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ISSUE: 2017 VOLUME: 1

## Sexual Assault Prevention: The Effects of a Priming Intervention on the Likelihood of Intervening

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**Abstract.** Previous research has looked specifically at priming behaviors; however, none have investigated how those priming procedures affect a person's likelihood to intervene in a hypothetical sexual assault scenario. This study used priming procedures to influence a person's likelihood to intervene. It was predicted that those who completed priming procedures would show a higher positive likelihood to intervene. Students from Minnesota State University Moorhead either completed a set of priming procedures or did not. They then received a scenario and responded on their likelihood to intervene. Results show that there was not a significant difference between the intervention group and the no intervention group on their likelihood of positively intervening. Results also show that there was not a significant difference between the intervention and no intervention group on their likelihood of negatively intervening. If the hypothesis was supported by the results, then the study could have been used in many schools as an inexpensive and effective way to increase students' likelihood to intervene in a sexual assault situation.

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According to Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fischer, and Martin (2007), one in five women and 1 in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college. Sexual assault is something that can happen to anyone. There are things that can be done to help people who are at a higher risk of sexual assault. Baker and Boland (2011) found in their survey that 29.5 percent of students and faculty at a university experienced invasion of their personal space. If schools included better preventative education programs available, some students and faculty would not begin to invade others' personal space. Several different types of interventions can be provided to educate students and the public on how to prevent sexual assault and avoid performing bystander behaviors. In these situations, ignorance is not bliss. Instead, being fully informed on when and how to act is most beneficial. For example, Banyard, Moynihan, Cares, and Warner (2014) found

that college students who were involved in an abuse intervention program were more likely to take action. They showed a higher readiness to help, intent to be an active helper, self-reported bystander opposed responses, and higher perceptions of peer norms.

Darley and Latane (1968) were the first researchers to look at bystander behaviors. They looked mostly at the willingness of people to respond to an emergency situation in group settings compared to individual settings. They found that people were more willing to respond to an emergency when they were the only bystander present compared to when multiple bystanders were there. Here is an example, if someone was the only person on the street and noticed an assault taking place, they would be more likely to intervene and help the victim than if they were in a group of people.

Bystander prevention programs help people learn how to prevent a harmful





situation from occurring or continuing. It helps people be aware of harmful situations in the event that something does happen. McMahon, Banyard, and McMahon (2015) found that 64.6 percent of incoming college freshman have participated in bystander behaviors. That left researchers with the idea that colleges need to incorporate bystander interventions with different levels of severity to make students more aware of harmful situations. Bystander prevention programs are used in many school systems. When used in a school setting it is usually to make students more aware of a threatening situation and to teach them how to step-in and assist properly. Palm Reed, Hines, Armstrong, and Cameron (2015) showed that people who took a bystander prevention program in college improved bystander efficacy over time, whereas traditional psychoeducation programs instigated less significant improvement over time.

Previous research has shown that bystander prevention programs have many positive outcomes. Prevention programs given to students on bullying in high schools reduced the number of bystander behaviors later performed (Polanin, Espalage, & Pigott, 2012). In college settings, students were more likely to intervene after attending a prevention program. According to Senn and Forrest (2015), adding bystander prevention workshops into the college curriculum results in fewer students acting with bystander behaviors related to sexual assault. Bystander behaviors are represented by the scenario in which a student watches a friend take a girl to the bedroom when she is clearly too intoxicated to know the difference. These results are an indicator that more prevention programs should be available on college campuses. Andrew Stewart (2014) looked at a sexual assault prevention program that targeted college men. He used a pre-post test design to see if his prevention program would be successful and found that after completing the program the men reported less sexism,

rape myth acceptance, and gender-biased references. He also found an increase in collective action willingness, feminist activism, and bystander efficacy. The three studies mentioned in this section show that, regardless of the age level or gender, prevention programs lead to a higher willingness to intervene in a harmful situation.

