

Bystander Behaviour: An Interview with Dr. Alan Berkowitz”

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The news right now is full of stories of sexual harassment and abuse. From [Cosby](#), to [Trump](#), to [Weinstein](#), to [Louis C.K.](#) and so many others, the story seems to be the same. A powerful man uses his position to get away with harassment and even rape. Now, as women are finally stepping forward to speak out against these high-profile aggressors, we are also hearing that many others knew about the abusive behavior going on. Take the Harvey Weinstein case, for example. Many celebrities, like [Jane Fonda](#), [Quentin Tarantino](#) and [Seth Macfarlane](#) are now coming forward saying that they knew that Weinstein was an abuser but failed to speak up until the news was already out. The question on everyone’s mind? Why didn’t anyone say anything?

This question is one that researcher [Alan Berkowitz](#) has thought a lot about. Dr. Berkowitz is a psychologist and independent consultant who helps universities, public health agencies, military organizations, and communities design programs that address issues of sexual assault. Much of his work has focused on bystanders, those who observe, but aren’t directly involved with abuse. Berkowitz has learned a lot by looking at why bystanders (and his work focuses mainly on male bystanders) often fail to intervene.

At the the Upstander Project, we interviewed Dr. Berkowitz to find out more about his innovative research, get his opinion on why more bystanders don’t speak up, and learn what we can do to change that.

Why Don’t Bystanders Intervene? A Case of Underestimated Social Norms

According to Berkowitz, one major factor that determines whether a bystander intervenes is their perception of the social norms in the group or culture they are in. “If you ask college men ‘would you respect someone who intervenes to prevent a sexual assault’ almost all will say ‘yes’” says Berkowitz. “If you ask them ‘do you think most other men would respect someone who intervenes to prevent a sexual assault’ most will say ‘no.’” This research shows that men often misinterpret the social norms when it comes to bystander behavior, and may think unhealthy norms favoring abusers are more prevalent than they actually are.

“On the one hand there are certainly unhealthy norms in male culture and in men's behavior that need to be changed” Berkowitz explains. “On the other hand there are many healthy norms that are underestimated, or not perceived, or in the closet.”

It's easy to see why bystanders might come to the conclusion that the unhealthy norms predominate, when there are so many examples of unhealthy norms in the media. Take, for example, Donald Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women, and then being elected president. *“You might formulate a research question”* says Berkowitz, *“What percentage of men were uncomfortable with Trump bragging? And did those men express discomfort, and did they know that their discomfort was shared by other men?”*

“Because what happened in that case, and in all social justice issues, is we that we put the affected group in the position of doing the heavy lifting. Most of the objections to Trump's acknowledgments came from women and most of men's discomfort was not expressed.”

“Then the other side of that coin is that the men who thought that what he did was OK, feel validated.” Berkowitz points out. *“They think that they are the majority when they are the minority.”*

Bystanders Fear Repercussions

“Many of the bystanders are jammed by some of the same dynamics that keep victims from reporting.” Berkowitz points out that although *“men themselves are not victimized to the extent that women are, many feel trapped in many of the same ways; in that they don't want to hurt their career; they don't want to jeopardize their relationship with a superior; they don't want to be ostracized by the group.”*

Still Berkowitz believes *“we have the tools to unjam the men, so that men as a group or as a collective or as a culture will be willing to stand up and say and do something when offensive remarks are made.”*

What is the key to shifting this cultural problem? According to Berkowitz, the first step to encouraging bystander interventions is encouraging more discussion of the positive social norms that already exist.

He explains that while we have training programs designed to encourage bystander interventions, the research shows these programs only work to increase bystander interventions at first, and then rebound after only a year. *“So this is where we're being successful but we're missing something.”* explains Berkowitz. *“What we're missing is how to sustain the behavior... The behavior will be sustained if you know that other people share your discomfort and are willing to support you.”*

How Can We Encourage Bystander Interventions?

Berkowitz says that these programs would be more successful if they encouraged men to communicate with each other more about the healthy social norms, so that those who respected speaking up against abuse would see they aren't in the minority.

He also suggests bystanders need to be *"given a more low-risk way of intervening"* that won't leave them feeling bad after they try it.

