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Bystanders and Bullying: A Reflective Examination of College Students' Experiences

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**Abstract**

This study examines the individual responses of bystanders to bullying based on situational and personal variables. Using self-report data collected on 935 university students, these variables were used to determine if there was a relationship between the variables and the decision to intervene in a bullying situation for a friend. The results suggested that race, sexual orientation, and direct forms of bullying (physical and cyber bullying) have a relationship between an individual's choice to intervene in a bullying situation for a friend. The findings failed to support the hypothesis that personal factors such as gender, socio-economic status, and a history of being a bully and/or victim had an effect in the individual choice to intervene.

Bullying can be defined as unprovoked, intentional, longstanding physical or psychological violence conducted by an individual or group directed toward individuals who cannot defend themselves (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Henttonen, 1999). Bullying can manifest in either direct or indirect forms. Direct forms of bullying include physical aggression, verbal bullying, teasing, and cyber bullying, while indirect forms include alienation, social isolation, social ostracism, and denial of friendship.

Bullying and peer victimization is a prevalent and serious problem for many youths. This subcategory of aggressive behavior is a common experience for children and has been linked to negative outcomes (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005). Prior research suggests victims and perpetrators of bullying suffer emotional, psychological, and behavioral effects (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Olweus, 1993), which may result in poor academic performance, health problems, delinquency, and criminality (Hymel et al., 2005). Adolescents, many who are considered to be kind and caring by peers, are witness to these negative effects of bullying and stand idly by. These bystanders act in ways that condone, encourage and maintain bullying, with a number of the adolescents actively engaging in bullying or failing to intervene (Hymel et al., 2005).

Since bullying behaviors are typically a group phenomenon, often occur in public places (i.e. schools), and are maintained by the indirect involvement of others (i.e. bystanders); it is critical to examine what factors predict intervention in acts of bullying and why individuals fail to act and remain bystanders (Trach et al., 2010). This analysis will examine (1) what demographic factors played a role in the decision to intervene in

instances of bullying, (2) whether bystanders are more likely to intervene in direct methods of bullying, and (3) whether a past history with bullying as a bully or victim influenced the decision to intervene.

### **Literature Review**

Many studies have been conducted regarding bullying, which have focused specifically on the victim and the aggressor. The role of the bystander and the influence of a bystander, however, have been seemingly overlooked, and it is imperative that more research be conducted on the issue of bystanders and bullying (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Since the role of the bystander can hinder or encourage bullying, dependent on the response, the bystander is critical in influencing whether and how volatile a situation may become.

### **Role of Bystanders**

The role of bystanders is a pivotal aspect in understanding bullying and school violence. As bullying is a collective act, influenced by the size and reaction of the audience, bystanders' reactions are crucial to the prevention or promotion of aggressive behavior (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). There have been specific roles of bystanders identified during a situation involving bullying: reinforcer, defender, encourager, and ignorer (Wiens & Dempsey, 2009). These roles, however, tend to disagree with individual bystander's private beliefs on bullying. Most children, about 80-85%, report that they do not approve of bullying (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). Research has provided evidence, which suggests that peers intervene in 19% of all bullying episodes, which correlate with other findings suggesting that 17% of peers play the role of the

defender of the victim (Hawkins et al., 2001). Most children witness bullying on many occasions, and the majority of these children identify aggressive bullying behavior as wrong (Rock & Baird, 2011). Regardless, few children intervene and stand up to bullies. Research suggests that failure to intervene during bullying situations may be due to a number of factors including unpleasant and anxious feelings experienced during the bullying situations, or failing to recognize the best way to confront the bully (Rock & Baird, 2011). Since intervention is crucial in the prevention of bullying, it is critical to further understand the motives behind the bystander's choice as it may conflict with his or her personal beliefs (Poyhonen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012).

The presence of bystanders strongly influences the promotion or the prevention of violence. The likelihood of a verbal dispute turning into a violent situation is strongly correlated with the presence of bystanders (Stueve et al., 2006). The aggressor may feel pressure to display power and authority, and if there is no intervention, the acts against the victim are then deemed as acceptable. Hence, the presence of a bystander may serve as a stimulus for continued and increasing aggressive behavior by the bully (Stueve et al., 2006). Bullies are motivated by attaining and maintaining a position of power, and the gathering of peers may foster and encourage the bully's desire for power (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Salmivalli et al., 2005). The bully's choice to harass peers of a less powerful position is dependent on the maintenance of perceived status. If peers disapprove or act negatively towards the aggressor in a bullying situation, the rate of bullying should decrease (Karna et al., 2010). Thus, the response of the bystander to the volatile situation, whether remaining passive or active, reinforces the actions of the aggressor.