Specific to college campuses, research has investigated how bystander prevention programs affect students' willingness to step-in or stop a harmful situation from happening. Different types of interventions were performed, online and in person, and all resulted in a prevention program positively affecting a person's willingness to intervene in a harmful situation. A study by Kleinsasser, Jouriles, McDonald, and Rosenfield (2015) looked specifically at an online program for the prevention of sexual violence on college campuses. They found that the online program did not only increase bystander intervention behaviors specific to sexual violence, but was also more cost and time efficient.

In a study done by Senn and Forest (2015) it was shown that participants who completed a workshop consisting of prosocial attitude scales and an intervention led by two undergraduate cohort groups for rape prevention had a higher readiness to change and help in a sexual assault situation on campus than those in the control group not consisting of prosocial attitude scales. Participants who were in the intervention group consistently reported a higher willingness to intervene over a 4-month time period compared to those in the control group.

In addition to classroom programs being too expensive and long, there are many other confounding variables that a researcher can encounter when conducting a bystander intervention study. Bennett and Banyard (2016) looked to see if friends would assist in a sexual violence situation. They compared a bystander helping a friend and a bystander helping the perpetrator. The researchers found



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that in both situations the risk level of the sexual violence contributed to their willingness to intervene. Bystanders who were friends with the victim were more likely to intervene than bystanders who were friends with the perpetrator. Some researchers have found that where you get your sample from is a huge factor that can lead to biased results (Nickerson, Aloes, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). They used a sample from a predominantly White school system and thought that it could have skewed their results since the students have similar beliefs. Exner, Deinera, and Cummings (2011) found that there is a need for gender-targeted prevention programs that provide information for prosocial bystander behaviors that look specifically at increasing self-efficacy and lowering potential barriers to intervening. For example, a female might see a male perpetrator and be less likely to intervene based on the social stigma that males are usually stronger and more dangerous than females.

Previous research has shown that using priming scales and techniques like interventions can contribute to decreasing a behavior. In one study, half of the participants were primed with a racial prejudice scale before answering questions relating to how they felt an immigrant was treated in a given scenario, and the other was just presented with the scenario and asked to answer the questions. The researchers found that the participants who completed the racial prejudice scale answered that they felt the immigrant was intelligent, interesting, reliable, etc. Those who did not complete the racial prejudice scale were more likely to think the immigrant was unfriendly, hostile, dishonest, etc. (Araya, Akrami, Ekihammar, & Hedlund, 2002). From the study conducted, we hoped to see similar results related to how these participants above rated how they felt about

the immigrant, but instead of immigration we would like to see it on a person's likelihood to intervene.

Levine and Crowther (2008) used some of the prosocial attitude scales similar to Senn and Forest to measure a person's willingness to intervene after a sexual assault scenario was presented to the participants. They specifically targeted the type of people that the participants were with when they visualized the supposed sexual assault scenario to see if that affected their willingness to intervene. The study conducted combined these two studies to look at how a priming intervention using a prosocial attitude scale will affect a person's likelihood to intervene. After looking at other data and experiments, we were intrigued to study if a program on bystander interventions would increase a person's likelihood to intervene if they come upon a sexual assault situation or see one about to occur. It was hypothesized that college students who completed a priming prosocial attitude scale before reading the provided sexual assault scenario would report a higher likelihood to intervene positively than those who did not complete the prosocial attitude scale.

## Method

### Design

The current study was a single-factor between subjects design. It had a dependent variable that measures a person's likelihood to intervene in a sexual assault situation along with an independent variable, which was intervention type consisting of two levels. One level of the IV was the control group where participants do not participate in the priming intervention, where the second level consists of participants who do participate in the priming intervention. They were randomly assigned to one of the two levels of the independent variable.





