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A Qualitative Analysis of Bystander Intervention Among Heavy-Drinking College Men

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Abstract

This study qualitatively examines how heavy-drinking college men conceptualize bystander intervention. Twelve semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with college men reporting past-month heavy drinking and sexual activity within the past 2 months. NVivo software was used to conduct a thematic analysis. Following the stage model of bystander intervention, men in this sample described situations—predominantly in drinking contexts—when other men made sexual advances toward women who were not interested or who were intoxicated as opportunities for intervention. Men reported relying on women’s expression of verbal and nonverbal cues as a sign that a situation was problematic, and warranting intervention. Men reported a desire to protect women from experiencing a sexual assault, or to protect a peer from being accused of rape. Men perceived themselves to be more likely to assume responsibility for intervening when the situation involved someone they knew, especially a female friend. A variety of intervention strategies were also reported. Preliminary support was offered for considering alcohol myopia as a barrier to intervention. The interviews also provided preliminary support for further investigation into the role of alcohol expectancies regarding “liquid courage” and “aggression” as factors that can influence bystander intervention when intoxicated. Implications for future research and the development of tailored sexual assault prevention efforts for heavy-drinking men are discussed.

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sexual assault prevention, bystander intervention, alcohol use

Rates of sexual assault are alarmingly high on college campuses (Krebs et al., 2016). The development of a more comprehensive approach to sexual violence prevention requires that risk be addressed across the individual, peer, and community levels of the social ecology (Basile, 2015; Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Bystander approaches to violence prevention call upon all members of a campus community to safely take action to address risk factors for sexual and relationship violence (Banyard, 2015). Bystander intervention can occur prior to an assault happening (i.e., confronting sexist remarks), while risk is actively present (i.e., stepping in after hearing cries for help), or after an assault has occurred (i.e., providing assistance to a friend who discloses they are a survivor; McMahan & Banyard, 2012). Proactive intervention has direct benefits to potential victims and communicates to the perpetrator that their behavior is not acceptable (Berkowitz, 2003).

Evidence is accumulating in support of a bystander intervention approach to sexual assault prevention (Burn, 2009; Casey & Ohler, 2012; McMahan & Banyard, 2012; McMahan & Farmer, 2009; McMahan, Postmus, & Koenick, 2011). Several bystander intervention programs for sexual assault prevention have received rigorous evaluation (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; Coker et al., 2016; McMahan & Dick, 2011), and the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault (2014) recommends that bystander intervention training be a part of a college's comprehensive sexual assault prevention approach. Federal regulations also require colleges and universities to incorporate bystander intervention training into new student education programs (Clery Center for Security on Campus, 2012). For these reasons, research is warranted to understand how to optimize bystander intervention training for college students.

Decades of psychological research documents trends in who tends to step in to help others, when and where this behavior is likely to occur, what situations are likely to spark a call for intervention, and why individuals might help prompt others to engage in prosocial behavior (Fischer et al., 2011; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). The bystander effect refers to the tendency for the presence of others to inhibit helping behavior during emergencies (Latané & Darley, 1970). According to Latané and Darley (1970), individuals refrain from helping in critical situations due to diffusion of responsibility (i.e., decreased personal responsibility in the presence of others), evaluation apprehension (i.e., fear of being judged), and pluralistic ignorance (i.e., assuming that no one else perceives a situation as an emergency). Latané and Darley (1970) also describe a decision-making model that outlines a series of stages that bystanders must go through before engaging in helping behavior. This model highlights situational factors that influence a bystander's decision-making process include noticing and labeling an event as problematic, feeling a sense of responsibility for helping, and having the requisite skills to take action (Latané & Darley, 1970).

Numerous intrapersonal attitudes (e.g., ascription to traditional gender norms), interpersonal factors (e.g., relationship to the perpetrator/victim), and contextual variables (e.g., community norms) influence bystander behavior in general (Fisher et al., 2011), and bystander behavior in situations that pose a risk for relationship or sexual violence in particular (Banyard, 2011; Katz, 1995). For example, there is evidence that the bystander effect—in general—is attenuated when individuals perceive a situation to be dangerous, when bystanders are perceived to be in a position to offer a source of physical help, when bystanders to a situation are exclusively male (and are perceived to offer “strength” to assist with intervention), and when bystanders are friends or acquaintances (Fischer et al., 2011). In U.S. culture, there is also a strong emphasis on personal freedom (Schwartz, 2000), and individuals report not stepping in during risky situations because they do not want to be seen as meddling in what is perceived as “someone else’s business” (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; Nelson, 2011). Some factors that influence helping behavior in general—such as high levels of extroversion and one’s confidence in addressing the situation—have also been shown to influence whether or not individuals intervene to address risk for sexual and relationship violence (Banyard, 2008; Hoxmeier, Flay, & Acock, 2016). Research also documents that in situations that pose a risk for sexual violence, individuals are more likely to help when they feel socially connected to a potential victim (Bennett, Banyard, & Garnhart, 2014; Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010), or when they personally know a victim of sexual violence (McMahon, 2010).

