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Abstract

Despite growing interest in the use of bystander education programs to address the problems of sexual and relationship violence on college campuses, little knowledge exists on adverse consequences experienced by students intervening as a bystander. The current study examined the prevalence and correlates of adverse consequences of bystander intervention in two samples of first-year college students. In Study 1, 281 students completed a measure of negative consequences experienced when acting as a bystander to help someone at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking. Efficacy for bystander behavior was also assessed. Approximately one third of the students (97/281) reported having tried to help someone who had been at risk of violence during the previous academic year. Of these, approximately 17% (16/97) reported experiencing a negative consequence from having tried to help. Experiencing negative consequences was associated with lower levels of bystander efficacy. In Study 2, conducted at a different university, 299 students completed measures of negative consequences resulting from intervening as a bystander and efficacy for bystander behavior. Students also participated in virtual-reality simulations that provided opportunities to intervene as a bystander. Again, approximately one third of the students (99/299) reported having tried to help someone at risk of violence. Of these, 20% (20/99) reported experiencing a negative consequence. Two of the adverse consequences (physically hurt, got into trouble) were negatively associated with bystander efficacy and observed effectiveness of bystander behavior in the virtual simulations. Results of exploratory analyses suggest that training in bystander intervention might reduce the likelihood of experiencing adverse consequences.

Sexual and relationship violence are widespread problems on U.S. college campuses. In a review of prevalence research on campus sexual assault, approximately 44% of women and 3% of men were estimated to have experienced some form of sexual victimization during college; approximately 8% of women and 1% of men were estimated to have experienced a completed rape (Fedina, Holmes, & Backes, 2016). Relationship violence is also prevalent among college students, with studies consistently indicating that around 30% of women and 30% of men report experiencing physical aggression from a dating partner since entering college (Fass, Benson, & Leggett, 2008; Miller, 2010; Milletich, Kelley, Doane, & Pearson, 2010). Sexual and relationship violence victimization are associated with numerous adverse health concerns, including depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and somatization (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Okuda et al., 2011). In addition, victimization is related to poor academic performance (Jordan, Combs, & Smith, 2014) and outcomes associated with unprotected sex, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Black, 2011).

To address the problem of sexual and relationship violence, many colleges are employing bystander education programs. These programs target students who witness or are aware of violent acts, as opposed to the perpetrators or victims of violence. A shared goal among these programs is to motivate onlookers to take action to prevent violence from occurring or escalating. Such actions (referred to as bystander behavior) might include stepping in when seeing a friend in a heated argument with their partner, or stopping a friend from having sex with an intoxicated person at a party. Many different bystander education programs have been rigorously evaluated using randomized controlled trials on college campuses (e.g., *Bringing in the Bystander*—Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Moynihan, Banyard, Arnold, Eckstein, & Stapleton, 2011; *TakeCARE*—Jouriles, McDonald, Rosenfield, Levy, & Sargent, 2016; *Know Your Power*—Katz, Olin, Herman, & DuBois, 2013). In each of these evaluations, college students were randomly assigned to either receive bystander training or to a control condition. Afterward, students completed follow-up questionnaires on their bystander behavior. In each study cited above, students who received bystander training self-reported engaging in more behavior to prevent violence from occurring or escalating at postprogram follow-up assessments, compared with those in control

groups. Promising findings such as these have led to recommendations for U.S. colleges to implement bystander education programs (Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act, 2013).

Unfortunately, these recommendations have been made with almost a complete absence of scientific research exploring possible adverse consequences of bystander behavior, particularly among college students. Many examples exist in the media documenting how witnesses who have intervened to prevent violence become physically hurt or otherwise in trouble. These examples include being expelled from school (Elk & Devereaux, 2014), life-threatening injuries (Balkenbush, 2016), and, in some cases, death (Connolly, 2014). Such examples should give one pause before strongly encouraging bystander behavior without sufficient education and training. They also highlight how the lack of knowledge about the prevalence of these adverse consequences, and characteristics of the students who experience them, is an important omission from the literature. It also remains unknown how highly publicized events in which a bystander experienced adverse consequences affect public perception of bystander behavior.

