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What Would You Do? Strategies for Bystander Intervention to Prevent Sexual Violence by College Students

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Abstract

Bystander education is an increasingly utilized strategy for addressing sexual assault prevention and intervention on U.S. college campuses. Given the paramount importance of peers among college students, what types of pro-social bystander interventions do students themselves deem feasible in the campus context? Drawing on self-reports from first-year undergraduate students who participated in a bystander education program, this analysis summarizes a range of student responses. Because peers form the support base for these interventions, their influence must be accounted for in the development of bystander education interventions on campuses.

The epidemic rate of campus sexual assault has been well documented in the literature, with estimates that 20% to 25% of all women experience a completed or attempted assault while at college (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2005). The devastating consequences on survivors has also been well established, including negative impacts on physical, emotional, and sexual health as well as academic performance (Campbell, 2008). In response, many colleges are implementing sexual assault prevention programs to address the problem.

Increasingly, peer and community contexts have been regarded as a salient focus for the prevention of sexual assault (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Within these peer contexts, social norms and expectations can

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influence both the occurrence and prevention of sexual assault. For example, male peer support theory suggests that sexual assault is more likely to occur in situations where men perceive support for their actions from their peers (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Additionally, Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, and Stark (2004) demonstrated that the primary factor impacting men's willingness to intervene to prevent sexual assault was their perception of other men's willingness to intervene. Similarly, Brown and Messman-Moore (2010) found that the most significant factor in predicting men's willingness to intervene in situations involving sexual assault was perceived peer attitudes about sexual aggression.

Based on the recognition of the potentially prominent role of peer contexts, the bystander approach has been introduced as a way for peers to challenge the social norms in their communities that support sexual violence. Its premise is that individuals in a community can intervene in prosocial ways before, during, or after a sexual assault occurs (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004).

The bystander approach may have particular relevance in college settings, which have been identified as at-risk contexts for sexual violence (Burn, 2009), but which also provide opportunities for students to learn about bystander intervention and to receive support from the greater campus community. Bystander education builds upon the call for institutions of higher education to facilitate personal and social responsibility (see Colby & Sullivan, 2009; Mayhew & Engberg, 2010). By framing sexual violence as a community responsibility that requires students to engage in pro-social behavior, college administrators can influence students' civic, personal, and moral development.

While much of the research in the field of bystander intervention focuses on whether or not individuals will take action in sexual assault situations and other types of emergencies, there is less research indicating *what* it is that they would do (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006). Given the late adolescent developmental stage of many college students, peer influences are paramount (Astin, 1997; Casey & Lindhorst, 2010). Finding ways to challenge peers as bystanders in certain situations may be difficult for students for a number of reasons, including a fear of rejection and a need for congruence with one or more student subcultures in order to succeed in college (Burn, 2009). Therefore, it is critical to begin to understand what types of bystander intervention actions college students propose as feasible for challenging sexual assault on campus. As such, the purpose of this study is to explore the strategies generated by students themselves for engaging in bystander intervention to challenge sexual assault.

Types of Bystander Intervention

Once potential bystanders decide to act, they are faced with a range of options in terms of how to intervene. In particular, bystanders must decide what type of strategy to employ, as well as who will be the target. The research indicates several distinctions, indicating that not all types of bystander intervention or helping behavior are the same (Dovidio et al., 2006). Some authors have distinguished between direct and indirect actions (Berkowitz, 2009; Chabot, Tracy, Manning, & Poisson, 2009). Direct intervention can involve confrontation with the offender or in situations involving immediate harm, offering support to the victim, or waiting until later for situations that pose less immediate risk for the victim or bystander. Indirect intervention refers to other bystanders or individuals who may be affected by the action (Berkowitz, 2009).

The distinction among types of potential bystander action has also been by bystander education programs. For example, the Green Dot program suggests that individuals can consider "the three D's" when deciding how to intervene. Delegating is asking someone to help in the situation; distracting creates a diversion, and being direct is interacting with the perpetrator or victim (California Coalition Against Sexual

Assault, n.d.). The White Ribbon Campaign outlines three types of communication that bystanders can use: passive, assertive, and aggressive (White Ribbon, n.d.). In addition to deciding what type of action to take, individuals must decide who will be the target of the help. Berkowitz (2009) explained that actions can be directed to the offending person (perpetrator), victim, or other bystanders.