Research has provided evidence demonstrating that defenders of victims and passive bystanders share some characteristics and differ on others (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Both defenders and passive bystanders tend to be low in aggression, are able to avoid harassment for themselves, have average-to-good theory of mind and social skills (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Defenders of the victim, however, tend to have higher levels of empathic responsiveness, and experience the moral conflict of the innocent bystander, in which one witnesses another in pain or danger and experiences a moral conflict of intervention (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Additionally, bystanders who have experienced prior victimization at the hands of a bully may be more likely to defend another. The extant literature addressing prosocial attitudes toward victims of bullying support this notion those victims are more likely to be supportive of other victims. There is a need for further investigation into student decisions for intervention, especially if those students themselves had once been victims of bullying (Pozzoli et al., 2012).

### **Factors which Influence Bystanders**

Social norms, social standing, type of bullying, and peer relationships are all factors that are considered in bullying intervention (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Bystanders are strongly influenced by the type of bullying that is witnessed. Many bystanders choose to intervene when direct bullying is observed, such as aggressive physical attacks and verbal abuse (Oh & Hazler, 2009). When bystanders witness multiple forms of bullying, they are less likely to intervene, as this situation may create a concerned feeling of retaliation and greater threats for attacks (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Additionally, cyber bullying is now being used as a forum for the extension of traditional bullying (Jose, Kljakovic, Scheib,

& Notter, 2011), and research indicates that many cyber bullies had a higher level of engagement in other forms of peer aggression (Low & Espelage, 2013). Many bystanders choose to intervene in cyber bullying situations, as the electronic interpersonal dynamic is not as established or robust as face-to-face interactions, creating less risk for the bystander (Jose et al., 2011). In addition, peer relationships and social norms significantly impact the decision of the bystanders. Bystanders are more likely to intervene if they have a close, personal relationship with one of the parties involved or if the victim is one who is deemed to have high social standing (Oh & Hazler, 2009).

The establishment of social norms also drives the motivation to intervene in social situations. Many bystanders decide to intervene only if breaking social norms provides more benefits than remaining passive. Bystanders seek to identify and belong to a group, in order to enhance self-esteem. Group membership creates a social identity and provides social rules to follow, which may conflict with personal beliefs. The desire to be included in groups may drive bystanders to not only remain passive in bullying situations, but to encourage or support the bully (Gini, 2006). Individuals who are members of groups not only follow specific rules but also create discriminating social attitudes against those not involved in the group. Many group members consider aggressive behavior acceptable if it is consistent with group rules and directed towards a threat to the group (Gini, 2006).

### **To Intervene or Not: A Theoretical Model**

Latane and Darley (1969) maintained that bystanders who are placed in complex and volatile situations make judgments and participate in a decision-making process that



ultimately determines whether they will intervene. First, bystanders are forced to notice that a situation is occurring. They must interpret the situation as one that requires intervention, assume responsibility, decide what to do, and feel they possess the skills to act. Bystanders are more likely to take action if they feel confident in their skills, feel they understand the correct choice of action, and believe that they are more capable to assist than others. Bystanders, however, may be deflected from acting at each stage of this decision-making process (Latane & Darley, 1969). Bystanders are less likely to respond in situations where there are multiple bystanders present or in cases where there is a lack of personal responsibility. Bystanders, in essence, will choose not to act if they believe that there is a high personal self-risk, strangers are involved, and there are no expectations from significant others for intervention (Stueve et al., 2006).

When directly applied to bystanders in bullying situations, the second, third, and fourth step of the Latane and Darley Model are essential in the examination of behavior (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). The second step, interpretation of the event as an emergency situation, is critical in the decision of any defending behavior. This step may be unclear in many social situations, as interpretation of a situation is a vital factor in which help is offered (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). The interpretation of the situation is also linked to attitudes toward the opinions of the bystander, people engaged in the situation, the environment, and the situation itself (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). The third step of the Latane and Darley Model, perceived personal responsibility is a crucial part of the Model because bystanders have noticed the event, interpreted the event as an emergency and now must take personal responsibility for the assistance of the victim (Pozzoli & Gini,

2012). Once bystanders have assumed personal responsibility, they must select the most effective way to intervene. It is the responsibility of the bystanders to determine the most appropriate strategies for assistance. If they do not know what to do or prefer to distance themselves from such situations, they will not intervene (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012).

