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Bystanders

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The concept of a bystander is frequently linked to issues of gender, in the context of bystanders who take responsible action against harassment and discrimination. Bystanders are people who observe or learn about good—or bad—behavior by others, while not knowingly engaged in planning or executing the behavior. They have no formal role in the situation and may or may not take action. If they take helpful action, they may be called "active" or "positive" bystanders, or "up-standers." This entry considers the cultural, religious, and gender perspectives through which one can understand bystander behavior, the value of bystander training, and directions for future research.

Cultural, Religious, and Gender Lenses

Historically, many cultures have expected bystander males to protect females, but depending on the situation, these cultures have also at times expected bystander males to exploit or demean females. For example, a male leader may take action to assist a female who is being harassed, especially if she is a family member or he sees her as part of his "in-group." The same person may engage in micro-inequities or even aggressive behavior in different circumstances or after drinking. Some male bystanders will more typically help men; some women will more typically help women. Gender effects appear to be important but case dependent.

Many studies have examined the effect of gender on bystander behavior. Girls and women, by self-report, seem modestly more likely to intervene as responsible bystanders than are boys and men, but interventions vary case by case and issue by issue. The presence of women in formerly all-male groups has been found to be associated with diminished violence; this may be in part due to an indirect bystander effect.

Many religions and many organizations have understood the potential importance of bystanders in helping affirm exemplary behavior and discourage unacceptable acts and speech. Peer pressure is widely understood to be powerful for good as well as for unacceptable behavior. The religious parable of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the role of a bystander who stops to help a person who had been mugged. The victim was not only not in the Samaritan in-group but may actually have been from a religion the Samaritan would normally have despised.

Everyday examples of bystanders taking helpful action on the spot to help strangers are very common: giving a seat to a pregnant woman, helping a man or woman change a tire or dig out a car, breaking up a fight in a dorm, passersby reporting an accident. Bystanders also frequently report unacceptable behavior to the authorities (e.g., by calling a police tip hotline).

There are many studies of bystander behavior with respect to specific issues. Most anecdotal and quantitative research refers to bystanders reacting to behavior they perceive as unacceptable, such as micro-inequities, microaggressions, and sexual assault. There are fewer studies of bystanders affirming and fostering behavior seen as good.

Despite the fact that helpful bystander behavior is common in real life, there are common situations where both females and males will not notice or not take action when very good things happen or very bad things occur. Because of this, bystanders sometimes have a bad name; the term *bystander effect* now exists in many languages and refers to a person who does nothing when expected to act.

In sum, no generalization about bystander behavior is a universal truth. Many bystanders are strongly influenced by context and to some extent by gender.

Focused Bystander Training

With the growing awareness of sexual harassment, bullying, and alcohol and drug abuse, "bystander training" continues to gain support. The government now sometimes encourages or requires certain kinds of bystander training, with respect to specific issues such as safety, sexual assault, and discrimination.

The U.S. government and other authors have compiled lengthy bibliographies about the potential effectiveness of bystanders in dealing with sexual violence. Many reports discuss bystander training programs in a context of strong support for such training.

For methodological reasons, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of bystander training in changing actual behavior. For one thing, the training may suddenly begin in the context of strong organizational leadership, new policies and procedures, and new resources—it could be that any behavioral changes in an organization would properly be linked to many factors. However, a number of studies suggest positive results of training, especially in terms of self-reports by trainees about attitudes.

Future Research

Bystanders can be enormously helpful in fostering exemplary behavior and dealing with unacceptable behavior. Future researchers may learn to measure bystander effectiveness, bystanders' ability to take notice of exemplary or unacceptable behavior, and their being able to judge certain situations as requiring action. Research can examine initiatives, programs, and organizations that assist bystanders in understanding their resources, helping affirm good behavior, and taking appropriate action with unacceptable behavior. With regard to support systems and policies to elicit bystander action, researchers can examine how authorities' leadership affects whether or not bystanders come forward. For each of these future directions, variables such as gender, race, and ethnicity may be examined to better understand how culture influences bystanders' experiences across different contexts.

See alsoCultural Gender Role Norms; Gender Microinequities; Gender Stereotypes; Hostile Sexism; Institutional Sexism; Male Privilege; Microaggressions; Sexism; Sexual Harassment; Street Harassment; Subtle Sexism; Women's Issues: Overview; Workplace Sexual Harassment

- women
- sex work
- sex trafficking
- transsexualism
- sexism
- sexual harassment
- women against violence against women

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Further Readings

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