Although gender role proscriptions that frame men as chivalrous and heroic may increase men’s helping behavior in general (Eagly, 2009), men are less likely than women to intervene in situations that pose a risk for interpersonal violence (Banyard, 2008; Brown, Banyard, & Moynihan, 2014; Burn, 2009; Koelsch, Brown, & Boisen, 2012; McMahon, 2010; VanCamp et al., 2014). Dominant cultural narratives place a high degree of pressure on men to pursue sexual activity with women and men report refraining from getting involved in other men’s pursuit of sexual activity to avoid losing respect from their peers (Carlson, 2008). Various masculine norms demonstrate complex associations with bystander intervention, such that the belief that men should attain social status was associated with more confidence in intervening, whereas the beliefs that men should be tough and should not act in stereotypically feminine ways were associated with lower perceived confidence in intervening (Leone, Parrott, Swartout, & Tharp, 2016). The association between pursuing social status and bystander intervention was explained by the belief that intervention would result in positive consequences among men who were high in masculine gender role stress, suggesting that some men may be especially motivated to engage in bystander intervention to demonstrate their masculinity. These findings highlight the importance of continued research to understand the array factors that may differentially influence bystander intervention among college men, specifically.

Despite the proliferation and popularity of bystander intervention approaches for sexual violence prevention, we currently know very little about the factors that influence bystander intervention in the context of alcohol use. This is concerning, given the widespread recognition of problematic alcohol use on college campuses (Gruzca,

Norberg, & Bierut, 2009) and numerous studies documenting event-level, global, and environmental associations between alcohol use and the perpetration of sexual aggression (Abbey, Jaques-Tiura, & LeBreton, 2011; Abbey, Wegner, Woerner, Pegrum, & Pierce, 2014; Locke & Mahalik, 2005, Testa & Cleveland, 2016). In fact, only two studies to our knowledge have specifically examined an association between alcohol use and bystander intervention. Specifically, Fleming and Wiersma-Mosley (2015) documented that global patterns of alcohol use among men—but not women—were associated with a decreased likelihood of intervening to help a friend. Orchowski, Berkowitz, Boggis, and Oesterle (2016) found that the association between heavy drinking and bystander behavior was explained by endorsement of hypermasculine beliefs among college men. As these studies both utilized cross-sectional survey methodologies, research is needed to better understand the mechanisms through which alcohol use influences bystander intervention.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that the pharmacological, cognitive, and sociocultural effects of alcohol use may also influence men's ability to notice risky situations, label these situations as problematic, take responsibility for intervening, and safely take action. According to alcohol myopia theory, alcohol use shifts an individual's cognitive focus to the most salient social cues (Steele & Josephs, 1990). Men may also draw upon their beliefs regarding the effects of the alcohol to interpret situations in a way that aligns with their expectations (Connors, O'Farrell, Cutter, & Thompson, 1986). When intoxicated, men are apt to misinterpret a woman's friendliness as a sign of sexual interest (Farris, Treat, & Viken, 2010; Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill, & Zawacki, 2007). As a result, when under the influence of alcohol, men may fail to recognize situations where women are uncomfortable, or fail to label these instances as problematic and warranting intervention.

Alcohol use may also influence the way in which men intervene to address risk. High levels of alcohol consumption are associated with impaired motor and cognitive functioning (Hendler, Ramchandani, Gilman, & Hommer, 2011). Research on alcohol-related expectancies and outcomes documents how men tend to feel more confident and aggressive when drinking (George & Marlatt, 1986). It is therefore possible that men are more confident intervening when intoxicated but choose more aggressive (and therefore potentially unsafe) intervention strategies. In addition, understanding whether alcohol use influences the type and effectiveness of bystander intervention has important implications for the development of bystander intervention training programs, which, to date, have yet to rigorously address how alcohol influences one's likelihood to intervene.

Contextual factors are also likely to influence bystander intervention among college men. College students frequently drink alcohol at parties and bars (Clapp, Reed, Holmes, Lange, & Voas, 2006; Harford, Wechsler, & Seibring, 2002), which serve as venues for systematically pursuing or "picking up" a sexual partner (Grazian, 2007; Laumann et al., 2004; Owen, Finchman, & Moore, 2011; Snow, Robinson, & McMcCall, 1991; Testa & Cleveland, 2016; Thompson & Cracco, 2008). Furthermore, women who consume alcohol or are present in a bar are commonly perceived to be open to sexual advances (Graham et al., 2014; Parks & Scheidt, 2000; Pino & Johnson-Johns,

2009; Testa & Livingston, 2009). Thus, it is possible that the sociocultural norms of expected behavior in college drinking environments serve to normalize the cues indicative of risk for sexual violence (see Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996), thereby reducing the likelihood that men notice opportunities for intervention. If risk for violence is recognized, it is also possible that some men who notice opportunities to intervene would be *more likely* to intervene in a party or bar setting, as taking action as a proactive bystander would allow them to demonstrate their masculinity to other men while in the presence of women (see Grazian, 2007). Research is warranted to explore these possibilities.

Purpose of the Present Study

As documented above, there are currently numerous unanswered questions regarding how acute alcohol intoxication, sociocultural norms regarding expected behavior in drinking contexts, and personal attitudes about alcohol use, violence, and gender interact to influence bystander intervention in situations that pose a risk for sexual violence. To address some of these gaps in the literature, the present study conducted a series of qualitative interviews to explore factors perceived to influence bystander intervention behavior among heavy-drinking college men. Given the paucity of studies specifically addressing the intersection between alcohol use and bystander intervention, a qualitative approach was utilized to provide more nuanced information on how best to guide the next steps in research.