Few empirical studies have examined adverse consequences of bystander behavior in situations involving relationship violence. In their study of rural victims of violence, Taylor, Banyard, Grych, and Hamby (2016)found that approximately 15% to 23% of bystanders are physically hurt or threatened when witnessing acts of partner violence. However, these estimates were measured through victim reports, and assessed using a single dichotomous question asking, "Did any witness get hurt or threatened?" The extent to which students on college campuses experience a range of adverse consequences when attempting to stop an act of sexual or relationship violence remains unclear.

Negative consequences for taking action may also have ripple effects on future bystander efforts. Bandura's (1986) social-cognitive theory suggests efficacy is linked to experiencing negative consequences when helping a victim of sexual or relationship violence. Specifically, efficacy, defined as one's belief in his or her ability to successfully perform a task, is influenced by performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1986). Students who have experienced adverse consequences as a result of acting as a bystander to prevent violence may perceive future bystander situations as threatening, and possess less efficacy in their ability to help. In addition, individuals who possess low efficacy for engaging in bystander behavior may be less effective in their attempts to do so, which, in turn, might increase the likelihood of experiencing negative consequences. In other words, low efficacy could be a cause or an outcome of experiencing negative consequences after intervening as a bystander, and might also be linked to the effectiveness of the bystander behavior.

Present Research

This article presents an initial effort to examine adverse consequences that college students might experience when they attempt to stop an act of sexual or relationship violence. We utilize data collected at two universities to assess the prevalence of certain adverse consequences as a result of bystander intervention behavior among first-year college students. We then evaluate two hypotheses about characteristics of students who experience these adverse consequences. Specifically, we hypothesize the following:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Students who have experienced adverse consequences, as a result of trying to prevent an act of sexual or relationship violence, have lower efficacy for intervening effectively as a bystander to prevent violence.

- **Hypothesis 2:** Students who have experienced adverse consequences, as a result of trying to prevent an act of sexual or relationship violence, demonstrate less effectiveness in their bystander behavior.

The first hypothesis is evaluated in Studies 1 and 2, whereas the second hypothesis is tested in Study 2.

Study 1

Method

Participants and procedures

The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Toward the end of the 2015 fall semester, 650 students were randomly selected from the first-year class (N = 1,547) at a midsized, private university in the Midwestern United States, and invited to take part in an online study investigating how students handle risky situations; 281 (43%) agreed to do so and received a US$10 e-gift card for participating. Study measures were administered online using Qualtrics survey software, and informed consent was provided online and obtained via electronic signature. Participants were recruited as part of a larger study assessing how student bystanders respond in situations ranging in risk and violence. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 years (M = 18.28 years, SD = 0.49 years). The sample was predominantly female (65%), and identified as White (77.9%). However, students identifying as Asian (8.5%), Latino/a (5.7%), multiracial (5.3%), Black or African American (2.1%), and American Indian (0.4%) also participated. Bystander training is provided to second-year students at the university and, therefore, no students had received the university's training prior to the current data collection.

Chi-square goodness-of-fit models were conducted on participants' gender, race, and ethnicity to determine whether the sample characteristics differed from documented population characteristics (Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, 2016). Results revealed that there were greater percentages of female (χ^2 = 7.568, p = .01) and White (χ^2 =10.49, p = .01) participants in the sample than in the first-year class as a whole (57% female, 69% White in the first-year class). However, students in the current sample were comparable with those of all first-year students on ethnicity (Hispanic or Latino/a vs. not Hispanic or Latino/a; χ^2 = 0.13, p = .72).

Measures

Self-reports of negative consequences

After completing a measure of bystander behavior, students were asked, "How many times this academic year have you experienced each of these things after trying to help someone who was at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking?" The negative consequences assessed were as follows:

> I was physically hurt because of what I did. I was harassed because of what I did. I was threatened verbally because of what I did. I got in trouble as a result of my action (e.g., charged with underage drinking).

Students provided responses on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 to 8+ times, and were given the option to indicate "N/A" if they had not been in a situation where they tried to help someone who was at risk. N/A responses were recoded as 0.