In the present study, participants were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions: fake good/peers, fake good/professors, fake bad/peers, fake bad/professors, honest/peers, or honest/professors. They were then given special instructions and asked to complete a shortened version of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (MPS) to determine the degree to which they scored on each form of perfectionism, producing three scores for each participant. Based on Stoeber et al.'s (2013) findings, the first hypothesis of the present study states that participants faking good images of themselves will perceive all three forms of perfectionism as more desirable than participants faking bad images or giving honest answers. In addition, it is expected that participants being judged by their peers will perceive socially prescribed perfectionism as more desirable than participants being judged by their professors.

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 51 college aged students from Minnesota State University Moorhead. The ages ranged from 18 to 35 ( $M = 20.66$ ,  $SD = 2.97$ ). Demographics were taken for 47 of the participants. Sixty-six percent of the recorded participants were females and 34% were males. Seventeen percent of the participants were Freshman, 23.4% Sophomores, 36.2% Juniors, and 23.4% Seniors. The participants received extra credit in classes for volunteering by signing up on a volunteer sign-up board.

### **Materials**

A brief demographics survey was used to assess the participants' age, sex, and class standing. For the priming intervention, a Nine-item readiness-to-change scale was used that was developed by Banyard, Eckstein, and Moynihan (2010). One example item is: "I don't think sexual assault is a big problem on campus." Another example item is: "I think I can do something about sexual assault and am planning to find out what I can do about the

problem." Responses were given based on a 5-point scale with one being *not at all true* and five being *very much true*. It measures a person's readiness to change their behavior related to preventing sexual assault, where higher scores indicate greater readiness to change their behaviors.

A Ten-question post-test survey was used to measure the participant's likelihood of intervening. The questions were based on a 0-100 percent likely scale with 0 being *not at all likely* and 100 being *completely likely*. For example, a question was worded as follows: "Would you approach the woman and ask her if she is okay?" The question was answered with a rating of 0-100 percent. A revised scenario taken from the program Step UP was used (Scenario: Sexual Assault).

You are at a party, it is 1 a.m. and everyone is intoxicated. The music is so loud that it is making your ears ring and the strobe lights are blasting in your eyes through the darkness of the room. During the past hour you notice one of your male friends has been talking to a young woman. They seem to be having a good time but it is clear that the woman has had too much to drink. She is slurring her speech and is using the wall to help her stay standing. At one point your friend walks by you and you hear him say he is just going to get her "one more" and "that should be enough." He gives you a smirk and walks away to get another drink and brings it to her. A few minutes later you see him put his arm around the young woman's waist and start to lead her upstairs. He goes into a bedroom and closes the door behind them...

### **Procedure**

The participants signed-up on a volunteer sheet outside of the Minnesota State University Moorhead Psychology Department



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office. Next, they signed a form that requires written informed consent. Then the participants filled out a brief demographics survey and were assigned to one of the two groups. The intervention group sat down and completed the provided priming intervention scale, followed by reading the scenario. The control group read the same scenario, but they did not complete the priming intervention scale prior to reading the scenario. Both groups then completed a survey assessing their likelihood to intervene in the scenario that they just read. After finishing the survey, the participants were debriefed and told that the experiment was looking specifically at if completing a priming intervention scale will increase a person's likelihood to positively intervene.

## Results

It was predicted that participants who completed the priming intervention scale before reading the scenario would later report a higher likelihood to positively intervene. An independent samples *t*-test was used to determine if the intervention group rated a higher likelihood of intervening than the no intervention group. It was found that there was not a significant difference between the no intervention group ( $M=79.56, SD=19.32$ ) and intervention group ( $M=7.75, SD=17.95$ ) on their likelihood of positively intervening,  $t(49) = .35, p>.05$ . We also compared the results of the likelihood of negatively intervening and found that there was no significant difference between the intervention group ( $M=2.46, SD=8.55$ ), and the no intervention group ( $M=4.32, SD=9.30$ ),  $t(49) = .74, p>.05$ . The results are shown in Figure 1.