The interview protocol was aligned with Latané and Darley's (1970) decision-making model of bystander intervention, which empathizes that to intervene, an individual must notice a situation, label it as problematic, take responsibility for helping, and have the requisite skills for taking action. Our interview was also set up to specifically explore how an existing relationship with the potential victim or perpetrator would influence the process of bystander intervention. The interview also included queries to explore how men describe the role of alcohol and drinking contexts as potential influences to bystander intervention.

Method

Participants, Study Recruitment, and Inclusion Criteria

Participants were recruited via email. A list of more than 5,000 enrolled undergraduate men between the ages of 18 and 22 years was provided by the university registrar. A random sample of 400 enrolled undergraduate men between the ages of 18 and 22 years received an email invitation to complete a telephone screening to determine eligibility for a study addressing social and dating behaviors among college men. Of the 400 students who were emailed, 24 called the laboratory to complete the telephone screening. After providing verbal consent for the screening, men answered a brief questionnaire assessing demographic characteristics including age, race, and ethnicity. Men were also asked whether they had engaged in anal,

oral, and/or vaginal sexual intercourse with a female partner in the past 2 months. Past-month alcohol use was assessed with the graduated frequency measure (Hilton, 1989). One drink was defined as one 12-ounce beer, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or one 1.5-ounce shot of 80-proof spirits (NIAAA, 2005). The interviewer administered the antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) module on the Structured Interview for the Diagnosis of Personality Disorders (Pfohl et al., 1997) to screen out participants who met the majority of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.; *DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria for ASPD. Drawing from the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1996), two items were included to assess suicidal ideation and homicidal ideation. Men were also excluded if they scored 23 or higher on the Alcohol Withdrawal Symptom Checklist (Pittman et al., 2007).

As this study was conducted in the context of a larger treatment development study (see Orchowski et al., 2017), the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the parent study were applied. Men were included if they were enrolled at the university, were between the ages of 18 and 22 years, had consumed five or more drinks in one sitting on more than one occasion in the past month, and had engaged in oral, vaginal, or anal sex with a female partner in the past 2 months. Men were excluded from the study if they reported a serious mental health condition (i.e., suicidal/homicidal ideation, symptoms of current alcohol withdrawal) or constellation of personality characteristics that might preclude honest reporting (i.e., meeting diagnostic criteria for ASPD).

Of the 24 men who called in to complete the telephone screening, 14 men met the study inclusion criteria and were invited to enroll. One man chose not to participate in the study after hearing the study description, and another participant did not present for the interview and was not able to reschedule. The final study sample included 12 men, the majority of whom were 20 or 21 years of age ($SD = 0.90$). In this sample, 83.3% self-identified their race as “Caucasian” ($n = 10$), 8.33% as “African American” ($n = 1$), and 8.3% as “Multiracial” ($n = 1$). All participants identified as non-Hispanic/non-Latino. On average, men indicated consuming five or more drinks in one sitting on 6.3 occasions ($SD = 4.62$) in the past 30 days. The average number of drinks consumed on one occasion in the past 30 days was 10.7 ($SD = 3.69$).

Procedure and Data Analysis Plan

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the university and local Institutional Review Board. The study was conducted at a large public university in the Northeast United States. The individual interview was semi-structured and conducted by a male interviewer. Interview prompts were open ended and aligned with the aforementioned research questions (see Table 1). The interviewer was instructed to probe using nonspecific follow-up questions (e.g., “please can you tell me more?”). Facilitators were also instructed to query regarding how various levels of alcohol use would influence bystander intervention.

Table 1. Interview Guide.

-
1. How does one tell when another man “crosses the line” with a woman in a potential sexual situation?
 2. Do men at this school typically do something when they see potentially risky sexual situations?
 3. When men do something, what do they do?
 4. For those men who do act when they see these situations, what motivates these men to step in?
 5. What makes it easier to step in?
 6. What makes it harder to step in?
 7. How does being friends with the guy in these situations change things?
 8. How about if they are friends with the girl?
 9. How does alcohol play a role in whether or not the guys step in?
 10. We’ve been talking about men’s behavior, but how does this change depending on whether the woman is using alcohol?
-

All sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed, removing any identifying information. Transcripts were entered into NVivo for analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied. Through a process of analytic triangulation, four research assistants (two males and two females) independently coded the data and compared their findings in weekly coding meetings. These four coders participated in the qualitative analytic process throughout the entire phase. During the independent coding phase, the coders initially reviewed “codes” that provided insight to the overall coding scheme. Given our awareness of the decision-making model of bystander intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970), we approached the analysis with the expectation that the codes might fall across each stage of this model. When several codes had similarities, they were then grouped together under an overarching umbrella which we called a “theme.” Similarities and differences in emerging codes were discussed together, thereby creating a space for a coding scheme to emerge from the most substantiated codes. After establishing the preliminary codes, focused coding was then applied to the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2014). During the process of focused coding, the most significant codes were collapsed and differentiated under a “theme.” This process allowed for further modification of the coding scheme when appropriate. Consensus was reached when all coders shared a mutual agreement on the themes and codes that were identified during this process. When discrepancies arose, group members engaged in thorough discussion of the content under review, and when necessary, reviewed the audiotapes to further understand how to best interpret transcript-specific content. Once agreement was verified, the final coding scheme was applied to the full set of transcripts. The final coding scheme included four main themes: (a) noticing risk for sexual violence, (b) labeling situations as problematic, (c) taking responsibility for helping, and (d) taking action to intervene.

