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COMMENTARY

Incorporating bystander intervention into sexual harassment training

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Medeiros and Griffith (2019) addressed practical challenges in implementing sexual harassment (SH) training and proposed several recommendations to improve training effectiveness, particularly in light of the recent #metoo movement. Although we agree that SH training should be preventive, and that both internal and external factors must be considered to ensure training effectiveness, we propose that one perspective that the authors did not consider is bystanders' (i.e., observers') roles in SH incidents. In this commentary, we offer empirically supported, practical suggestions for the design and application of an effective bystander intervention (BI) training that can be incorporated into regular victim- and perpetrator-targeted SH training. Furthermore, although we acknowledge that SH and sexual assault exist on a continuum of sex-based mistreatment and violent behaviors (Fitzgerald, 1993), we focus on SH in this commentary because it is more often witnessed by a third party.

What is bystander intervention training?

Although SH involves two parties, victim and perpetrator, there is a third party that can potentially play an important role in a SH incident: observers who witness the harassment occurring but are not directly involved (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). SH is intrinsically a manifestation of power, such that perpetrators harass victims as a display of dominance. As a result, victims are often passive toward such personal violations for fear of retaliation. For instance, they often deny that an act constitutes harassment, downplay the severity of an act, or avoid the harasser (Baker, Terpstra, & Larntz, 1990; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Farley, 1978). With such, successfully curtailing SH can be difficult when the focus is on victims' willingness to act against it. Observers, on the other hand, are in the unique position of being first-hand witnesses to the situation but not directly related to the conflict, which affords them an opportunity to intervene. Drawing from classic social psychological work on BI (e.g., Latané & Darley, 1970), the bystander approach highlights the role of observers, proposing that observers can intervene by engaging in helping behaviors that vary in the extent of immediacy and involvement, and that whether an observer intervenes depends on individual and situational factors such as observers' perceptions of SH and organizational ethical climate (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). Specifically, the purpose of BI training is to (a) inform bystanders of the nature of SH so that they can correctly identify it and (b) encourage bystanders to intervene when they witness instances of SH. Next, we detail the benefits of BI training and propose practical suggestions to design such training.

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What are the benefits of bystander intervention training?

The benefits of BI training can manifest at both individual and organizational levels by reinforcing the unethical nature of SH. Beyond its illegal nature, SH is an ethical issue because it is intrinsically harmful to victims (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999), and it therefore involves individuals' ethical decision-making process about whether to help or harm others (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Past research has suggested that one critical antecedent to ethical decision making is moral intensity, or the degree to which individuals regard an issue as having a moral component. Therefore, increasing the level of moral intensity should be a key component in training people to make ethical decisions (i.e., not engaging in SH and helping SH victims). Incorporating BI training into SH training can create a synergistic effect because regular SH training may only impact potential perpetrators and victims, but BI training will strengthen the moral intensity of all members of a community, including victims, bystanders, and even perpetrators.

Specifically, greater moral intensity via BI training may influence the ethical actions of bystanders through social consensus, a component of moral intensity that represents the extent of social agreement that a behavior is either bad or good (Jones, 1991). Unfortunately, the definition of SH is relatively ambiguous (Roehling & Huang, 2018), and, therefore, social consensus regarding what constitutes SH also tends to be low (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Although regular SH training aims to decrease ambiguity surrounding the definition of SH, BI training can further facilitate social consensus of SH among employees, in that everyone within an organization is responsible for taking action against SH. Given that victims are more likely to show a passive reaction and often refuse to reveal their cases, a social consensus among bystanders is vital for more SH occurrences to be reported.

Beyond the individual level, implementing BI training can help organizations set a higher degree of moral intensity by communicating a stronger message of low organizational tolerance for SH than when simply implementing regular SH training. Past meta-analytic evidence suggests that perceived organizational tolerance for SH is the most important predictor for workplace SH and bystanders' reactions to SH (Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). As a result, a decrease in organizational tolerance, as signaled by the incorporation of BI training into regular SH training, can have a cascading effect on employees to accept a higher level of moral intensity by leading them to perceive that an organization takes SH as a more serious, moral issue.

