

You see but you do not observe: A review of bystander intervention and sexual assault on university campuses



Danielle Labhardt*, Emma Holdsworth, Sarah Brown, Douglas Howat

Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Bystander behavior
Bystander intervention
Sexual assault
University campus
Systematic review

ABSTRACT

Sexual assault on university campuses has garnered increased attention in recent years. A systematic review was conducted to identify the factors associated with bystander intervention regarding sexual assault on university campuses. Currently, no published systematic reviews exist within this area. Twenty-eight studies were reviewed according to four major bystander factors: rape myth and date rape attitudes; bystander efficacy; bystander intent; and bystander behavior. There was a heavy emphasis on bystander intent and behavior throughout. Three important limitations were identified: (1) all empirical research has been conducted in the USA, yet bystander intervention programs exist outside of the USA, in countries such as the UK, (2) a majority of the studies employed quantitative methodologies and so failed to capture important details such as bystanders' perceptions of sexual assault or what other factors influence the likelihood of intervening, and (3) there were limited attempts to control for factors such as social desirability. This area of research is still in its infancy. Future research should examine in greater detail the factors inhibiting and facilitating bystander intervention. Finally, research outside of the USA is important in developing the literature in this area to effectively inform bystander intervention programs.

1. Introduction

Sexual assault is a serious problem (Kimble, Neacsu, Flack, & Horner, 2008; Martin, Fisher, Warner, Krebs, & Lindquist, 2011). It is legally defined under the sexual offences act – 2003 as one person intentionally touching another person in a sexual manner without consent (GOV.UK, 2004). Touching is defined as touching or penetration of any part of the victim, with any part of the perpetrator's body or with anything else such as an object (GOV.UK, 2004). Approximately, one in four female students in the USA are sexually assaulted every year (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Kleinsasser, Jouriles, McDonald, & Rosenfield, 2014). Researchers in the USA focus on university students as the party culture increases the risk of sexual assaults occurring in a public or party location (Fischer et al., 2011); they are producing research to combat the problem (e.g., Potter, Stapleton, & Moynihan, 2008). Conversely, approximately one in seven female students in the UK are sexually assaulted every year (NUS, 2010); risk of victimization is highest among women aged 16 to 19, who are studying full-time, and who visit pubs or night clubs at least once a week (MoJ, 2013). Given the negative consequences associated with sexual assault such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Briere & Jordan, 2004), substance abuse (Kilpatrick et al., 2000), and

risk of committing suicide (Ullman & Brecklin, 2002), it is vital to identify ways to decrease the alarmingly high prevalence rates of sexual assault on university campuses.

Differing views exist on how to address the problem of sexual assault on campus. One review suggests prevention of sexual assault should be the responsibility of women (see Söchting, Fairbrother, & Koch, 2004). Others say responsibility should be on the men as they are most often the perpetrators (see Berkowitz, 1992; McDermott, Kilmartin, McKelvey, & Kridel, 2015). Finally, some believe that bystander intervention is the way to decrease prevalence rates (see Latané and Darley (1970) where they present the importance of bystander intervention and the five steps to intervening); bystanders (also known as third party witnesses) can be encouraged to intervene before, during, or after a sexual assault has occurred (McMahon et al., 2014). However, all three perspectives fail to account for the effects of rape culture. Rape culture is defined as promoting sexual assault, excusing men (perpetrators), and increasing victim blaming (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney, 2006). Consequently, victims of sexual assault are hesitant to report due to low conviction rates, not being believed, or feeling embarrassed (Beckford, 2012).

Bystander intervention is needed as it could be used to reduce the prevalence rates of sexual assault on university campuses as the

* Corresponding author at: Centre of Research in Psychology, Behaviour & Achievement, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: labhardt@uni.coventry.ac.uk (D. Labhardt).

