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research article

Strategies for Intervening in Situations of Sexual Violence: Does Gender Matter?

—Emily Olsen

My research project focused on the question of whether or not gender plays a role in determining intervention strategies in situations of sexual violence. Is it true, as commonly held, that men almost always respond with physical action and women with fear and passivity? Or are there responses shared by both sexes? Answers to these questions can improve the effectiveness of bystander intervention programs by influencing the methods of education used.

Beyond Gender Stereotypes

Earlier research into the role gender plays in helping behaviors tends to support the stereotypes of aggressive men and passive women. Eagly and Crowley, for example, note that evidence that norms fostering . . . nurturant and caring helpfulness are associated with the female gender role, and that "the male gender role, particularly in its traditional form, encourages other forms of helping. One such form is heroic behavior, especially altruistic acts of saving others from harm performed at some risk to oneself" (1). Another study claims that "psychologists and popular writers who have analyzed the male gender role have claimed that men are expected to be tough, violent, and aggressive," while "the traditional female gender role places little emphasis on aggressiveness...in addition, the female gender role emphasizes avoiding physical harm to oneself" (2). Psychologist Carol Gilligan, in her important and influential book, also notes the existence of these different gender roles (3).

Bystander intervention programs teach the necessity for intervention and how to do it safely and effectively. If these gender stereotypes hold true today, intervention education of men and women should be tailored to each gender's specific needs. For example, it would be important to teach men a method of "counting to ten" and getting help before responding to violence with violence. Similarly, education of women would foster belief in the necessity of acting and how to overcome fear and get help. University of New Hampshire researchers Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante state, "if bystanders are taught these skills and beliefs, they may be more likely to intervene with regard to rape, attempted rape, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence incidents on the college campus" (4). If, however, these gender stereotypes are no longer true, then bystander education programs should not uphold them or run the risk of being ineffective.

The Pilot Project

At the University of New Hampshire in 2002, the researchers Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante designed, ran and evaluated a pilot bystander intervention program in which men and women students learned how to intervene safely in situations before, during, and after sexual violence-situations that could involve friends, acquaintances and/or strangers (4). As part of the program, they created a series of 10 vignettes, each describing a different

scenario of sexual violence. The vignettes were as gender neutral as possible. (See Vignettes of Pilot Project below.) Students were first asked to "Please read each of the following short vignettes and imagine yourself in the situation depicted." They were then asked to describe how they would respond if they were in each situation and what they felt would be the possible benefits and costs of their response.

I conducted a content analysis of the responses of 16 women and 16 men, volunteers for the larger research project noted above. They were all enrolled in Psychology 401 and had not participated in any intervention training.

Methodology

My first step in analyzing the data was to generate categories for the intervention strategies the volunteers described. Following the method of grounded theory, I let the categories emerge from the participants' responses rather than predetermining the categories (5). Thus I looked at responses without assuming gender stereotypes or knowing the gender of the respondents. (Each respondent was given an identifying number.)

Looking across all the responses, I established 14 categories of intervention strategies, including "not knowing what to do" and "leaving without doing anything." (See Categories of Intervention.) I created, for example, the category of "Physical violence" for responses such as "I would beat the person to a pulp" or "I would make him feel pain." For responses expressing apprehension about getting involved "in a harmful and dangerous situation where I can get hurt too," I created the category "Fear prevents intervention."

Once I determined the categories, I scored answers in the following way: a score of one (1) equals the presence of a particular intervention behavior, while a score of zero (0) equals an absence of that behavior. If more than one strategy was indicated in a response, each strategy received a score of one. For example, the category of "Physical violence" received a score of one each time a strategy of it appeared in participant responses to any of the 10 vignettes.

As noted above, in order to remove any potential bias that I might hold about gender expectations, I did not know the sex of the participants until after all the scoring had been completed. Only then did I ask if there were differences between male and female responses to these vignettes and, if so, what they were. Therefore, gender was the independent variable and each strategy of intervention used in the situation of sexual violence described in the vignette was a dependent variable.

I entered the data into a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences file. Each respondent was assigned an identification number for the purposes of analysis and evaluation. To test whether men and women differed in some significant ways in their intervention strategies, I used the independent samples t-test to compare the mean scores of men and women for each of the intervention behavior categories. A t-test is a statistical procedure used to compare the means on a variable for two different groups. Based on this statistical procedure, a difference must be large enough to be significant ($p < 0.05$).

Results

My research question asked: "Does gender matter in the strategies used for intervening in situations of sexual violence?" Statistical results from the data indicated that only one category of intervention, physical violence against the perpetrator, showed significantly different responses between men and women. That is, men were more likely than women to say that, as a bystander in a situation of sexual violence, they would intervene with physical violence against the perpetrator ($t = 2.15$, $p < 0.05$). Contrary to stereotypical gender expectations, the data indicated that, for all other categories of intervention, there are no significant differences between the responses of men and women. That is, based on the statistical analysis, both men and women were just as likely to choose other intervention behaviors, including, such responses as "Listen," "Verbal," or "Leave."

Implications

Despite the research on gender differences cited earlier, my analysis suggests that, except for physically violent intervention alone, men and women have similar responses about how they would intervene or what might prevent them from intervening. These results imply the need for both men and women to be taught the same helpful intervention strategies and not to be pushed into perhaps harmful strategies that reflect socially created gender stereotypes. The similarities of responses between men and women are very important for educators teaching college students how to intervene safely and appropriately.