Results

Noticing Risk for Sexual Violence

The most common situations identified as opportunities for bystander intervention by this sample of heavy-drinking college men were observing a man engaging in continued unwanted sexual advances toward a woman who was perceived to be uninterested in sexual activity or who was clearly intoxicated. These situations were described as commonly occurring within drinking contexts, such as parties or bars. For example, when speaking about when they would intervene, men noted,

If they are being pushy. Or repetitively trying to go after the same girl even though she keeps trying to deny you.

Men reported that intervention was called for only if a man was making continued unreciprocated sexual advances toward a woman. Signs that a woman was uncomfortable with the sexual advances of a man included displays of physical resistance (e.g., pushing a man away), verbal refusals (e.g., saying no, leave me alone), or nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, walking away, turning their backs). For example,

A lot of the time a third party will notice more of the verbal rejections or the body language. You can read people and their reactions. A lot of times you can figure out what they're thinking by the way they're standing, by what they're doing. I mean if one of your friends is pushing a girl up against the wall or something and she's pushing him back, hands on his chest or something you can tell that's not what she wants.

If it does get physical, there is normally a look in a girl's face that just says "get me out of here." There is the "get me out of here" eye roll on the couch—which is like, "oh like I'm so sorry that sucks," and the "get me out of here, because this guy is crazy"—which is a big issue. I see something like that, like I get a knot in my stomach.

Men articulated the physical nature of another man's sexual advance toward a woman was also a turning point in the interaction that signaled an opportunity to intervene.

Men also expressed how alcohol use and the drinking context could influence their ability to recognize that a situation warranted bystander intervention. Specifically, parties and bars were described as risky environments, where intoxication made it difficult to tell the difference between right and wrong. For example,

When you're drunk, the environment you're in is already kind of weird because everyone is drunk, everyone is hammered. [Risk] becomes part of the scenery almost and just people aren't able to distinguish between what's right and what's wrong.

Men also discussed how behavior that would normally be inappropriate seemed common place within a drinking context.

Whereas the two major scenarios discussed as opportunities for bystander intervention among this sample of heavy-drinking men were specific to a drinking context—including witnessing a woman being aggressively pursued by a man, and witnessing a man try to “pick up” an intoxicated woman—men discussed some other situations that they perceived as warranting intervention. For example, two participants discussed how they felt called to intervene when witnessing a verbal or physical fight between a man and a woman. Bystander intervention in response to sexist comments, derogatory jokes, and other risk factors for sexual aggression that are more commonly occurring in society—and often deemed less serious in nature (McMahon & Banyard, 2012)—were not described among the men in this sample as occurrences that warranted intervention.

Labeling Situations as Problematic

Having an existing relationship with the woman who was on the receiving end of the sexual advance made it easier to label the situation as problematic and warranting intervention. For example,

I was with my ex this weekend and we were at a party. She is one of my really good friends. She’s extremely attractive and she’s got big boobs, and she had them out that night. And all my friends know I’m not dating her and they kept coming up to her and saying “Hey who’s your friend? Who is this?” A couple of them were really drunk, and they were always up next to her and talking to her, and touching her, and didn’t really understand that she didn’t really want to be there. She was extremely annoyed at the situation. She probably wanted to punch them in the face. He was leaning over, talking to her saying stupid stuff that she probably didn’t even want to hear. I’m sitting off as the outside observer, and I was drunk and I kept thinking “wow she is so miserable talking to him right now.”

I personally have stepped in before when a couple of my friends were getting hit on by some guy. [The guy] was clearly told once or twice that they were not interested. So I just step in and say, “Hey listen these girls are with me, just leave them alone. They’re obviously not interested go find someone else.”

Men’s comments highlight how they utilized women’s verbal and nonverbal as cues a sign that another man’s sexual advance was problematic. These findings suggest that heavy-drinking men also may be well positioned to intervene on behalf of their female friends, especially in drinking contexts where women are frequently the targets of men’s sexual advances. In these situations, men described how their female friends turned to them for help, and also how they acted on behalf of their female friends when their own attempts to thwart a sexual advance were unsuccessful.

Men were also likely to label situations where men made unwanted advances toward women who were clearly intoxicated as problematic. In this situation, men felt motivated to intervene because they believed they could lead to sexual assault or regretted

sexual activity. Men also believed that pursuing sexual activity with a woman who was clearly intoxicated could lead to a man being “accused of rape.” For example,

I think you might be more willing to [intervene] when she’s really drunk. Something could happen.

I think you would absolutely step in if this girl’s stumbling all over the place, and she can’t even stand up, and this guy is being really pushy. I think you’re going to be like, “listen man, she’s wasted, take it easy.” That’s not cool at all.

If the girl is wasted, you definitely want to save the girl from getting raped or doing something she doesn’t want to do. And you have to save the guy from getting sued for rape.

[Alcohol] brings a lot more risk into the situation because the probability of crying rape. It is the worst-case scenario, but it has happened, and it is a risk you don’t want to take. If you’re the third party, you have to say something. Like we were at the bar this weekend and a buddy of mine were hanging out with a girl that was way too drunk. Instead of saying something, I helped him carry her out to her friend’s car, which made it so he couldn’t sleep with her. I feel like that changed the situation up and prevented a lot of bad things from happening.

As shown above, men were likely to label situations where men were making a “bad decision” as problematic and warranting intervention. Emphasis was placed on helping men to avoid pursuing sexual activity with an intoxicated partner who might “cry rape”, rather than acknowledging men’s responsibility for not pursuing sexual activity with a woman who was too intoxicated to consent. Interviewees also suggested that women needed to appear clearly intoxicated or “wasted” for men to identify the situation as warranting intervention.

