings revealed when men are among peers who are supportive of SA, bystander intervention was inhibited (see Figure 1). This may be because intervention is viewed as less “manly” or that individuals fear losing status as a man if they intervene. However, when men are among non-misogynistic peers, high bystander efficacy is associated with intervening in SA more quickly, relative to those low in efficacy. This suggests having the confidence to intervene in SA is related to actual bystander intervention, but only when men are around peers that may be perceived as rejecting violence against women or those that hold more...
prosocial norms. It is in this type of environment that men’s confidence to intervene can be translated into action.

In summary, when men were among misogynistic peers, they rarely intervened. However, when men were among peers who are non-misogynistic, they took action. They acted significantly more quickly if they also had confidence in their ability to intervene to prevent SA.

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention Speed</th>
<th>Did Not Intervene</th>
<th>Misogynistic Peers</th>
<th>Non-Misogynistic Peers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Bystander Efficacy</td>
<td>High Bystander Efficacy</td>
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</tbody>
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Implications for Violence Prevention

This work has several implications. First, while many bystander intervention programs target single-gender audiences (e.g., Gidycz, et al., 2011), there is a dearth of empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of these programs. This is the first study to examine the unique challenges men face in the presence of misogynistic peers, which inhibits actual bystander behavior. Engaging men using small focus groups may allow men to talk about these unique issues more freely. Second, intervention programs should aim to empower men to intervene across various social contexts, especially around peers that hold certain attitudes towards women. Moreover, intervention programs should teach men how to intervene in social contexts that may be threatening to one’s masculinity. For example, when witnessing SA behavior at a party, a man may ally with another friend to engage in bystander behavior together, rather than by himself. Conversely, a man may indirectly intervene by finding a friend of the victim to help. These methods of intervention may be less threatening because engaging others in intervention can alleviate some fears of embarrassment associated with intervening alone. Third, results suggest that men are most likely to intervene in SA if they are around peers who do not support violence against women. As such, it is important for men to challenge others when they witness misogynistic behaviors (e.g., sexist jokes, sexually objectifying language). For example, men may challenge sexists joke by simply saying, “That’s not funny,” or asking if the individual would be comfortable telling a joke about a racial/ethnic or sexual minority.

Other resources for information on this topic

http://www.mencanstoprape.org


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