Clearly, researchers are recognizing that bystander intervention is complex with many types of intervention possible. The type of strategy can vary and may be based on situational factors such as whether the opportunity occurs before, during, or after an assault. There is a lack of information from potential bystanders themselves to explore what strategies they would generate in various situations. It is unclear whether the typologies proposed in the literature actually fit with what students themselves view as feasible bystander actions. This information is important to gather to help facilitate our understanding of the types of bystander interventions that college students endorse as realistic and plausible.

The purpose of the current study was to explore the strategies generated by college students to address a variety of bystander opportunities related to sexual violence prevention. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study asked the following research questions: (a) What strategies do college students identify to address bystander opportunities before, during, and after a sexual assault occurs?, (b) Are the types of strategies direct or indirect for each of these categories (before, during, or after an assault)?, and (c) Towards whom are the bystander interventions directed (victim, perpetrator, other bystanders, or general situation)?

Methods

Setting and Data Collection

The data for this paper were collected as part of a larger experimental study that examined the effectiveness of a bystander intervention education program at a large public university in the Northeast. As part of the larger research project, students were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Both groups attended a peer education presentation at new student orientation that used theater to depict a rape, including actions before, during, and after the assault. The peer educator actors showed different bystander perspectives, including individuals who either support or blame the victim for her actions, do not want to become involved in the situation, and either collude with or confront the perpetrator.

One group was then invited to participate in two additional bystander education workshops. During the first workshop, students were presented with an introduction to bystander intervention. In the second workshop, which is the focus of this article, participants were organized in small groups and were presented with one of six potential bystander scenarios and asked to discuss how they would respond. The scenarios were based on the skit that the students originally viewed at orientation and were devised by peer educators to reflect possible bystander opportunities. A total of six scenarios were presented, including two that occurred prior to an assault, two that occurred during an assault, and two that occurred after an assault. In order to keep the analysis manageable and to avoid redundancy, we selected three scenes for analysis, representing opportunities to intervene before, during, and after the assault (see Results section for further description of scenarios).

Sample and Data Collection

A total of 1,224 students who were part of a larger study were invited to attend the two workshops, with a total of 620 attending the first workshop, and 550 attending the second workshop. The second workshop,

which is the focus of this article, was offered a total of 21 times, with attendance ranging from 9 to 46 participants at each session ($N = 550$). In the sessions, the students were randomly divided into six small groups with 6 to 10 participants. All participants were first-year students in their first semester of college. The sample included 60% women, 39% White, 24% Asian/South Asian, 10% Black/African/Caribbean, 7% Latino/a, 6% Pacific Islander/Mid-Eastern/Indian, and 14% missing ethnicity. Participant groups were assigned a peer educator who was trained to work with them on a specific scenario. The peer educator read the scenario to the students and encouraged them to brainstorm as many interventions as possible. All brainstormed interventions were recorded on a flip board, and then were shared and discussed with the larger group.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the interventions developed by program participants during the second workshop were compiled and coded. The interventions were reviewed to determine if they were unique suggestions or reflected interventions that had been demonstrated by peer educators in the first workshop. Then, a deductive approach was used to test whether categories of bystander intervention in the literature were apparent in the data (Patton, 2002). A codebook was created that included a systematic checklist that combined a number of bystander categories described in the research literature. First, each intervention was reviewed to see if it was direct or indirect, based on Berkowitz's (2009) definitions. Direct interventions were those that directly addressed the perpetrator/victim or the concern. Indirect interventions were identified as actions that prevent the problematic situation without addressing the individual's behavior.

After coding interventions as direct or indirect, they were further categorized. If an intervention was coded as "direct," it was further coded as "passive," "assertive," or "aggressive," modified based on the framework developed by the White Ribbon Campaign. *Passive interventions* are interventions that involve doing something that intentionally disrupts the harmful behavior without directly addressing the target of the intervention or the harmful act itself. *Assertive interventions* are directed toward a particular target or a particular behavior; however, the tone of the intervention is rational and respectful. Similar to assertive interventions, *aggressive interventions* are directed toward a particular target or behavior; however, these interventions are considered confrontational in some way. Often the bystander uses insults, mean-spirited or sarcastic jokes, or commands to interrupt the harmful action.