Men also discussed psychological barriers that prevented them from labeling behavior as problematic and taking responsibility to intervene. Specifically, men reported a desire to not believe that the men around them were capable of hurting others. These effects were believed to be exacerbated when alcohol use was involved. For example,

I would [intervene]. I think my friends would too but when, when things like that happen though, your first, your first thought is normally for you to just deny it. Because people don’t want to see that, and their first instinct is to be like: “Oh that’s not really happening is it? Like, they’re just joking, I don’t have to do anything.” Because people don’t want to have to do anything and they also don’t want it to be happening in the first place. So a lot of people let things happen that shouldn’t because, because they are confused or afraid to do anything. And it’s the people who would never do that behavior themselves, who are afraid [to intervene] because they don’t understand how someone could do [harm someone]. Because they don’t do that.

These reflections highlight how men talked themselves out of framing a situation as problematic to avoid taking responsibility for stepping in.

Taking Responsibility for Helping

Aligning with the decision-making model of bystander intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970), men's comments highlighted how they believed they would take responsibility for addressing a problem once risk was recognized. One of the primary factors that men believed facilitated their engagement in bystander intervention was a desire to "do the right thing" and protect themselves or someone else from harm. For example, one participant noted,

I feel like it is your moral obligation to say something. Or else bad things can happen. I guess you could end up with—worst case scenario—a rape charge. So you've got to do something.

Other men in the sample described some of their peers as "natural helpers" who commonly took responsibility for addressing inappropriate situations.

When asked to specifically describe how their relationship to the man and woman involved in a risky situation would influence their likelihood to intervene, men's responses were mixed. Specifically, men discussed their feelings about intervening to address the risky behavior among their male friends with ambivalence. Although men expressed their desire to not get in the way of other men's chances of "scoring" a sexual partner, they also articulated a desire to address a potentially dangerous situation. For example, when asked to discuss how their relationship with a man influences their likelihood to get involved, men noted,

I think that could go both ways. Yes I think it'd be harder, you're like "yeah he's my boy" I hope he gets some tonight for his sake or whatever. But on the other hand, I mean if he's your friend and he's someone you know, it's much easier for you to be like "hey dude take it easy, she doesn't want it, you're not like that man. You don't want to be doing that."

You don't want to be known as a cock-block.

How close you are to the person definitely plays a factor. If it's just another guy in the house, yeah, I'll step in if I need to, but at the same time, if it's your best friend and you know he's been trying to sleep with a girl for example, you really don't want to screw things up for him, but if he's crossing the line, you really have to.

Men's hesitancy to intervene reflected their desire to avoid disrupting cultural norms that link men's social status to sexual activity. Men also reflected a desire to preserve their relationships with their male friends. In some situations, "being a friend" meant that men would overlook their peers engagement in inappropriate behavior; whereas in other situations "being a friend" meant that they felt an obligation to step in to prevent both parties from harm.

When speaking specifically about their relationship with women, men noted that they felt a sense of responsibility to step in to help—and protect—their female friends. For example,

[People] usually do nothing, unless it's a girl that they know. Like if it's just a random girl or something, but if it's a girl that they know, they might go and try to help her out.

Some responses highlighted how ascription to traditional masculine norms could motivate bystander intervention. Specifically, men described a personal responsibility to “save” the women who came with them to a party or bar from unwanted advances from men outside of their peer group.

Men also described how they were more likely to take responsibility for intervening when intoxicated as a way to demonstrate their masculinity. When in the presence of others, intervening to address inappropriate behavior was not only a way for men to be “superman” but also a way to be noticed by others. Alcohol use was perceived to facilitate bystander intervention by giving individuals a sense of “liquid courage.” For example,

The more people drink they get a big head, kind of. You kind of think of yourself as more of a superman kind of, the drunker you get. It's the whole immortality thing. When you're wasted you're not really, you really don't know your limits anymore. If you are already drunk, you might be like, I'm going to step up, and be like a macho man to all the girls who are watching—and for that girl I'm going to stop this douche bag. He deserves to be stopped.

[Alcohol] could make someone think they're superman and step in and try to save the day.

The aforementioned comments highlight how men perceived themselves to be more carefree and confident when intoxicated, and as a result, more likely to intervene and “save the day.” These comments also reflect how traditional notions of masculinity—which position men as protectors of women—were an underlying motivation for engaging in bystander intervention.

Other factors that influenced men's likelihood to take responsibility for helping were the characteristics of the potential perpetrator, and the belief that bystander intervention would result in a fight. For example,

This guy has fifty pounds on me and could probably throw me over a car. I don't want to screw around with that. I'm not going to get in his face and be aggressive.

Such a response was echoed across men in our sample, suggesting that men envisioned situations where they would intervene to address risk for sexual violence as particularly confrontational, especially if the situation occurred in a drinking context. Despite this fear, men also described that alcohol use could facilitate bystander intervention by making them less fearful of the perceived consequences of stepping in. For example,

People are more carefree when they're drunk, they're not thinking of like the consequences of getting in a fight when they're drunk.

I think that it's if you are sober, it's easier to tell when someone is being pushy. It may be easier to tell when you are sober, but it is harder to step in because you are sober, at the same time. So you may see it, but you may be more hesitant to step in. Rather when you are drunk you may not notice it, because your perception is off, but if you do notice it, you'll be more likely to step in.