## Discussion

Previous research supported the hypothesis that participants who were in the

intervention group consistently reported a higher likelihood to intervene than those in the control group (Senn & Forest, 2015). It was also shown by Senn and Forest that adding bystander prevention workshops into the college curriculum resulted in fewer students acting with bystander behaviors relative to sexual assault. This study looked at whether priming through the use of a prosocial intervention scale would increase a person's likelihood to intervene in a hypothetical college sexual assault scenario.

This study specifically hypothesized that college students who completed a prosocial attitude scale before reading the provided sexual assault scenario would report a higher likelihood to intervene positively than those who did not complete the prosocial attitude scale. An additional analysis was later added to investigate whether students who completed a prosocial attitude scale before reading the provided sexual assault scenario would report a lower likelihood of negatively intervening than those who did not complete the prosocial attitude scale. Unfortunately, this hypothesis was not supported, and therefore the results fail to support the previous research.

If this hypothesis had been supported, the main implication would have been for use in college curriculum to increase students' likelihood to intervene or even stop a potentially harmful situation from happening. It would have supported a study done by Polanin, Espalage, and Pigott (2012), showing that after prevention programs were given to the students in college settings, the students were more likely to intervene. Hypothetically, this implication could have affected the overall thoughts and views of students on their likelihood of intervening in a situation. It would overall increase their awareness of what could really happen and increase their short-term likelihood of intervening. Long-





term, if the students were part of a prevention program each year they were in college, or even high school, they would possibly be more likely to intervene once they were done with college and into their adult life. This is supported by a study done by Banyard, Moynihan, Cares, and Warner (2014), which found that college students who were involved in an abuse intervention program were more likely to take action. Also if the hypothesis would have been supported by the completed research, then it could have been used in college curriculum on many campuses as an easy and inexpensive way to get students to be more likely to intervene in a wide range of situations. Also, extending this study onto other campuses and even into high schools could be a good way to look at a broader range of results. The effectiveness of the prosocial scales as an intervention strategy could be compared between colleges and high schools. However again, this study could not give support to these proposed ideas.

There were also some limitations to the study that possibly affected the results. One problem was that there was a small sample size. This was due to the lack of volunteers that signed up to participate in the study. Since the sample size was small, we can speculate that a possible effect could have been detected with a larger sample size.

One main problem with this study is that the participants potentially caught on to what was being investigated for and answered the scales accordingly. Another factor was that most of the participants were psychology students who have participated in many other studies in the same day or in the same semester. These students have a better understanding of how the studies are conducted, potentially causing them to direct their answers to what they thought the investigator wanted. This could have led to the lack of significant differences between the intervention group and the no intervention group. The results could have also turned out as such because both groups answered their

likelihood to be more likely to positively intervene in the scenario instead of what they would actually do in the given scenario. Another factor is that most of the participants were female. It was previously found that 1 in 5 women and 1 in 16 men are sexually assaulted while in college (Krebs, et.al 2007). The scenario was possibly too threatening for the females, and they would have all actually wanted to step in and positively intervene. Based on the researchers opinion, females typically look out for each other more at a party than males do. Another possibility could be that the scenario was either too risky or not risky at all to certain participants. According to Bennett and Banyard (2016) the risk level of sexual violence contribute to the participant's willingness to intervene.

Even though this study did not support previous research or detect significant differences, there are still ways that it could be used in future research. An extension of the study could be conducted looking at a few different factors. One factor is adding in more priming procedures; possibly having more prosocial scales related to different topics could be the perfect addition to the priming intervention. Another factor is extending the amount of time that is given to complete the study; if more time was spent in the lab, there could have been more time available to collect data from participants. Making the study a little bit longer in the time it takes each participant to complete could cause participants to make inferences about the study's purpose. All of these factors could be used to increase the probability of getting significant results. Where the researcher gets his or her sample from is a huge factor that can lead to biased results (Nickerson, Aloes, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). To get more participants, using a recruiting technique instead of only volunteer sign-up could raise awareness about the availability of the studies. Perhaps getting more departments within the college to give extra credit to students could lead to more participants as well.