Efficacy

Students completed the Bystander Efficacy Scale (BES; Banyard et al., 2007) to indicate their confidence in performing 14 specified bystander behaviors. Confidence was rated for each item on a continuous scale from 0 to 100 (0 = *not at all confident*, 100 = *very confident*). Sample items include "Do something if I see a woman surrounded by a group of men at a party who looks very uncomfortable" and "Express my discomfort if someone makes a joke about a woman's body." Items were averaged, with higher total scores indicating greater efficacy. Coefficient alpha in the current sample was .90. Prior research indicates that BES scores correlate with self-reported bystander behavior concurrently (Banyard et al., 2007) and in the future (Jouriles, Rosenfield, Yule, Sargent, & McDonald, 2016).

Results

Prevalence data

Prevalence rates for negative consequences are presented in Table 1. One third of the total sample (n = 97) indicated that they had tried to help someone who was at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking during their first months of college. Of these students, 16 (16.5% of students who intervened, 5.7% of total sample) indicated that they had experienced at least one negative consequence as a result of their actions. In this subset of students, the most frequently reported adverse consequences were being verbally threatened (13%) and harassed (12%), followed by getting into trouble (7%) and being hurt physically (5%). Of students who experienced negative consequences, most (13 of 16; 81%) reported experiencing multiple negative consequences.

Table 1. Study 1: Prevalence of Negative Consequences.

Variable	Total Sample (N = 281)	Subsample (n = 97)
1. I was harassed because of what I did	12 (4%)	12 (12%)
2. I was physically hurt because of what I did	5 (2%)	5 (5%)
3. I was threatened verbally because of what I did	13 (5%)	13 (13%)
4. I got into trouble as a result of my actions (e.g., charged with underage drinking)	7 (2%)	7 (7%)
Any negative consequences	16 (6%)	16 (16%)

Note. Items were dichotomized, with N/A responses recoded as 0 = not experienced. The subsample included only students who indicated they intervened in a risky situation (i.e., students who did not respond "N/A" to every item).

Relations among variables

Correlations among study variables are presented in Table 2. As expected, negative consequences and efficacy were negatively correlated with each other, with correlations ranging in magnitude from −.14 to −.24. That is, students who reported experiencing negative consequences from intervening as a bystander expressed less confidence in their ability to respond in situations where someone might be at risk of being sexually or physically assaulted.

Table 2. Study 1: Correlations Among Negative Consequences and Efficacy in the Total Sample (*N* = 281).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. BES	—				
2. I was harassed because of what I did.	−.20**	—			
3. I was physically hurt because of what I did.	−.14*	.64**	—		
4. I was threatened verbally because of what I did.	−.14*	.71**	.61**	—	
5. I got into trouble as a result of my actions (e.g., charged with underage drinking).	−.24**	.76**	.84**	.62**	—
6. Any negative consequences	−.18**	.86**	.55**	.90**	.65**

Note. BES scores could range from 0 to 100, and the actual range in this sample was 10 to 100. Higher scores indicate greater efficacy in intervening. BES scores (*M* = 74.04, *SD* = 16.97) evidenced a normal distribution. Negative consequence items and "any negative consequences" were dichotomized such that 0 = did not experience and 1 = experienced. BES = Bystander Efficacy Scale.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Study 2

Study 1 indicated that approximately 17% of first-year college students who intervened to prevent violence experienced at least one of the measured negative consequences, and those who experienced negative consequences reported lower efficacy for intervening effectively as a bystander to prevent violence. Study 2 examined prevalence in a sample of first-year college students at a different university. Study 2 also attempted to replicate Study 1 findings on the relation between negative consequences and efficacy, and tested the second hypothesis, that negative consequences are associated with students' effectiveness as a bystander.

Method

Participants and procedures

The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Participants were first-year students (N= 299) enrolled in required wellness classes at a midsized private university. Students received course credit in their class for participation, and those who did not wish to participate were provided alternative options for earning credit. Participants were 18 to 21 years of age (M = 18.26 years, SD = 0.51 years), and 147 (49%) were male. Most identified as White (71%), followed by Asian (16%), Black or African American (2%), Hispanic or Latino/a (5%), and "more than one race" (6%). One participant indicated the race as "unknown or not reported." Approximately 65% of students (n = 193) received bystander training, in the form of a 20-min video, during their first 2 weeks at the university.