If the intervention was coded as "indirect," it was further coded as "distract," "delegate," or "other," drawing on the Green Dot program (Edwards, 2009). *Distract interventions* aim to diffuse problematic situations by changing the focus of the people involved in the situation, but without necessarily confronting them about the problematic behavior. Those interventions coded as *delegate* involved asking someone else to help with the situation. To determine if the use of direct versus indirect interventions varied significantly by the type of scenario (before, during, or after an assault), a Chi-square statistic was computed.

An inductive approach was also used to allow the identification of new types of interventions that did not fit in the predetermined categories (Patton, 2002). Researchers generated new categories when they observed interventions that did not fit into one of the predetermined categories but rather were labeled as "other." All codes were entered into an Excel spreadsheet for descriptive analysis including frequencies.

Next, each intervention was also coded to determine who was the target of the intervention, including the victim, the perpetrator, or other. To increase reliability, the two researchers reviewed the intervention data separately and then met to compare their findings (Patton, 2002). The majority of coding decisions (ap-

proximately 90%) were agreed upon by the two researchers. When there were disagreements about coding choices, the researchers discussed these differences until they reached consensus in the codes.

Results

The results indicate that a number of types of interventions were proposed by students, with 70% coded as unique and 30% repeated from a previous workshop. The interventions suggested by students included some that aligned with the categories proposed in the literature, as well as others that suggested different approaches.

Intervening Prior to Assault

The first scene analyzed depicted a group of college students at a party, where one of the males was degrading women and using drinking games to get the women drunk. Based on the original skit, the male eventually convinced one of the women to come to his room, where he raped her. Students were aware that this situation resulted in a sexual assault and were asked what type of intervention could have occurred prior to the assault, during the time period when the female was drinking alcohol. For this scene, 73% of interventions proposed by students were coded as unique and 27% repeated actions shown in the previous workshop.

In response to this scene, 34% of the interventions proposed by students were direct while 59% were indirect. Of the direct interventions, the majority suggested were assertive (69%). Examples of this type of intervention included directly telling the male to stop being a “creep” or degrading women. Assertive interventions also focused on asking the male if he would treat a female family member in such a disrespectful way.

For those that were indirect, most interventions involved distraction (60%), such as suggesting another group activity that did not involve alcohol, convincing the women to leave to dance in another room, or spilling the drinks. A total of 19% of the proposed indirect interventions were labeled as delegating, with suggestions such as changing the leader of the game.

A small number of proposed interventions (7%) were neither direct nor indirect. These included two that were labeled “leveling the playing field interventions,” which attempted to involve the men in drinking large amounts of alcohol also. Additionally, two multilayer interventions were proposed that involved actions that were considered both direct and indirect.

In terms of who was the target of the intervention, 38% of the interventions for this scenario were directed towards the perpetrator and 6% towards the victim. The majority of interventions were not directed towards the perpetrator or victim (56%). Instead these interventions attempted to engage the larger group in another activity. For example, interventions suggested that students “act drunk to stop the game” or “change the game” entirely.

Intervening During Assault

The second scene we analyzed involved a friend of the perpetrator walking into a room while the assault was occurring. In the original skit, the perpetrator convinced the victim to leave the party downstairs and come to his bedroom, where the assault occurred. After the friend walked into the room unintentionally and

Table I
Frequencies and Percentages for Uniqueness, Type, Subtypes, and Target of Interventions Prior to Assault

Unique Intervention?	N	%
Yes	77	73
No	28	27
Type of Intervention (N = 105)		
Direct	36	34
Indirect	62	59
Other	7	7
Types of Direct (N = 36)		
Aggressive	4	11
Assertive	25	69
Passive	3	8
Other	4	11
Types of Indirect (N = 62)		
Delegate	12	19
Distract	37	60
Other	13	12
Target of Intervention (N = 105)		
Victim	6	6
Perpetrator	40	38
Other	59	56

Note: All percentages rounded up to whole numbers.

noticed that the victim looked uncomfortable, the perpetrator yelled at the friend to get out of the room. Suggested interventions focused on how the friend could have helped stop the situation. For this scene, 72% of the interventions proposed by students were coded as unique, while 28% depicted interventions that had been shown in the previous workshop.