The addition of BI training may also have a unique effect on potential perpetrators of SH over and above that of SH training. Greater moral intensity via BI training may influence the potential actions of perpetrators by expanding their scope of consideration to bystanders, thus increasing the perceived risks of engaging in SH (O'Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001). Perpetrators may keep engaging in SH behaviors because they perceive that victims are the only people who will be affected by their actions and view them as negative. Potential perpetrators who attend a BI training with other employees, however, may learn that others will be more aware of SH and consider SH a more serious ethical violation. This realization, in turn, may prompt perpetrators to extend their consideration beyond merely victims to also include bystanders. These potential perpetrators may also realize that bystanders are trained to act against SH, thus increasing the perceived risk associated with committing SH (e.g., higher probability of SH being revealed, expulsion from social group). These additional considerations and increased perceived risks can ultimately decrease the likelihood that perpetrators will follow through with the intention to harass. Next, we propose practical suggestions to design BI training.

What are the suggestions for effective bystander intervention training?

The practical suggestions for effective BI training applied to the SH context that we propose here are rooted in Latané's and Darley's (1970) five-step cognitive and behavioral process that bystanders must advance through in emergency situations if they are to help. Specifically,

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Latané and Darley (1970) outlined five barriers to bystander helping behavior, including (a) failure to notice that a situation is occurring, (b) failure to identify that a situation is high risk, (c) failure to feel responsible to intervene in what is occurring, (d) failure to intervene due to skill deficits, and (e) failure to intervene due to the fear of looking foolish. SH training should aid in overcoming the failure to identify that a situation is high risk, considering that it provides information about what constitutes SH, but successfully implemented BI training also has the potential to overcome each of the other four barriers.

Remove barriers to bystander intervention behaviors

First, a successful BI training teaches trainees how to be more vigilant in noticing what is occurring around them by increasing awareness of the ongoing situation. Specifically, the training could include a module that allows the trainees to practice evaluating ambiguous scenes and provides them feedback on which situations in each scene they correctly and incorrectly evaluate. Second, a successful BI training teaches trainees that they are responsible for what occurs around them regardless of how many other employees are also around at any given time by encouraging trainees to more automatically intervene in a situation. Specifically, the BI training could include a module that allows them to practice intervening in an emergency situation while in a group setting. Third, a successful BI training teaches trainees the skills necessary to competently intervene in a SH situation. Specifically, the BI training could include a module that allows trainees to practice those skills until they feel comfortable enough to perform them automatically. Finally, a successful BI training should teach trainees that their intervention will not be perceived negatively by others. Specifically, the BI training could include a module where interventions are honestly evaluated by peers to allow the trainees to receive support from their peers after each intervention. Although these modules are not an exhaustive list of possibilities in BI training, making sure to address each of Latané's and Darley's (1970) four barriers to bystander helping behavior mentioned above should result in a successful BI training applied to an SH situation.

Break sexual harassment myths

Another way to facilitate bystander intervening behaviors is to break SH myths. SH myths refer to attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male SH of women (Lonsway, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). One of the most common content domains of SH myths is to attribute responsibility for the event to the victim. Such beliefs, like women with certain characteristics (e.g., sexually loose or dressed improperly) are more likely to get sexually harassed, misguides people to believe that those victims deserved their misfortunes (Lerner, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). Another common myth regarding SH is that victims often lie or misinterpret the perpetrator's behaviors as SH. Recent evidence suggests that the prevalence of false accusations of SH is only between 2% and 10%, but those small numbers of cases are widely publicized through the media, leading people to overestimate the rate of false accusations (Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994).

Those negative attitudes and beliefs against victims can function as the barriers to bystander behaviors that were proposed by Latané and Darley (1970). First of all, acceptance of SH myths may lead observers to fail to recognize a situation as high risk by increasing the ambiguity of a situation. Furthermore, SH myths are often associated with people's just world belief, which is the predisposition to believe that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Lerner, 1965). Based on this just world belief, observers attribute the responsibility of incidents to the victims, and feel less responsibility to intervene in high-risk situations. In fact, acceptance of SH myths is found to predict negative attitudes toward victims (Sakalli-Uğurlu, Yalçin, & Glick, 2007) and decrease bystanders' willingness to intervene in situations (Bannon, Brosi, & Foubert, 2013; Burns, 2009). Considering the negative impacts caused by SH myths,

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it is critical to challenge those myths during the training by identifying counterexamples of SH myths and suggesting evidence to discredit them.