Labeling men and women with socially constructed gender roles can be harmful, especially in bystander education programs. Gender stereotypes may teach men to intervene violently, unsafely, and alone in situations of sexual violence. Equally, gender stereotypes may teach women passivity, fear, and not to intervene at all. Banyard, Moynihan, and Plante note the negative effects of the use of gender stereotypes in bystander education programs: some men may erroneously 'hear' a prevention message targeting them as potential rapists only while women see themselves mainly as potential victims. Participants may develop a great deal of defensiveness toward viewing themselves in such roles, hence increasing resistance to sexual violence prevention messages (4). My research on the role of the gender of the bystander demonstrates the importance of deconstructing traditional gender roles for men and women, and also demonstrates the importance of understanding and applying, in bystander education programs, the similarities between male and female strategies of intervention.

The results of my research project may be helpful to organizations such as the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program (SHARPP) which trains students and others in helping end sexual violence. Moreover, learning about gender roles in sexual violence intervention may lead to greater understanding of the effects of socialization on male and female stereotypes. Through education, both men and women can be empowered to practice safe and helpful intervention strategies in situations of sexual violence.

I would like to acknowledge the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at the University of New Hampshire for funding my research project. I would also like to acknowledge Victoria L. Banyard, Mary M. Moynihan, and Elizabeth G. Plante for letting me analyze the data they collected for their research project. I would like to thank Theresa Marquardt for doing reliability checks for me. And I would also like to thank Mary M. Moynihan for being my faculty mentor on my research project.

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Categories of Intervention

Category	Bystander Intervention Behavior
Call	Calls an outside source of help or authority such as the police or a hospital
Talk	Supports the person in the situation by talking to them
Listen	Listens to the person in the situation talk about what happened to them and what they need
Verbal	Verbally intervenes in the situation described, specifically when they talk directly to the perpetrator
Physical	Uses physical violence alone to hurt the perpetrator in the situation
Pro-social	Uses pro-social intervention to help the person in the situation, such as getting someone else to help them in the situation or taking the person home
Leave	Leaves the situation without intervening
None	No intervention in the situation
Don't Know	Don't know what they would do in the situation
Fear Prevents Intervention	Response demonstrates that fear of the perpetrator in the situation would prevent intervention
Fear of Perpetrator	Response demonstrates that fear of the perpetrator exists but does not prevent intervention
Fear of Losing Friend	Response demonstrates that the fear of losing a friend in the situation would inhibit or prevent intervention
Fear of Embarrassment	Response demonstrates that fear of embarrassment in the situation would inhibit or prevent intervention
Fear of Conflict	Response demonstrates that fear of creating conflict, fear of angering someone, and/or fear of intervening in the situation would inhibit or prevent intervention

Vignettes of Pilot Project

- 1) You are asleep in your room. At about 3:00 AM, your roommate comes home. Your roommate's clothes are torn, and your roommate is crying hysterically. Your roommate tells you they've just been raped.
- 2) After spring break, you stop by your friend's room to say "hi." Your friend has a dark bruise under their eye. You recognize the bruise as the remnants of a black eye. Your friend says the black eye came from a pickup basketball game.
- 3) You find out through the "grapevine" that one of your friends is dating your ex-partner. Your ex was verbally and physically abusive to you on several occasions, but you never told anyone.

- 4) At a party, you see someone trying to get an obviously drunk friend of yours to go into a bedroom. Your friend has had so much alcohol that they can barely walk and they seem reluctant.
- 5) A friend of yours has accused one of your close male friends of rape. Some of your other friends are “badmouthing” the accuser, saying it wasn’t rape because the accuser is promiscuous anyway.
- 6) A man pushes and then slaps a woman at a party. People are upset but don’t do anything. You do not know either person well.
- 7) Earlier in the evening, you saw a woman at a party who was drunk and hanging all over some of your male friends. A friend tells you that she’s been taken upstairs to a bedroom, where a bunch of people are having sex with her. Your friend urges you to join them.
- 8) You are with a casual acquaintance at a party and you are both drunk. You really want to have sex with this person and they start putting the moves on you, but you think they are too drunk to give clear consent.
- 9) It’s Friday night and you’re walking across campus, party hopping with a group of friends. As you pass by the Student Center, you see a beautiful woman. One of your friends makes a comment about the woman’s body and starts to hassle her.
- 10) As you enter a residence hall, you see a couple who appear to be very drunk stumbling down the hallway. A few minutes later you hear a struggle and someone screaming, “Help me!”

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Author Bio

Emily Olsen is a junior at UNH with a double major in English and Women’s Studies. Her research project grew out of her data entry work as part of a team conducting research in bystander intervention. She became interested in the different questions the data might answer and designed her research proposal under the direction of Professor Mary Moynihan. In the summer of 2004, she received a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) to carry out her work. During her project, she learned a lot about doing statistical research in the social sciences; compiling her results into a research report was the most difficult task. The best part was the opportunity to work with Professor Moynihan: “She taught me so much and helped me a great deal with this research project.” Emily wants to go on to graduate school and someday work as an editor at a publishing house.

Mentor Bio

Professor Mary Moynihan, a native of New Hampshire, has been at UNH for about 15 years in various research and instructional capacities. She is presently Research Associate Professor of Women’s Studies, and internship coordinator. Emily was not the first SURF student Professor Moynihan has mentored. She feels that mentoring and working with Emily on the Inquiry article was “absolutely a great experience and opportunity for an undergraduate to [go through] the review process and have a journal to publish in.” She and Emily had fun with the Inquiry poster, revising it for Women’s Studies.