For this scene, interventions primarily focused on taking indirect action (68%). The indirect action involved either distraction (72%) or delegation (24%). Distraction interventions typically involved making up a problem to divert the perpetrator's actions, such as saying there was a fight downstairs at the party, the cops were called, or a friend was sick. Interventions that focused on delegating sought help from more people such as the perpetrator or victim's friends; some interventions also referenced outside resources, such as a resident assistant or police.

Direct interventions (31%) mainly used an assertive (77%) approach. Examples of an assertive intervention include asking both the perpetrator and victim what is going on, telling the perpetrator to stop, and asking the victim if she is okay. Aggressive interventions (11%) were also suggested for this scene. For instance, these interventions suggested pulling the victim out of the room and physically attacking and/or yelling at the perpetrator.

In this scenario, the majority of proposed interventions did not target the perpetrator or victim exclusively. For instance, perpetrators were the sole target in 28% of the interventions and victims 21% of the time. The remaining interventions (51%) were typically directed at both the perpetrator and victim. These interventions involved the friend of the perpetrator going into the room and creating a distraction that

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages for Uniqueness, Type, Subtypes, and Target of Interventions During the Assault

Unique Intervention? (N = 114)	N	%
Yes	82	72
No	32	28
Type of Intervention (N = 114)		
Direct	35	31
Indirect	78	68
Other	1	>1
Types of Direct (N = 35)		
Aggressive	4	11
Assertive	27	77
Passive	3	9
Other	1	3
Types of Indirect (N = 78)		
Delegate	19	24
Distract	56	72
Other	3	4
Target of Intervention (N = 114)		
Victim	24	21
Perpetrator	32	28
Other	58	51

Note: All percentages rounded up to whole numbers.

stopped the perpetrator's actions with the victim, thereby distracting both. Additional interventions suggested that the perpetrator's or victim's friends be involved.

Intervening After the Assault

The last scene we focused on involved confronting the perpetrator about his behavior with the victim after the assault has occurred. In the scenario presented to participants, the perpetrator began by bragging about having sex with the victim; however, two of his friends looked to question his perspective about what actually happened. Participants were asked how the friends could intervene at this stage after the assault occurred. A total of 65% proposed interventions were unique and 35% were repeated from the previous workshop.

The majority of proposed interventions focused on direct action (80%), and of those, a majority employed an assertive style (76%). These interventions involved speaking directly with the perpetrator to confront him about his actions and/or the perpetrator's friend who helped facilitate the assault. Other forms of direct action were coded as aggressive action (6%), which focused on verbally attacking the perpetrator's ego or confronting him. Other direct actions used a more passive style (8%) that avoided talking about the subject directly by either telling jokes or describing another similar situation to gauge the perpetrator's reaction.

Table 3
Frequencies and Percentages for Uniqueness, Type, Subtypes, and Target of Interventions After the Assault

Unique Intervention? (N = 105)	N	%
Yes	68	65
No	37	35
Type of Intervention (N = 105)		
Direct	84	80
Indirect	17	16
Other	4	4
Types of Direct (N = 84)		
Aggressive	5	6
Assertive	64	76
Passive	7	8
Other	8	10
Types of Indirect (N = 17)		
Delegate	9	53
Distract	0	0
Other	8	47
Target of Intervention (N = 105)		
Victim	7	7
Perpetrator	74	70
Other	24	23

Note: All percentages rounded up to whole numbers.

Some interventions were indirect (16%), of those, 53% suggested delegation. These interventions suggested speaking with the victim's friends or an outside source (like a resident assistant) for support. None of the interventions in this scene looked to distract from what was happening.

The perpetrator was the target of the intervention 70% of the time. These interventions focused on asking the perpetrator questions or confronting him directly about his behavior. The victim was a target of interventions 7% of the time. Finally, 23% of the interventions did not exclusively focus on the perpetrator or victim. Instead, they identified the perpetrator and victim's friends as other individuals to engage in this situation. This included trying to get the perpetrator's friend to confront him about what happened, or talking with the friends of the victim.

In sum, a range of interventions were reported before, during, and after the assault. The chi-square results indicated that there was a significant association between the time of the assault (before, during, or after) and the type of intervention (direct or indirect), with $\chi^2(4) = 58.990, p < .001$. Indirect actions were suggested more often for situations occurring before or during an assault, and direct interventions for after the assault.