Promote empathy

In addition to considering SH myths, empathy is found to be an important predictor of attitudes toward victims. Empathy indicates an "other-focused" emotional response that allows one to make an affective connection with another (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995). Deitz, Blackwell, Daley, and Bentley (1982) and Sakalli-Uğurlu et al. (2007) found that participants who were higher in empathy expressed more positive feelings toward rape victims and negative feelings toward harassers. These positive and negative feelings are expected to influence a bystander's attribution of responsibility in SH incidents, leading to a greater likelihood of intervening behaviors.

Past diversity training research suggests that perspective taking is an effective strategy to increase empathy. Perspective taking refers to the cognitive ability to consider situations from the viewpoint, feelings, and reactions of others (Dovidio, Gartner, & Validzic, 1998). Considering that perspective taking requires individuals to think more in terms of "us" rather than "them," it may reduce stereotypes regarding victims and encourage bystanders to form social bonds with victims (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005). Empirical studies have supported this reasoning that people who actively engage in perspective taking are more likely to show empathic responses, including understanding and identifying with their experiences (Egan, 1990) and wanting to offer helping behaviors to the targets (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002). Therefore, in order to encourage bystanders to take more action in SH, BI training should include activities to build perspective taking, which can effectively promote empathy among trainees.

Costs and benefits analysis

Although removing barriers, breaking myths, and promoting empathy may increase the likelihood of observers intervening in SH incidents, an observer's level of involvement is dependent upon net costs of behaviors (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005). That is, even when observers decide to intervene, they weigh the costs and benefits of intervening to make a decision about how much they involve themselves in an observed situation. Ryan and Wessel (2012) also found consistent results that people who perceived an intervention as high in benefits and low in costs were more likely to show greater involvement in SH situations.

Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) defined involvement in a public and social sense, proposing that involvement should reflect the degree of willingness of individuals to take action on social stages. Therefore, high involvement indicates a stronger public connection of observers to incidents, such as directly confronting a harasser or publicly offering a hand to a target. On the other hand, low involvement is associated with more indirect and weaker social connections, including providing private support for the target or anonymously reporting an incident to a third party (McDonald, Charlesworth, & Graham, 2015).

Although there currently is no established empirical evidence to support that a high level of involvement is more advantageous than a low level of involvement, stronger reactions from observers can be beneficial for two reasons: First, they aid in constructing a meaning of an event and providing a role model to other observers. High-involvement responses clearly indicate that observers interpret an incident as SH, playing a significant role in determining the meaning of events (Yagil, Karnieli-Miller, Eisikovits, & Enosh, 2006). Second, those observers who failed to intervene due to skill deficits can learn from the observer's intervening behavior through role modeling. Considering the social sense of the definition, a high level of involvement should benefit more than a low level of involvement because actions taken in public are more salient to other bystanders than actions taken in a private setting. With all of these potential benefits of a bystander's high-involvement intervention, a training should focus on increasing the perceived benefits

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and reducing the perceived costs of intervening. Benefits of intervening include future reciprocity from the coworker and positive feelings about oneself. Costs include perceived risk in reporting and the possibility of becoming a target oneself (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005).

Conclusion

We argue that the practical challenges in implementing SH training and the recommendations to improve the training effectiveness that were proposed by Medeiros and Griffith (2019) could have benefited greatly by including the role of the observer in SH situations. Adding BI training to the SH training can have several benefits at the organizational and individual level by decreasing an organization's perceived tolerance for SH, increasing the level of moral intensity, improving the understanding of SH, and raising the awareness of potential perpetrators regarding their behaviors. We also provide some practical suggestions with empirical and theoretical evidence. During the BI training, removing the five barriers that were outlined by Latané and Darley (1970), breaking SH myths, and improving empathy are critical to increase the likelihood of bystanders intervening in high-risk situations. Furthermore, the training should also focus on providing observers with more perceived benefits and reducing the costs of intervening behaviors in order to increase their level of involvement.

Last, although we believe that our argument for BI training is theoretically and empirically grounded, we encourage future research to examine the effectiveness of incorporating BI training into regular SH training. Specifically, studies can compare training effectiveness among regular SH training, BI training, and a combined training (i.e., BI training and regular SH training). Furthermore, as echoed by past SH researchers, the benefits of high-involvement responses that we suggested, as well as the typology of observers' response to SH proposed by O'Leary-Kelly and Bowes-Sperry (2005), have not yet been empirically tested (Willness et al., 2007). Therefore, future research needs to test whether bystanders' intervention of a certain a level of involvement and immediacy is more advantageous in protecting SH victims and preventing high-risk incidents.

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