If you're drunk you're less aware of your surroundings and can't tell that he's got 5 of his best friends standing right behind him.

As highlighted above, some men were aware that their alcohol use might influence their ability to identify the most effective or safest plan of action. Aligning with alcohol myopia theory, participants discussed how when drinking, their attention would likely be pulled to other aspects in their environment, rather than to potential risks for sexual assault. The role of alcohol as a facilitator of bystander intervention was also perceived to vary as a function of men's level of alcohol use. Specifically, men indicated that the level of alcohol use they had consumed would influence bystander intervention, such that they would be unlikely to intervene if "wasted."

Participants also discussed how other men in their environment influenced their likelihood to take responsibility for helping. Specifically, if other men in their social circle called out inappropriate behavior, men felt much more likely to follow suit. For example,

[Intervening] is easier when someone else steps in first. There always has to be that one person who says "no" this is wrong. And then they become the poster boy—or girl—for the cause. And then it is way easier to follow than to lead . . . others are able to switch sides and be like "Oh, yeah, I am on his side. This is wrong."

These findings highlight the way in which men's assumptions about other men's beliefs influence how they respond to inappropriate behavior. Some men reported, however, that they were less likely to take responsibility for intervening when they were around their friends, and "did not want to be bothered." For example,

I would be more difficult to intervene if you're just with your own circle. I'm doing my own thing. It's like I really don't want to be bothered by this right now. I don't approve of it, but I'm going to just do my own thing and not worry about what's happening.

As this response highlights, when in social settings that emphasize fun or social connection, some men reported a decreased sense of responsibility for addressing risk in their environment.

Taking Action to Intervene

Bystander intervention strategies discussed by men in this sample ranged from indirect approaches designed to de-escalate and deflect risk, to more direct confrontational approaches. Some men in the sample reported talking to the other men around them

about situations that they identified as inappropriate. For example, when asked whether men at the university tend to address situations that pose a risk for sexual violence, one participant stated,

In my experience I'd say nothing active. You might look at who you're with be like "look at this douche" like I feel bad. I don't think I've ever seen somebody go up to somebody and be like "Hey, knock it off!" or something. And that's probably what you should do, but I don't think I've ever seen it happen.

Although participants discussed their tendency to discuss the inappropriate behavior of other men, they did not indicate that this commentary was with the goal of garnering support from others to address the situation. In some instances, men discussed attempting to direct their friends' attention to other sexual partners who might be more interested, rather than framing the behavior itself as problematic. For example,

You either tell them to stop. You tell them that there's plenty of other girls to hook up with.

Framing social settings (i.e., bars, parties) as situations where it was acceptable to deliberately seek out a sexual partner, men encouraged their peers to "move on" to another potential target when their sexual advance toward a woman was unrequited.

Other men discussed ways that they used distraction, redirection, and then gentle verbal confrontation to address what they perceived to be inappropriate behavior. For example,

[I would] not embarrass the guy. I'd be like "oh, Joe, come take a shot with me," or "come look at this over there" . . . Just take him away from the girl and then be like "Joe, you gotta relax."

Distraction was a popular form of indirect bystander intervention that could be utilized in the moment to remove peers from situations where a man perceived his advances to be unwanted.

Men also described taking great care to avoid being perceived as aggressive when confronting their peers, particularly when they wanted to preserve their relationship with a friend who was acting inappropriately. For example, one participant noted,

You've got to be verbal and not aggressive. One of our fraternity brothers got an internship at Disney World, and [his ex-girlfriend] is still here and another kid in the house is trying to sleep with her. So we called him out on it. The brother in Florida is an older brother, he's got more respect in the house. The kid that's trying to sleep with his ex-girlfriend pledged last semester so he's the new guy. Had that come to light, the whole house would have imploded on him and he would have been ostracized immediately. In that case, we would try and show the kid that we're just trying to protect him from himself. He was being stupid and you've just got to show him that without being aggressive or confrontational.

This comment reflects men's desire to address situations without creating further problems, such as a physical fight. In fact, men discussed how the schemas of being a

“superman” when engaging in bystander intervention did not actually match what they commonly witnessed or would personally do to address situations that posed a risk for violence. For example,

I’ve never seen that movie moment of a guy messing with a girl and someone steps up. I feel like if it was me I would make sure they were separated. Make sure that the guy is away and that he’s calming down. And if it’s really heated, not make him angrier by making him a villain. I’d be like: “Yo dude, you gotta knock it off. Let’s, let’s sit this one out.” I’d not turn it into Superman versus Luther but make sure they’re separated and make sure it stops. Because it doesn’t have to be a bigger issue than making sure that this girl is comfortable and that this guy is away from her.

To protect themselves from anticipated rebuke, men discussed that they would pretend to be a woman’s boyfriend to ward off the sexual advance from another man. Men also voiced their desire not to embarrass the men they were confronting.

Whereas indirect bystander intervention strategies were common ways to address the inappropriate behavior of friends, more direct confrontational forms of bystander intervention occurred more often in our sample in response to strangers, situations that posed a direct risk for sexual violence, or instances where the participant had a reasonable sense that the person they were confronting could not harm them. For example, one participant noted,

I’ve been driving down the street, not in a party situation or anything like that, but a guy was like just arguing with his and always raised his hand to her, and I just opened up the window and was like “you better not do that.” He just like stopped, because he shouldn’t hit a girl. So I’d step in if it was a situation that, I feel like you have the moral right to.