Chi-square goodness-of-fit models were conducted on gender, race, and ethnicity to determine whether the sample characteristics differed from documented population characteristics (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). The rates of all demographic variables were comparable with those of the population: χ^2 = 0.96, p = .33, for gender; χ^2 = 1.16, p = .28, for race; χ^2 = 0.57, p = .45, for ethnicity.

Participants were asked to complete one laboratory-based assessment, conducted on average 10.7 weeks (SD = 1.64 weeks) after the beginning of the fall semester. Assessments took place in a university lab and involved completing questionnaires and participating in virtual-reality (VR) simulations (described below). As in Study 1, participants were recruited as part of a larger study assessing bystander behavior, and questionnaires were completed online using Qualtrics survey software.

Measures

Self-report measures

As described in Study 1, after completing a measure of bystander behavior, students completed the four questions on consequences of bystander behavior, and a slightly modified version of the BES (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004). Coefficient alpha of the BES in the current sample was .90.

VR simulations and the quality of bystander behavior (QBB)

In addition to completing self-report measures, students participated in five VR simulations. In each simulation, participants experienced themselves as seated in the passenger seat of a car parked in a parking lot, with a male student (avatar) in the driver's seat. A trained male actor controlled the avatar's speech and movement via computer. Simulations were viewed through Oculus Rift goggles, which provide a dynamic environment that adjusts to participants' head movements.

Three VR simulations afforded participants opportunities to engage in helpful bystander behavior (referred to as bystander simulations), and two additional simulations related to academic decisions, and were included as distractor simulations. Bystander simulations included the avatar telling the participant about an unconscious friend being taken into a back bedroom at a party (B-Sim1), the avatar pointing out to the participant a situation in which a friend has just thrown her backpack at her boyfriend in a heated argument (B-Sim2), and the avatar describing plans to return to a party to hook up with a drunk woman (B-Sim3).

Each simulation was 2 to 4 min long, and began with a research assistant providing background information about the scene (e.g., "You are in a car with a friend, leaving a party."). Participants were then instructed to interact with the live actor as they normally would with a friend. Actors were provided with nine scripted statements in each simulation, one to two of which suggested imminent potential for violence (e.g., "She's really drunk, she probably has no idea where she is right now"; "Did you see her throw her bag at him?" "She's really drunk, so I definitely think I can make this happen."). Actors were instructed to say all nine scripted statements

in every simulation, but could say the statements in any order to simulate a natural conversation. All simulations were coded for actor adherence to the scripts, and adherence was 99%.

Student responses in each simulation were audio recorded and coded for QBB. QBB was defined by clarity of the response, immediacy of the plan, and the likelihood of the plan in preventing harm for the person at risk. Quality was coded on a scale ranging from 0 (*low potential to be effective*) to 6 (*high potential to be effective*); a score of "6" would involve the participant clearly articulating a plan that involves immediate action and is likely to safely prevent harm. A score of "3" might involve some kind of responsive bystander behavior, such as articulating concern, but no clear plan to prevent harm. As another example, a score of "3" might involve articulating some sort of immediate action, but one that is unlikely to prevent harm. Nonsubstantive responses (commenting "OK" to most statements) or those that did not include a plan to intervene ("She's fine, let's leave them alone") were scored as "0."

Simulations were coded independently by a primary coder and a reliability checker (coding 100% and 50% of the audio recordings, respectively). The intraclass correlation for each bystander simulation was .95. Correlations among quality scores across simulations were $r_{\text{B-Sim1, B-Sim2}} = .33$, $r_{\text{B-Sim1, B-Sim3}} = .37$, and $r_{\text{B-Sim2, B-Sim3}} = .44$. A total score was calculated by summing the ratings of each simulation.

Results

Prevalence data

Prevalence rates are presented in Table 3. Similar to the findings in Study 1, about one third of the total sample (*n* = 99) indicated that they had tried to help someone who was at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking during their first months of college. Of these students, 20 (20% of students who intervened, 6.7% of the total sample) indicated that they had experienced at least one negative consequence as a result of their actions. The most frequently reported consequence experienced in this subset of students was being verbally threatened (10%), followed by being hurt physically (9%), and then harassed (8%) and getting into trouble (8%). Nine of the 20 students (45%) who indicated experiencing negative consequences reported experiencing multiple negative consequences.

