Rethinking the Bystander Effect in Violence Reduction Training Programs

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Many violence prevention programs include a focus on the role of bystanders and third parties in violence prevention training. Central to this work has been the classic social psychological research on the ‘bystander effect’ (Latané and Darley 1970). This is the notion that the more people who are present during an emergency incident, the less likely any single bystander is to intervene. Violence reduction programs that include a bystander component all seek to counteract this ‘bystander effect’ as part of their education and training. However recent theoretical and empirical work on bystander behaviour has shown that the bystander effect does not hold for events that involve aggression and violence. For example, reviews of the literature (e.g. Fischer et al., 2011) show that the classic view of the bystander effect is not supported by the evidence when it comes to bystander behaviour during violent or dangerous emergencies and that people are more likely to be helped when more bystanders are present.

At the same time, Levine and colleagues (Levine et al., 2005, 2013) have demonstrated that it is the social identity relationships between bystander, victim and perpetrator (rather than the simple presence or absence of bystanders) that is key to understanding bystander behaviour. This re-evaluation of the bystander effect is supported by recent research using CCTV footage to study real-life bystander behaviour in violent or dangerous emergencies in public spaces (as opposed to work using laboratory or self-report measures). Results show that bystander intervention is actually the norm in these kinds of incidents (Philpot et al., 2019). Of course, not everybody intervenes, but
intervention levels are very high, and the more bystanders are present, the more likely it is that the victims receive help.

With this in mind, we review some of the major violence reduction programs that include a bystander component: The Green Dot program; Bringing in the Bystander; and The Intervention Initiative. We show that the evidence for the overall effectiveness of these programs is mixed. Some programs are clearly effective in changing knowledge, beliefs and behavioural intention. However, demonstrating that the programs have an impact on real-life intervention behaviour is much harder to achieve. We note that these programs all have a component that teaches and seeks to tackle the bystander effect as traditionally understood. We argue that this uncritical adoption of the traditional bystander effect is something which undermines the effectiveness of violence reduction programs as a whole. We suggest that an evidence-based approach to the role of bystanders in successful violence reduction programs would require changes in both messaging and delivery. This would include:

- **Replacing the message that intervention is rare with the message that intervention is the norm.** Evidence shows that people do intervene, even if the intervention is not always successful. Bystanders should look out for intervention attempts and try to support them.

- **Delivering positive rather than negative messages about the presence of others in emergencies.** That is because the presence of more bystanders is good for victims – it means they are more likely to receive help. At the same time, the presence of other bystanders does not automatically inhibit bystander intervention. We do not have to ‘rise above’ the negative impact of the group. In fact, working together with others is the best way to make intervention successful.

- **Reassuring bystanders that intervention is much safer than we imagine.** The likelihood of being victimised as an intervener is low – and intervention is more effective when done in conjunction with others.
- **Using the power of social identity to enhance successful bystander intervention.** This means being sensitive to the different identities that may be salient in the case of the bystander-victim relationship; the bystander-bystander relationship; and bystander-perpetrator relationship.

- **Delivering bystander effect training in-situ, rather than away from the context of the aggression or violence.** This will maximise the effect of context on the effectiveness of the violence reduction intervention.