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## Measurement of the bystander intervention model for bullying and sexual harassment



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### ABSTRACT

Although peer bystanders can exacerbate or prevent bullying and sexual harassment, research has been hindered by the absence of a validated assessment tool to measure the process and sequential steps of the bystander intervention model. A measure was developed based on the five steps of *Latané and Darley's (1970)* bystander intervention model applied to bullying and sexual harassment. Confirmatory factor analysis with a sample of 562 secondary school students confirmed the five-factor structure of the measure. Structural equation modeling revealed that all the steps were influenced by the previous step in the model, as the theory proposed. In addition, the bystander intervention measure was positively correlated with empathy, attitudes toward bullying and sexual harassment, and awareness of bullying and sexual harassment facts. This measure can be used for future research and to inform intervention efforts related to the process of bystander intervention for bullying and sexual harassment.

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Bullying and sexual harassment are forms of peer aggression that pervade secondary school settings and have the potential to cause serious, lasting harm to victims (*AAUW, 2001; Hemphill et al., 2011*). Bullying refers to repeated acts of physical, verbal, relational, or electronic aggression (i.e., “cyberbullying”) intended to cause physical or psychological harm, perpetrated by an individual or group against a less powerful peer (*Nansel et al., 2001*). With puberty, bullying often becomes more sexual and gendered, taking the form of sexual harassment (*Espelage, Basile, & Hamburger, 2012; Pellegrini, 2002*), or “sexual bullying” (*Cunningham et al., 2010*). Sexual harassment is unwanted or unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with a person's life (*AAUW, 2001*). Similar to bullying, sexual harassment involves verbal (e.g., making sexual comments), physical (e.g., touching breasts or genitals), relational (e.g., spreading rumors), or cyber forms of aggression (e.g., posting pornographic images), yet it is distinct in that it targets the victim's sexuality, gender, or sexual orientation (*Felix & McMahon, 2006*).

A substantial proportion of students are exposed to peer victimization. Thirty-percent (30%) of middle and high school students report bullying others or being the targets of bullying (*Dinkes, Kemp, Baum, & Snyder, 2009; Nansel et al., 2001*). Prevalence rates of sexual harassment are even higher, with 40–84% of middle and high school students reporting having

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been sexually harassed by a peer (AAUW, 2001; Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2009), and 40% of middle school students saying that they have observed sexual harassment in their school (Cunningham et al., 2010). Observational studies reveal that peers witness more than 80% of peer victimization episodes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). Given that majority of peer victimization takes place in the presence of other students, bystander intervention holds promise for school-based prevention efforts.

### Role of bystanders in bullying and sexual harassment

Students who witness peer aggression can play one of several roles including: (a) assisting or reinforcing the bully; (b) defending the victim; or (c) being an outsider (e.g., ignoring; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Bystander interventions aim to promote defending behaviors among witnesses to halt the aggression or mitigate its effects. Defenders, or active bystanders, can take many actions to stop the aggression, including active efforts to make the student(s) bullying stop, reporting the incident, asking a teacher or another adult for help, or supporting, consoling, or taking the side of the student(s) being victimized (Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012; Huitsing & Veenstra, 2012).

Although bullying and sexual harassment almost always occur in the presence of bystanders (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; Timmerman, 2003), witnesses intervene less than 20% of the time (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2001). Despite this lack of actual intervention, children often express disgust at witnessing bullying and state that they are interested in helping victims of bullying (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). This disconnect is unfortunate, as bystander intervention and actively defending victims is associated with decreased bullying and sexual victimization (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000; Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). The bystander intervention model (Latané & Darley, 1970) offers a plausible explanation for why bystanders fail to intervene to help victims of bullying and sexual harassment. The current study strives to measure antecedent factors to bystanders' willingness to assist victims of bullying and sexual harassment by testing the theoretical model of bystander intervention. Assessment of these factors can then be used to inform and evaluate interventions.

### Theoretical framework: bystander intervention model

Bystander behavior has been the focus of social psychological research for over four decades, ignited by public outcry over the 1964 violent murder of Kitty Genovese that was witnessed by bystanders who did not help. It was suggested that bystanders refused to take action because each observer was either unsure if there was an emergency (pluralistic ignorance) or expected other neighbors to help the victim (diffusion of responsibility). The bystander effect refers to the inhibiting effects of the presence of others on helping behavior (Dovidio, Piliavin, Schroeder, & Penner, 2006; Darley & Latané, 1968). Diffusion of responsibility, where an individual feels a reduced sense of responsibility to act when in a group rather than when alone, may be due, in part, to audience inhibition, or the fear of being embarrassed in front of other people (Latané & Nida, 1981). Particularly in ambiguous situations, the bystander looks to others for social cues; when observing others who do not respond, the bystander also models inaction.

Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander intervention model outlines five sequential steps that one must take in order to take action: (a) notice the event, (b) interpret the event as an emergency that requires help, (c) accept responsibility for intervening, (d) know how to intervene or provide help, and (e) implement intervention decisions. The bystander model has been adopted and applied to helping behavior in contexts such as drunk driving (Rabow, Newcomb, Monto, & Hernandez, 1990), sexual assault prevention (Burn, 2009), and organ donation (Anker & Feeley, 2011). We briefly review the five steps of the bystander intervention model and its potential application to bullying and sexual harassment.

The first step of the model is noticing the event, as a prerequisite to helping is focusing one's attention to the problem. Perceptions of an event's occurrence directly or indirectly predict intervention (Greitemeyer, Fischer, Kastenmüller, & Frey, 2006). Research with the bystander intervention in both emergency and prosocial situations has revealed that vivid events, or those with specific, identifiable victims, are more likely to draw bystanders' attention (Dovidio et al., 2006; Loewenstein & Small, 2007). A focus on the self (e.g., pressing priorities) and environmental stimuli (e.g., noise, other people) decreases the likelihood that a person will notice an event that may require help (Burn, 2009; Dovidio et al., 2006). Given the previously noted high prevalence rates of bullying and sexual harassment in schools (AAUW, 2001; Dinkes et al., 2009), it is possible that students do not attend to the relevant cues (e.g., hearing derogatory names) or view them as vivid events.

After noticing an event, the situation must be interpreted as an emergency requiring assistance. Experiments reveal decision-making errors in this step as individuals look to other bystanders to guide their interpretation. In a seminal study where participants were asked to wait (either alone or with others) in a room that begins to fill with smoke, 75% of participants who waited alone reported the smoke in contrast to only 10% of participants who reported the event when they waited with two inactive bystanders (Latané & Darley, 1968). In addition to looking to others for cues about whether or not to interpret a situation as an emergency, ambiguity in the situation may make it challenging for an individual to recognize that help is needed. A more recent meta-analysis by Fischer et al. (2011) found that perceptions of dangerous situations made the bystander effect less likely. In regards to peer victimization, the nature of what constitutes bullying and sexual harassment can be ambiguous. Youth typically do not conceptualize bullying as it is defined. For example, their definitions almost always omit the components of intentionality and repetition (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). With regard to sexual harassment, although adolescent girls can accurately define and provide examples of sexual harassment in a hypothetical context, they tend to

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