Table 3. Study 2: Prevalence of Negative Consequences.

Variable	Total Sample (*N* = 299)	Subsample (*n* = 99)
1. I was harassed because of what I did	8 (2.7%)	8 (8.1%)
2. I was physically hurt because of what I did	9 (3.0%)	9 (9.1%)
3. I was threatened verbally because of what I did	10 (3.3%)	10 (10.1%)
4. I got into trouble as a result of my actions (e.g., charged with underage drinking)	8 (2.7%)	8 (8.1%)
Any negative consequences	20 (6.7%)	20 (20.2%)

Note. Items were dichotomized, with N/A responses recoded as 0 = not experienced. The subsample included only students who indicated they intervened in a risky situation (i.e., students who did not respond "N/A" to every item).

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Any negative consequences	20 (6.7%)	20 (20.2%)

Note. Items were dichotomized, with N/A responses recoded as 0 = not experienced. The subsample included only students who indicated they intervened in a risky situation (i.e., students who did not respond "N/A" to every item).

Relations between variables

Correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 4. Items 2 (*I was physically hurt because of what I did*) and 4 (*I got in trouble as a result of my actions*) were negatively associated with the BES, replicating findings from Study 1 for these two items. The magnitude of the correlations of the other two negative consequences with bystander efficacy were similar to those found in Study 1, but were not statistically significant in this sample. The same two items that correlated with efficacy also were negatively associated with QBB ratings of bystander effectiveness in the VR protocol.

Table 4. Study 2: Correlations Among Negative Consequences, Efficacy, and QBB in the Total Sample (*N* = 299).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BES	—					
2. QBB	.36**	—				
3. I was harassed because of what I did.	−.07	−.06	—			
4. I was physically hurt because of what I did.	−.23**	−.15*	.33**	—		
5. I was verbally threatened because of what I did.	−.08	−.04	.43**	.51**	—	
6. I got into trouble as a result of my action (e.g., charged with underage drinking).	−.14*	−.12*	.49**	.46**	.31**	—
7. Any negative consequences	−.14*	−.05	.62**	.66**	.69**	.62**

Note. BES scores could range from 0 to 100, and the actual range in this sample was 8.36 to 100. Higher scores indicate greater efficacy in intervening. QBB scores could range from 0 to 18, with higher scores indicating higher QBB in virtual-reality simulations. The BES (*M* = 77.12, *SD* = 15.34) and QBB (*M* = 11.74, *SD* = 4.38) both evidenced a normal distribution. Negative consequence items and "any negative consequences" were dichotomized such that 0 = did not experience and 1 = experienced. BES = Bystander Efficacy Scale; QBB = quality of bystander behavior.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

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Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BES	—					
2. QBB	.36**	—				
3. I was harassed because of what I did.	−.07	−.06	—			
4. I was physically hurt because of what I did.	−.23**	−.15*	.33**	—		
5. I was verbally threatened because of what I did.	−.08	−.04	.43**	.51**	—	
6. I got into trouble as a result of my action (e.g., charged with underage drinking).	−.14*	−.12*	.49**	.46**	.31**	—
7. Any negative consequences	−.14*	−.05	.62**	.66**	.69**	.62**

Note. BES scores could range from 0 to 100, and the actual range in this sample was 8.36 to 100. Higher scores indicate greater efficacy in intervening. QBB scores could range from 0 to 18, with higher scores indicating higher QBB in virtual-reality simulations. The BES (M = 77.12, SD = 15.34) and QBB (M = 11.74, SD = 4.38) both evidenced a normal distribution. Negative consequence items and "any negative consequences" were dichotomized such that 0 = did not experience and 1 = experienced. BES = Bystander Efficacy Scale; QBB = quality of bystander behavior.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Exploratory analyses

In Studies 1 and 2, efficacy for bystander behavior was negatively associated with being physically hurt or getting into trouble as a result of trying to help someone at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking. In Study 2, approximately two thirds of the sample were randomly assigned to participate in a bystander training program at the beginning of the academic semester (TakeCARE), in which one of the goals of the program is to improve efficacy (Jouriles, McDonald, et al., 2016). This circumstance allowed us to explore whether students who received bystander training (designed to improve efficacy) were less likely to report being physically hurt or getting into trouble as a result of bystander action, compared with students who did not receive bystander training.