Discussion

This exploratory study with college students provided some insight into the range of ways in which individuals propose to intervene as bystanders to challenge sexual assault. Overall, Berkowitz's (2009) catego-

ries of “direct” and “indirect” interventions fit the participants’ responses. Interestingly, these interventions proposed by students in this study varied depending on when the bystander opportunity occurred before, during, or after the assault. Indirect action was the predominant type of intervention recommended prior to or during the assault, and more direct interventions were suggested after the assault. This finding supports other work suggesting that educators need to move beyond presenting “bystander intervention” as one monolithic category because students may respond to various contexts in different ways (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). There is a need to build upon this finding to further understand the factors that facilitate or prohibit bystander action in these different contexts. Further investigation may reveal that training or education of students on bystander education may need to be tailored to the situation and tailored to the time it occurs, whether before, during, or after the assault.

The findings reinforce that college students have the capacity to develop unique ideas about how to intervene to prevent a sexual assault because students did not rely exclusively on the interventions shown in the original workshop. Instead, they brainstormed a range of interventions that felt appropriate and comfortable for them to do given the situation. For practitioners working with college students it may be important to remember that students likely have suggestions for strategies beyond what is provided in training. These results also suggest that there are indeed many ways for students to act as bystanders beyond using direct confrontation. For example, groups in this study reported actions such as starting random conversations or initiating dancing (before the assault), calling the campus police (during the assault), and involving friends of the victim after the assault took place. When students get caught in “all or nothing” thinking as potential interveners, it can be helpful for practitioners involved in bystander skills training to remind students that these indirect strategies can be just as useful as direct interventions. Additionally, many of the interventions were not directed at the potential victim or perpetrator but rather at the larger situation. Given the developmental stage of college students, we know that challenging one’s peers is extremely difficult, and, therefore, students can be encouraged to learn that there are a number of other ways to interrupt situations that may lead to sexual violence. Related studies on the impact of disclosure of sexual assaults to friends suggest that male friends and female friends may need different kinds of support from peers and campus mentors to make sense of their experiences as pro-social bystanders. While males may need help with building confidence in their ability to provide support to peers, females may need support in managing their anxiety and other feelings that arise when they act as pro-social bystanders (Banyard, Moynihan, Walsh, Cohn, & Ward, 2010).

One interesting bystander tactic suggested consistently throughout the various scenes was utilizing friends and peers to help address the situation, such as getting a victim or perpetrator’s friend to come interrupt a questionable interaction at a party. This finding builds upon a solid body of literature that suggests that students most often turn to their peers for support regarding a wide spectrum of issues (see Astin, 1997). This finding also complements the peer education literature that maintains that using other students to deliver messages about health and safety is the most effective method (Butler & Black, 2011). Additionally, the benefits of using peer educators extend beyond the formal delivery of the message into other, informal contexts such as parties or dorms, where peer educators are recognized as resources (McMahon, 2009). Based on this finding, student affairs professionals may wish to consider the benefit of utilizing peer educators not only to address negative health behaviors but also to promote prosocial bystander action and to frame sexual violence as a community responsibility.

The findings from this study must be considered within a number of limitations. This study was exploratory and included a sample where self-selection may have occurred since students had agreed to par-

ticipate in a larger study on bystander intervention. Replicating this study with randomized groups of students is needed. Additionally, demographic information was not collected in a way that we were able to link variables such as gender with the proposed bystander interventions. Given the consistently important role of gender in the bystander literature (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007), further research should explore whether proposed bystander strategies vary for males and females, along with other important identifiers such as race, history of victimization, and levels of efficacy. Further research can use homogenous groups or compare mixed-gender groups with same-gender groups. Additionally, as bystander research emerges, it will be important to determine not only what kind of interventions are used by students, but which ones are actually helpful, unhelpful, or may even escalate the situation.

Despite these limitations, this study provides exploratory results that can inform the development of bystander intervention programs on college campuses. It is worthwhile for student affairs professionals and other educators to encourage students to brainstorm bystander strategies to address situations that occur before, during, and after sexual assaults, as well as to provide students with opportunities to practice those strategies. Based on this study, we found that students came up with a number of creative ways to interpret the role of bystander to interrupt sexual violence. Future research can then investigate if students are able to implement their suggested interventions and what factors facilitate or prohibit their enactment.

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