Having others present was identified as a strategy for addressing a situation in person that reflected imminent risk for harm. For example, one participant noted,

I was walking [by the sophomore dorms] one day and saw like well I heard like this couple screaming at each other. I ran back to my car and got my buddies and was like, “Dude, we need to go set this guy straight.” We come up on this guy who’s just screaming at this girl—and dude, you don’t do that. It’s ridiculous. So we say, “Hey, we got a problem here?” The girl backed up from the guy a little bit and they both looked over. The guy is like, “No! No! No! No!” And she’s like, “Yeah, I was just leaving,” and walked off. The guy was like, “Fucking knights in shining armor over here. Saving the day.”

This comment reflects men’s awareness how the presence of other supportive peers served to attenuate the bystander effect.

Direct confrontation of risk through physical intervention was described by men as more common in situations where they were under the influence of alcohol. In addition, men in our sample reported willingness to engage in escalating forms of physically aggressive bystander intervention as a function of increasing levels of intoxication.

As noted by one participant, when witnessing a sexually aggressive man in a drinking context,

If I'm drunk I'm probably more willing to fight just because, it's the same thing it's liquid courage . . . "Oh I could beat up anybody." And on top of the fact, you could be the hero of the night. Like: "Oh, I just helped that girl out." So yeah, alcohol would put something into it. Is it going to change my opinions? No. But it might make me a little bit more aggressive.

Men discussed how alcohol use provided them "liquid courage," in the sense that they would be more likely to engage in a range of risky behavior when intoxicated, even intervening to address a situation that they perceived could result in a physical fight with a peer.

Discussion

The results from the present study advance our knowledge on how heavy-drinking college men—a group who may be at high risk to perpetrate sexual assault or potentially witness risks for sexual assault in drinking contexts—recognize, conceptualize, and respond to situations that may pose a risk for sexual violence. As this interview protocol specifically queried about the role of alcohol and their relationship to the potential perpetrator/victim, the conversations that occurred in this study reflected the ways in which men believed these variables to play a role in when, how, and why they intervened. Of note, limited research has qualitatively explored bystander intervention among college students in general (Carlson, 2008; McMahon & Dick, 2011), and to our knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively explore how heavy-drinking college men conceptualize bystander intervention to address sexual violence.

Broadly, findings from this research highlight the sequential stages described in the decision-making model (Latané & Darley, 1970) and provide context for the situational stressors that are placed upon potential bystanders in college drinking contexts. Several additional more specific findings were also revealed. First, findings from the present study are promising as they reveal several situations that heavy-drinking college men conceptualize as warranting intervention. The types of situations that participants in this sample identified as warranting intervention were largely overt in nature, and focused on men's pursuit of sexual activity with women who were either uninterested or too intoxicated to consent. Other men's use of physical aggression was also a sign that situations had "crossed the line" and warranted intervention. Importantly, when recognizing situations as risky, men focused on reading the nonverbal, verbal, and physical displays of disinterest offered by women in response to men's sexual advances—a skill that can be taught. This suggests that focusing on signs of noninterest and teaching men to notice them earlier could be a valuable prevention strategy.

It was also notable that the situations commonly described by men as warranting bystander intervention commonly occurred in drinking contexts. Drinking environments are commonly sought out for the purpose of picking up women (Grazian, 2007), and confer particularly high risk for sexual assault (Testa & Cleveland, 2016). As such,

these findings lend support to our hypothesis that heavy drinking men could be particularly well positioned to address situations that pose a risk for violence. Furthermore, aligning with alcohol myopia theory (Steele & Josephs, 1990), participants in this sample noted that they would be more likely to miss signs that a situation warranted intervention due to a focus on more pleasurable cues in social environments. Risk cues in drinking contexts were also described as “muddled,” as men were more focused on socializing, having a good time, and seeking sexual partners, and reported a desire to ignore or not be bothered to address situations that posed a risk for sexual assault. MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) describe how alcohol use is perceived to decrease personal responsibility for one’s actions, and numerous studies document the instrumental use of alcohol to facilitate norm violations (Montemurro & McClure, 2005). Alcohol is also deliberately utilized by perpetrators to decrease a victim’s ability to resist (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). These findings suggest the need for future research to explore the extent to which drinking contexts may serve to mask the sexually aggressive behavior of other men.

Second, two main factors emerged as reasons why men tended to label other men’s advances toward women as problematic. Whereas men identified other men’s unwanted sexual advances toward women as problematic because they could lead to a potential sexual assault, they also perceived this behavior to be problematic because it could lead to their friends being falsely accused of rape. Whereas false accusations of rape are quite rare (Lisak et al., 2010; Lonsway, Archambault, & Lisak, 2009), men tend to overestimate the frequency of false accusations (Burt, 1980; Kahlor & Morrison 2007). These overestimations may serve to maintain a state of denial regarding other men’s proclivity to rape, or may be linked to men’s own attitudes that support violence against women (Berkowitz, 2002). Social norms approaches to sexual assault prevention among college men have focused on debunking men’s misperceptions regarding the commonality of false accusations of rape (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011), and these qualitative findings lend support for continuing to address this topic in the context of interventions.