Chi-square analyses indicated that students who received bystander training were less likely to report getting physically hurt, compared with students who did not receive bystander training, χ^2 = 3.94, p = .047. However, this association did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance using Fisher's exact test, p = .07. Bystander training was not associated with getting into trouble as a result of bystander action using a chi-square test, χ^2 = 0.73, p = .40, or using the Fisher's exact test, p = .46.

Independent samples t tests also indicated that students who received bystander training (M = 12.22, SD = 4.29) demonstrated higher QBB scores compared with students who did not receive bystander training (M = 10.87, SD = 4.42), t(297) = 2.56, p = .01; but students who received bystander training (M = 77.43, SD = 14.96) had comparable scores on the BES compared with those who did not (M = 76.56, SD = 16.06), t(297) = 0.47, p = .64.

Discussion

Bystander intervention programs effectively promote student actions likely to help prevent sexual assault from occurring on college campuses (Katz & Moore, 2013). Unfortunately, little is known about the potential negative consequences associated with such actions. In the current research, first-year students from two college campuses responded to questions about their violence prevention efforts and adverse consequences experienced as a result of their efforts. Approximately one third of the students surveyed indicated that they had intervened during their first few months of college to help someone who was at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking. Of those students who intervened, 16% to 20% indicated experiencing at least one negative consequence as a result of their actions; 5% to 9% indicated they were physically hurt as a result of their efforts. In other words, up to one in five students who intervene as bystanders to prevent sexual assault and relationship violence experiences some type of negative consequence, and up to one in 11 students experiences an arguably severe negative consequence (being physically hurt). On the positive side, students' efficacy or confidence in performing bystander behaviors was negatively associated with the experience of negative consequences, and efficacy can be improved as a function of bystander training (Banyard et al., 2007; Jouriles, McDonald, et al., 2016; Senn & Forrest, 2016). In addition, exploratory analyses conducted in Study 2 suggest that bystander training can decrease the likelihood of certain negative consequences, such as being physically hurt, as a result of bystander action.

One needs to be cautious in interpreting the prevalence estimates reported in this research. The samples were drawn from only two universities, and the sample for Study 1 was not comparable on certain demographic variables with the population from which it was drawn. Thus, it is not clear how generalizable these prevalence estimates are. Nevertheless, they suggest that a sizable percentage of first-year college students (approximately one third in this research) are confronted with situations in which someone is at risk of sexual assault, relationship abuse, or stalking. These findings are consistent with data from other investigations suggesting that first-semester, first-year college females are at heightened risk of sexual violence (Kimble, Neacsiu, Flack, & Horner, 2008), and with the idea that many students will try to do something to address the violence.

It is notable that the majority of students who reported intervening in a potentially risky situation did not experience adverse consequences; thus, these data should not be interpreted as indicating that students should avoid intervening in such situations. Rather, they suggest that first-year college students would benefit from training on how to respond to such situations, either prior to starting college or shortly afterward. Certain bystander programs may offer an appropriate form of training, but our findings highlight the importance of making sure programs emphasize safe intervention. That is, bystander intervention programs should educate students on the prevalence of negative consequences, and provide strategies for avoiding these consequences. This might include teaching students tactics that could be used to de-escalate violent and conflictual situations, such as making the immediate situation safer by keeping a suitable distance from an angry person and securing backup help (Bowers, 2014). It might also necessitate offering opportunities to practice de-escalation skills, particularly in social groups where bystanders may be likely to help support one another. In addition, universities should consider policies to protect bystanders, such as amnesty for underage drinking when reporting sexual assault. It is also noteworthy that the consequences for bystander action have been linked to outcomes for victims of violence, such that victims experience a greater number of adverse outcomes (i.e., intense fear, physical harm) in situations where bystanders also experience adverse outcomes (Taylor et al., 2016). Thus, bystander training programs that emphasize safe intervention may reduce adverse outcomes for victims as well.