"We need to give men interventions skills that they are comfortable using" explains Berkowitz. *"One of the bystander skills that I recommend is to talk to other bystanders. Suppose I'm at a lunch with male colleagues and one of my colleagues, let's say a superior, makes offensive comments about the waitress, and I'm uncomfortable."*

"First of all" Berkowitz points out *"I can look at other people's faces to see if they're feeling any discomfort or I can ask them afterwards how they felt about it. If we agreed that we didn't like it, we can brainstorm a strategy of what someone could say the next time a remark is made."*

Berkowitz suggests one such strategy called **'Indirect Intervention'**. With this method *"you don't necessarily confront the offensiveness of the remark directly (which you might not want to do with a superior)." He explains. "Maybe if the boss makes a comment about her physical appearance, I might say 'I'm really more concerned about getting this service for lunch today' or 'Well I've been here many times and she's the best waitress. I always like to sit at her table.' So there's a way of reframing the situation that takes attention away from the remark, and that marginalizes or minimizes the comment."*

Berkowitz explains that this is *"not as risky as a direct confrontation, which sometimes is the appropriate intervention."* But, he feels *"we have a responsibility to give people who would not do anything, something...a tool."* When male bystanders both believe that their interventions will be supported by their peers, and have lower risk ways to step up, they are much more likely to intervene.

How Intersectionality Affects Bystander Behavior

Intersectionality can also come into play in bystander behavior. According to Berkowitz this is an element of the *"bystander issue which has not been explored sufficiently."*

"We know that sexual harassment is a crime in which vulnerability is exploited." Berkowitz explains. *"So in the news recently we have the vulnerability of a younger professional dealing with an older successful professional who has the opportunity to ruin their career. But there's many forms of vulnerability that include race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, immigration status, poverty. So it's really a crime of vulnerability, to a vulnerable group...Therefore we really need to bring into the discussion this issue of what is now called 'intersectionality'"*

[Intersectionality](#) refers to the complex ways that different forms of discrimination overlap and intersect in the experience of marginalized groups. When someone is part of more than one marginalized group, their disadvantages can increase in unexpected way. For example, this comes up often in discussions of feminism. Being a woman comes with one set of discrimination related disadvantages, but if you add being person of color, being disabled, being gay, or being a part of any other discriminated groups, you may find the combination has a somewhat different set of disadvantages. The disadvantages of being a woman are not uniform amongst all groups.

With bystander behavior, we see that intersectionality is also at play. *“For example, as a male who is also physically tall, I might feel more comfortable intervening in certain situations (than a woman might).”* Berkowitz explains. He also points out that, sadly, *“research shows that people are more comfortable intervening with other people who are like them. White people are more likely to intervene to protect a white person from harm than a black person from harm.”*

Berkowitz believes we need further explore the *“way all of these the intersectionalities of identities influence how and when people...intervene”* as well as *“what kind of training and education we can do to make it more likely that more people would intervene more often. This means we have to take into account all of these differences, which include cultural differences... I think if we started to think more broadly about the permutations of the bystander scenario then we would do a better job of coming up with more intervention options and skills, which would lead to more people doing something more often.”*

Stepping Up Bystander Training

Berkowitz explains that sexual abuse prevention which focuses on giving perpetrators reasons to not abuse (like jail, or social repercussions) is not effective while teaching individuals how to avoid situations where they might be abused is not true prevention. Rather, real prevention, according to Berkowitz *“is to train the bystanders to notice the event, interpret it as a problem, feel responsible, and intervene. And what we need to do is all three of these at the same time. We need to inhibit perpetrators, teach individuals to reduce risk and teach bystanders to intervene.”*

While they may feel uninvolved or helpless in the situation, bystanders can exert surprising power. *“Going back to the junior executives out to lunch with their senior and him making a comment about the waitress.”* Berkowitz says. *“If those guys, enough times, divert the conversation and show that they're not interested in having it and that he's not getting any reward for making a comment, then he will stop making that comment.”*

While the current state-of-the-art bystander training programs haven't shown much success in making long term progress with bystander issues, Berkowitz's insights have led to new programs that are currently being tested by the [CDC](#). *“There is a lot of research that shows that misperceptions of other people's concern, inhibits people from intervening. So there is a very strong theoretical base for arguing that normative feedback could lower the barriers to bystander intervention.”* explains Berkowitz. *“So now this combination of bystander intervention and*

normative feedback, which I'm advocating for, is being carefully tested. But the state of the art has not caught up with the research."

Berkowitz says that, in the end, learning to intervene may be a slow but valuable process "We need to realize that learning to intervene is not a one-time event like vaccination." he points out. "But it's an ongoing process. So rather than learning something at one event, we build a process in which people have the opportunity to have mentoring and support and debriefing so that when they intervene successfully, they don't give up. And I personally believe that if we did that, we would eliminate the rebound."

Dr. Berkowitz' theories are currently being tested by the CDC, and hopefully his insights will someday be applied to bystander training programs across the country. In the meantime, we can all do our part by finding ways to intervene in situations where we are bystanders ourselves.

Those interested in learning more about bystander intervention should check out Dr. Berkowitz book [Response Ability: A Complete Guide to Bystander Intervention](#) or his many articles on the topic which are available on his [website](http://www.alanberkowitz.com) (www.alanberkowitz.com)

If you enjoyed reading about Alan Berkowitz' inspiring work, stay tuned to the Upstander Project for more articles featuring people who have found ways to do good in their world.