Third, data also revealed several interesting findings relating to men’s likelihood to take responsibility for helping. Notably, men in this sample described bystander intervention as “the right thing to do.” Although speculative, it is possible that these prosocial attitudes be leveraged to facilitate bystander intervention. Social norms theory highlights how men’s perceptions of what other men think and do serve as important drivers in their own behavior (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003), and college students attitudes toward violence align with what they perceive to be normative among their peers (Dardis, Murphy, Bill, & Gidycz, 2016). As men tend to underestimate the extent to which other men support prosocial behavior, sharing the “good news”—specifically that most men want to step in to address risk for violence—could be a particularly important strategy for engaging men as allies in violence prevention (see Mabry & Tuner, 2016; Mollen, Rimalc, Ruitera, Jangd, & Koka, 2013), especially among this population.

Men's likelihood to feel responsible for intervening also intersected with traditional notions of masculinity in several ways, and more research is needed to examine how ascription to various masculine norms differentially influences men's likelihood to intervene to address sexual assault risk (see Barone, Wolgemuth, & Linder, 2007; Leone et al., 2015). Specifically, although men recognized that bystander intervention does not typically involve a "superhero" moment, they drew from language that framed bystander intervention as an act of heroism, using words like "save," and "swoop in" to describe their behavior. Men also articulated a sense of responsibility to help their female friends who they saw as vulnerable to unwanted advances and in need of protection. These findings are consistent with numerous studies linking men's helping behavior to adherence to traditional masculine norms (Eagly, 2009; Leone et al., 2015; Levine & Crowther, 2008; Orchowski et al., 2016). Men were also hesitant to interrupt their friends' pursuit of sexual activity, for fear they would be labeled a "cock block." Although future research is needed to expand upon this small-scale qualitative study, it may be useful for sexual assault prevention programs to consider the ways in which gender norms influence the process of bystander intervention (e.g., Leone et al., 2015).

Finally, men described a range of positive bystander intervention strategies, which included talking about the situation with friends, distraction, gentle verbal confrontation, direct verbal confrontation, and garnering help from friends to directly confront situations as a group. Men tended to utilize more indirect intervention strategies to avoid embarrassing their friends in social contexts. These findings are positive, and highlight the diversity of ways that men can engage as allies in shaping positive campus communities (see Flood, 2011), and should be promoted. Men feared that bystander intervention might result in a physical fight, and described utilizing more aggressive intervention strategies when under the influence of alcohol. While some men believed that alcohol would give them the "liquid courage" to intervene, men also recognized that they might be less capable of weighing the costs and benefits of various intervention strategies when drinking. Bystander intervention training programs offer a range of options for intervention, and highlight the importance of maintaining personal safety when stepping in (Banyard et al., 2007). Laboratory research utilizing an alcohol administration design would be useful to tease out how alcohol consumption, alcohol expectancies, and factors relating to the environment interact to influence bystander intervention in drinking contexts.

Several limitations about this study must be acknowledged. First, our study is limited by a racially and ethnically homogeneous sample. This interview was also specific to men who engaged in heavy drinking and reported recent sexual activity with a female sexual partner, and may not reflect the experiences of men who did not meet the study inclusion criteria. Thus, these findings may not be generalizable. In addition, the study site for this research was a relatively isolated large public university with a Greek system that has been ranked in the top 100 party schools in the United States. Drinking environments frequented by students at this study site include off-campus house parties, bars, and Greek houses. Conducting this research in settings where students frequent varying drinking contexts might yield different results. All interviews

were administered by male facilitators, and this context may also introduce some bias into the results. Finally, the email to participate in the study screening was generic, and the response rate to the invitation to complete the study screening was relatively low. The benchmarks for what is an acceptable response rate for online response to a screening invitation have yet to be established (Draugalis & Plaza, 2009).

There are several ways to extend this research. First, although the sample size included sufficient data for a saturation of themes in this study, further research utilizing a larger and more diverse sample is warranted. Second, the present study did not include survey assessments of engagement in bystander intervention. Third, future studies may consider employing a mixed-methods approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Research examining the intersection of alcohol use and bystander intervention to address sexual assault is limited, and there are likely to be a spectrum of variables that relate to interpretation and recognition of problematic events, feelings of personal responsibility (or lack thereof) to intervene, and the way in which men take action. Finally, there are also still relatively few psychometrically sound assessments of bystander outcomes (see Banyard, Moynihan, Cares, & Warner, 2014), and work is needed to design assessments specific to the process of bystander intervention to address risk for sexual assault in drinking contexts. The results from the present study also reveal a number of important potential implications for sexual assault prevention. Specifically, the college men who drank heavily in this study (a) were willing to intervene in certain situations, suggesting that the cues that signal some forms of risk may be taught; (b) responded positively to other men's willingness to intervene, which supports using social norms change as a strategy for revealing healthy norms among college men; and (c) utilized a variety of intervention skills, which can be taught, normalized, and reinforced in the context of intervention. All of the above suggest that targeted interventions for this population—who may be uniquely positioned to intervene in risky situations—are warranted.

In sum, the present findings provide useful descriptive information and themes to further our understanding of how heavy-drinking men conceptualize their role as proactive bystanders, describe the opportunities available to them for intervention, take steps to intervene, and understand the role of their own drinking as a barrier or facilitator to bystander intervention. Given the complex intersections of alcohol use and sexual violence on college campuses, more work is needed to understand how best to target student drinking in the context of bystander intervention training programs. Further consideration to the challenges associated with intervening in a drinking context or while intoxicated is also warranted.

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