Relatedly, it may be that some situations and intervention strategies are more likely to result in adverse consequences than others. For example, intervening in a heated argument between a couple may put one at risk of being hit or slapped, and trying to physically restrain one of the partners may increase this risk.

Unfortunately, there is limited empirical research directly addressing which bystander strategies are safest, or how to assess the severity of risk in situations calling for bystander behavior. In the current study, it remains unclear whether particular types of violent situations are more likely to be encountered as a bystander, intervened in, or result in negative bystander consequences. Prior work with high school adolescents indicates that there is considerable variability in the types of situations bystanders encounter and choose to intervene in (Sargent, Jouriles, Rosenfield, & McDonald, 2017), and rates of bystander victimization (i.e., experiencing threats or physical harm) appear to vary based on the violent act witnessed in community samples (Taylor et al., 2016). That is, adverse consequences may be a function of the situation as well as the action employed.

In addition, a large proportion (45%-81%) of students who experienced negative consequences as a result of their attempts to help actually experienced multiple negative consequences. These data, however, are difficult to interpret precisely. Students who endorsed multiple negative consequences in the current investigation may be referring to the same circumstance where they attempted to intervene. That is, a student may have been both verbally harassed and threatened verbally by the same individual for attempting to help. Alternatively, a student may be referring to multiple individuals and/or separate instances captured by a single negative consequence item. Future research should attempt to get more precise data on adverse consequences.

The negative associations between experiencing negative consequences, as a result of trying to intervene in risky situations, and both efficacy and QBB can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, students with lower efficacy for intervening in risky situations and who engage in lower quality bystander behavior may be more likely to experience negative consequences as a result of their involvement. Second, students who experience negative consequences may subsequently have reduced efficacy for intervening, and, thus, engage in low-quality bystander behavior when intervening in the future. A cyclical relationship may also be assumed, in which students who experience a negative consequence after intervening may have lower efficacy and QBB, which may place them at greater risk of experiencing another negative consequence when they next intervene.

There are several limitations to the current investigation. First, data on relations between experiencing adverse consequences, efficacy, and QBB were cross sectional, and conclusions regarding causality and direction cannot be drawn. In addition, this study focused on only four possible adverse consequences of bystander behavior. It is unlikely that these four consequences encompass all or even the most severe negative consequences experienced by students. Furthermore, it remains unknown what impact these consequences have on students. For example, it is unclear whether these negative consequences lead students to regret the actions they took or how students' emotional and mental health were affected by these consequences. The current study also focused only on adverse consequences. There are likely to be positive consequences of intervening for the bystander as well as for the potential victim, and considering both positive and negative outcomes will provide a more comprehensive picture of the effects of bystander intervention. Furthermore, the impact of positive consequences, or the balance of positive and negative consequences, has not yet been studied. It is possible that the benefits of intervening—preventing harm to someone—outweigh at least some of the negative consequences for the bystander. That is, bystanders may conclude that helping another student was worth the cost of being verbally harassed.

It should also be reiterated that caution needs to be exercised in interpreting and generalizing the prevalence estimates reported in this research. The samples were drawn from only two universities, and, in both studies, the samples were predominantly White. The number of students who experienced adverse consequences was too small to formally investigate differences in adverse consequences experienced among diverse populations. However, prior research suggests that women intervene as bystanders more often than men (Hoxmeier, Acock, & Flay, 2017), and African American students report more bystander behaviors than White students (Brown, Banyard, & Moynihan, 2014). In short, gender, race, and ethnicity are factors that need to be considered in future research on students' experiences of adverse consequences.

The current study represents an initial attempt to examine the prevalence and correlates of negative consequences experienced after engaging in helpful bystander behavior. It is clear from this investigation that negative consequences are prevalent among students who intervene in risky situations, and that experiencing a negative consequence is associated with bystander efficacy in intervening and QBB. This research provides some initial findings on adverse consequences experienced after intervening as a bystander in situations involving sexual assault and relationship violence, and points to the need for further investigation and consideration of negative and positive consequences in prevention efforts.

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