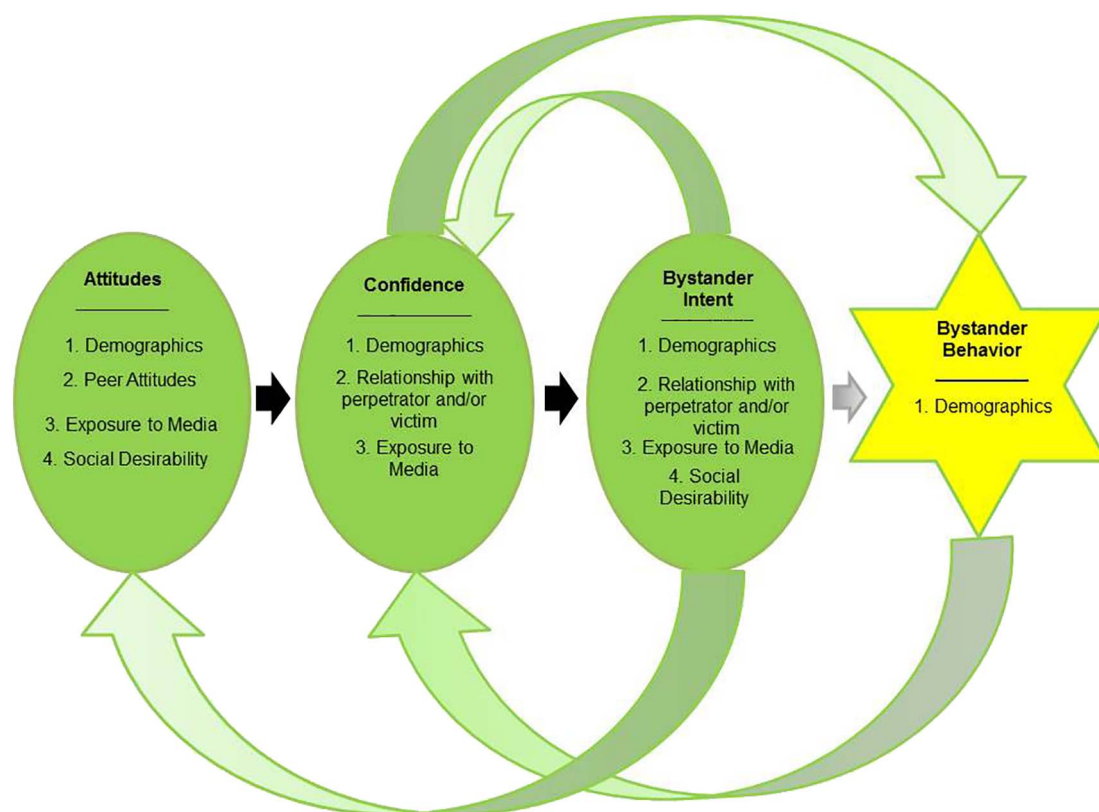


Fig. 1. Model of the factors that determine how a bystander will behave in relation to a sexual assault.

“numbers have remained stubbornly unchanged over 30 years” (Senn & Forrest, 2016, p. 607). An effective bystander intervention program should be able to impart knowledge and awareness regarding what sexual assault is, prevalence rates, negative consequences associated with victimization, learning to identify possible warning signs, and the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence to effectively intervene with minimal negative repercussions. Bystander intervention programs could then be a tool utilized to debunk rape culture and provide victims with confidence and additional support to report a sexual assault. Most importantly, it could increase overall bystander intervention as currently, according to Burn (2009) and Planty (2002), a third of all sexual assaults are witnessed by a bystander, yet they only intervene a third of the time.

Progress has been made in utilizing bystander intervention programs, such as the ‘Bringing in the Bystander’ (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007) or the Green Dot bystander intervention program (Green Dot, 2016) to develop prosocial bystander behaviors. Researchers such as Senn and Forrest (2016) have been successfully evaluating and applying these programs to test the effectiveness of improving bystander attitudes and behavior regarding sexual assault; their findings have confirmed the effectiveness of the workshop when included as part of the undergraduate curriculum. Bystander intervention is therefore, a valuable resource that could be exploited to reduce prevalence rates (McMahon & Farmer, 2009; Senn & Forrest, 2016). However, while bystander intervention programs have produced positive results prevalence rates remain unchanged, suggesting further research is needed to investigate what influences bystander intervention. In order to develop the field of bystander intervention and sexual assault on university campuses in the UK a thorough understanding of what affects intervention is required. Given the emergency of bystander intervention programs, it is essential that these programs are further developed and underpinned by the necessary evidence base in terms of bystander intervention and sexual assault research.

The review has two aims: (1) to define the different factors utilized

in examining the likelihood of bystander intervention; and (2) examine the different measures used to identify the barriers and facilitators that influence bystander intervention. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the factors that predict bystander intervention in relation to sexual assault on university campuses will provide a useful synopsis of the existing research to be utilized in developing evidence-based intervention programs.

2. Method

A search of Academic Search Complete, MEDLINE, PsycArticles, and PsycINFO was conducted to locate peer-reviewed empirical articles focusing on factors that influence bystander intervention regarding sexual assault on university campuses. The search terms used included combinations, synonyms, and derivatives of the following terms: bystander; university; student; sex assault; bystander intervention; bystander effect; university campus; sexual assault on campus; university students; likelihood of intervening; intervene; report; barriers; facilitators; and helping behavior. No time restriction was applied. The search returned 89 studies. Studies were included if they utilized a university sample, and measured the likelihood of a bystander intervening in a sexual assault. Studies were excluded if they were dissertations, conference abstracts, analyzed the bystander scale, evaluated a bystander intervention program, or designed an intervention program as the purpose of the review was to define and examine what factors inhibit and facilitate bystander intervention during a sexual assault. A total of 28 studies met the criteria for the review.

3. Results

Table 2 provides a description of the 28 studies included in the review, as well as what factors were assessed regarding the likelihood of bystander intervention and sexual assault. The studies are diverse in terms of the aim(s) of the studies and they were all conducted within

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