

What is the Relationship Between Traditional Gender Roles and Individuals' Likelihood to Engage in Bystander Intervention?

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a pressing public health crisis, with incidence rates continuing to rise on college campuses across the United States. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's 2022 Climate Survey revealed nearly one in five women (18.5%) and one in 24 men (4.2%) reported experiencing completed oral, anal, or vaginal sexual assault. Research has identified bystander intervention as a widely recognized, evidence-based strategy for reducing sexual assault on college campuses. Various factors influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in bystander intervention, with traditional gender roles—specifically, concepts of masculinity and femininity—emerging as a well-studied determinant in the literature. This literature review synthesizes existing research on the association between traditional gender roles and an individual's likelihood to engage in bystander intervention. The central themes focus on 1) social norms and 2) impacts on social status (confidence to intervene). This poster discusses the implications of heightening student awareness regarding how to intervene and raise awareness for concerns related to gender inequality through educational programs.

Keywords: sexual assault, bystander intervention, rape myth, gender roles, femininity, masculinity, college campus

About the Author: Jacqueline is a first-year student majoring in Psychology with a minor in Sociology and Criminology, Law, Society (CLS). She plans to advance her research by exploring the resources available to student survivors of sexual assault, as well as examining the factors that contribute to a students' choice not to disclose their experience of sexual assault

What is the Relationship Between Traditional Gender Roles and Individuals' Likelihood to Engage in Bystander Intervention?

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INTRODUCTION

- Sexual assault is a public health crisis and its rates are continuing to increase on college campuses.
- Literature shows that bystander intervention is a popular evidence-based program for reducing incidence of sexual assault on campuses.
- Current research suggests that men and women often experience a difference in levels of confidence when deciding whether to intervene, due to many reasons, one of which is gender constructs, like femininity and masculinity.
- There has been a variety of studies on bystander intervention which focus on psychosocial factors, and are examined through different data collection methods.
- This literature review synthesizes the association between traditional gender roles and individuals' likelihood to engage in bystander intervention.

METHOD

- I conducted a literature review on bystander interventions, specifically using research that has been conducted within universities.
- Using Google Scholar, I searched papers from 2020 to 2025 and selected from the following the criteria:
 - "bystander intervention"
 - "college campuses"
 - "femininity" & "masculinity"
 - "gender norms"
 - "sexual assault"

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the First Generation Scholar Research Program for allowing me to be apart of this wonderful program, and a big thank you to my research mentors that have guided and supported me through this process, Dr. Rachel Garthe and Apoorva Nag.

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RESULTS

Article 1: "Correlates of Men's Bystander Intervention to Prevent Sexual and Relationship Violence: The Role of Masculine Discrepancy Stress".

- Masculine Discrepancy Stress (MDS): MDS is distress men experience when they perceive themselves as not aligning with traditional masculine norms.
- Impact on Bystander Intervention: The study found that higher levels of MDS are associated with a decreased likelihood of men engaging in prosocial bystander behaviors.
- Beliefs and Attitudes: Men experiencing higher MDS may hold beliefs that discourage intervention.

Article 2: "The Chivalrous Bystander: The Role of Gender-Based Beliefs and Empathy on Bystander Intervention".

- Rape Myth Acceptance: Individuals who endorse rape myths are less likely to engage in bystander intervention.
- Hostile Sexism: This attitude, is negatively associated with the likelihood of intervening in situations of sexual or relationship violence.
- Benevolent Sexism: It holds stereotypical and patronizing views about women and can hinder proactive bystander behaviors.
- Empathy: Higher levels of empathy are positively correlated with increased intentions to intervene.

Article 3: "Predicting Bystander Intention to Intervene: The Role of Gender-Specific System Justification and Rape Myth Acceptance for Men and Women".

- Gender-Specific System Justification (GSJ): GSJ is the belief that existing gender relations are fair and legitimate. The study found that higher levels of GSJ are associated with greater acceptance of rape myths among both men and women.
- Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA): Researchers examined four dimensions of RMA: "She asked for it," "He didn't mean to," "It wasn't really rape," and "She lied."
- Bystander Intention to Intervene: Studies revealed gender differences in how RMA influences the intention to intervene.

Article 4: "A Systematic Review Exploring Variables Related to Bystander Intervention in Sexual Violence Contexts".

Individual Variables:

- Gender Differences: Females are generally more likely to intervene than males.
- Personal Cognitions: Feelings of responsibility and confidence to intervene are positively associated with the likelihood of intervention.
- Fear of Harm: Concerns about personal safety can deter individuals from intervening.

Situational Variables:

- Presence of Other Bystanders: The effect of other bystanders is mixed; their presence can either inhibit or facilitate intervention.
- Relationships: Bystanders are more likely to intervene when they have a personal relationship with the victim.
- Severity of Incident: More severe incidents are more likely to prompt intervention due to reduced ambiguity about the need for action.

Contextual Variables:

- Social Norms: Perceptions that peers support intervention behaviors increase the likelihood of bystander action.
- Organizational Culture: Supportive organizational attitudes and clear policies regarding sexual violence can encourage bystander intervention.

Article 5: "Is It My Responsibility?: A Qualitative Review of University Students' Perspectives on Bystander Facilitators and Barriers in the Context of Sexual Violence"

Facilitators of Bystander Intervention:

- Empathy and Personal Connection: Students are more likely to intervene when they empathize with the victim or have a personal relationship with them.
- Sense of Responsibility: A strong feeling of duty or moral obligation motivates students to take action.
- Confidence and Self-Efficacy: Belief in one's ability to effectively intervene increases the likelihood of action.

Barriers to Bystander Intervention:

- Fear of Negative Consequences: Concerns about personal safety, social repercussions, or misinterpretation of the situation can deter intervention.
- Ambiguity of the Situation: Uncertainty about whether an incident constitutes sexual violence can lead to inaction.
- Diffusion of Responsibility: The presence of others can lead individuals to assume someone else will intervene.

IMPLICATIONS

Bystander intervention programs should include male-only groups that engage men experiencing MDS, encouraging them to challenge harmful gender norms through prosocial behavior. These programs should provide safe spaces to discuss the pressures of masculinity, foster empathy, and highlight how rigid gender roles negatively affect everyone. By addressing gender-based attitudes, victim blaming, and beliefs like GSJ, while also teaching practical intervention strategies, such programs can reshape social norms and empower men to take meaningful action against sexual violence.

DISCUSSION

Research shows that bystander intervention in sexual assault is shaped by psychological, social, and contextual factors. MDS, along with beliefs like RMA, sexism, and gender system justification, reduces the likelihood of intervention—especially among men. In contrast, interventions that foster empathy, confidence, and a sense of responsibility increase willingness to act. Women are generally more likely to intervene than men. Situational elements, such as the presence of others, the bystander's relationship to the victim, and the incident's severity, also influence responses. Supportive social norms and organizational cultures encourage action, while fear of consequences, ambiguity, and diffusion of responsibility remain key barriers.

LIMITATIONS

- Some studies were conducted by self-reports, which can lead to bias.
- Racial and ethnic diversity were not considered.
- Scope of questions was limited by not considering gender identities beyond female and male.
- Wording of questions could be leading.