# The Red River Psychology Journal

PUBLISHED BY THE  
MSUM PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

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Creating an extension of the study with different social situations/scenarios could also change the results. A researcher could use bullying, stealing, abuse, alcohol, drugs, and many other situations as scenarios instead of just a hypothetical sexual assault scenario. Future research could also target a specific gender. Andrew Stewart (2014) looked at a sexual assault prevention program that targeted college men. He used a pre-posttest design to see if his prevention program would be successful and found that, after completing the program, the men reported less sexism, rape myth acceptance, and gender-biased references. He also found an increase in collective action willingness, feminist activism, and bystander efficacy. Future research could compare this study between men and women to see if the same results were obtained. Again, unfortunately the conducted study could not find significant results, but continued research may lead to different results and then the study could be used in many social and school settings.



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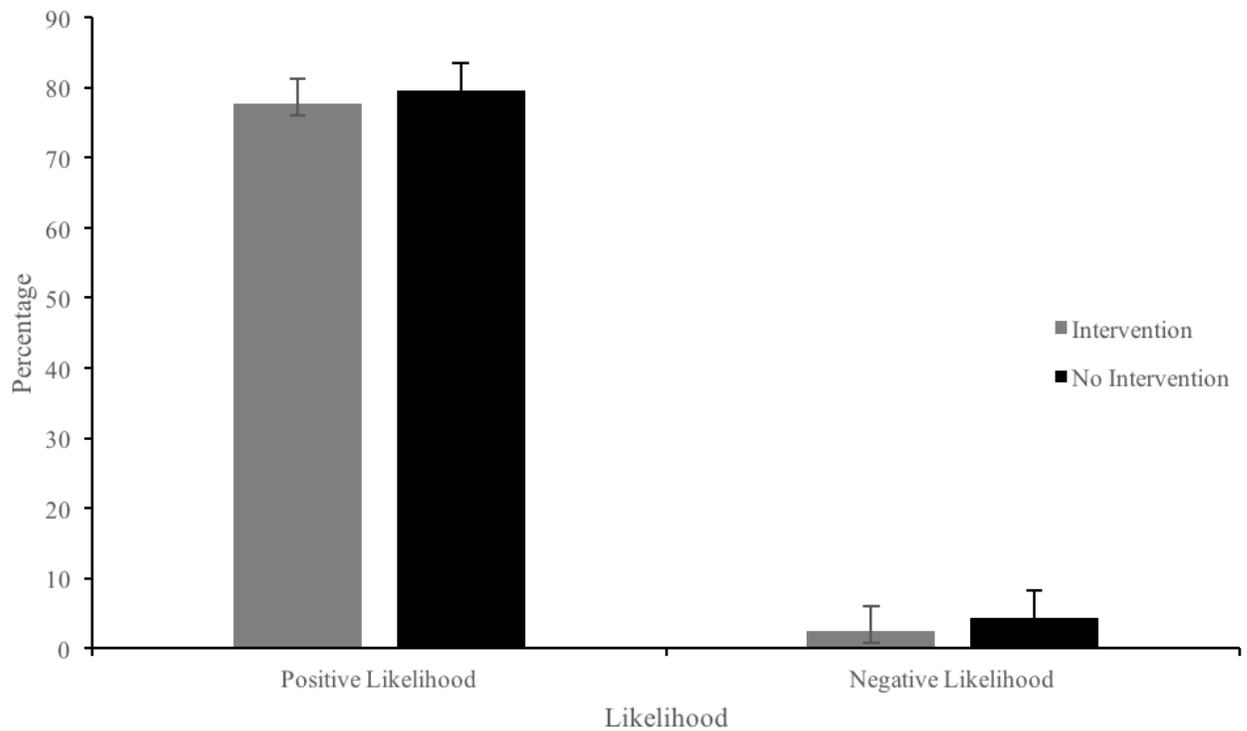


Figure 1. Comparison between the likelihood of a person to intervene positively and negatively.