The decision of bystanders to intervene is also influenced by the amount of reward one may gain or pain one may receive. Bystanders must feel that there are enough benefits to be garnered if action is chosen. The bystanders must weigh social cues, danger perceived, expectations from loved ones and peers, social standing of the aggressor and victim, and the relationship to those involved. Bystanders may feel pressure to follow social norms based on prior experiences when behavior was rewarded. The value of social identity, in-group membership, along with self-efficacy and outcome expectations, influences the decision for intervention (Poyhonen et al., 2012). Dependent on the predicted outcome of the situation, and the expected personal gain, the bystanders will decide whether action is necessary.

### **The Bullying Triad: Bully, Victim, and Bystander**

Upon the examination of the process of bullying, there have been three roles identified that are filled during peer victimization: the aggressor (bully), the victim, and the one or more students who witness the demonstration of aggression (the bystander[s]). Those who bully tend to express positive attitudes and expectations of beneficial outcomes when aggression is used. Many aggressors believe that violent behavior is the only appropriate behavior or alternative in response to actions of others, specifically the victims (Hymel et al., 2005). Many of those who bully have been found to be victims of

bullying in the past or have a history of bullying. Bully-victims consistently continue to demonstrate aggressive behaviors by assisting aggressors or supporting and reinforcing the behaviors as bystanders. These individuals are able to maintain their negative, aggressive behavior by switching roles from bullies, or bully-victims to unhelpful, passive bystanders (Oh & Hazler, 2009). The preservation of aggressive behavior may be due to the satisfaction felt when one participates in, or is witness to, bullying situations. Bullies tend to be aggressive, intimidating, and hostile to the victims; and those who may try to intervene on behalf of the victim, and elicit positive attitudes and acceptance toward aggression. Bullies are supported by the attitudes and beliefs of the peer group and are more influenced by peer reaction than their own prior behavior in similar situations (Gini, 2005). The extant literature has found that peers are often present in most instances of bullying; however, they seldom intervene on behalf of the victims involved (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). As noted, bystanders have the opportunity to inhibit or encourage the behavior of the aggressor dependent on the choice of action (Wiens & Dempsey, 2009). Students who take a passive role during peer victimization are encouraging the aggressor's behavior, and through inaction, prevent other witnesses from intervening. Additionally, the presence of witnesses may foster violence and aggression because peers may feel pressure to display their toughness and strength. As a result, passive bystanders may encourage future aggression by creating social norms of acceptance since there was no intervention in prior instances of aggressive behavior (Stueve et al., 2006). The tendency for an antagonizer to resort to and demonstrate aggressive and hostile behaviors may be one of the causes of reluctance of bystanders to

intervene and defend the victim (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Bystanders may choose to remain passive due to social pressures, fear of retaliation from the aggressive, hostile aggressor, and the reluctance to assist the weaker victim who has poor social standing in the social environment (i.e. school), due to a fear of losing social standing themselves.

There are many factors that are considered when the decision of intervention is made. These noninvolvement factors may include social norms established in the classroom, moral disengagement from the situation, and the identity of the victim and aggressor. The establishment of social norms introduces appropriate behaviors and ramifications for deviation from these behaviors. The guidelines established are influenced by class attitudes, specifically the collective judgment of the approval of bullying. Class attitudes might influence the decision for intervention based on the collective judgment of bullying and the specific situation at hand (Pozzoli et al., 2012). Injunctive norms, the guidelines for appropriate and desirable behavior in the group environment, are determined by the perception of others' expectations in a situation, specifically whether an individual will base action on the perception of others' expectations, and what the individual thinks that the rest of the group expects. Descriptive norms, actions of others perceived by the group or which behaviors exist in the environment (Pozzoli et al., 2012), set standards for behavior and action in the social setting. The pressure to maintain and uphold these norms guides the behavior of those in that environment, and it has been established that an individual's role and action in a bullying situation is dependent on the social norms and the perceived expectations of others (Gini, 2006).

Moral disengagement, removal of responsibility and ethical standards when acting in an immoral or unethical manner, allows people to commit to or be witness to inhumane and horrendous acts by separating the self from the act. There are psychological mechanisms used to establish the separation of self and action. These mechanisms include cognitive reconstructing, minimization of role in the behavior, the distortion of the effects and consequences of the act, and dehumanization of the victim (Hymel et al., 2005). Cognitive reconstruction, which can also be known as moral justification, places emphasis on the worthy cause that the negative behavior served. This deceptive labeling creates a biased, more positive view on the detrimental act. The minimization of one's role in the behavior can be directly applied to bystanders in which an individual defers responsibility to a larger group or authority. The distortion of the negative impacts of the behavior distances one from the harm produced and instead focuses on the positive outcomes that may have been derived from this situation. Finally, dehumanization of the victim is a strong component of victim blame and places the victim as someone of low value and deserving of the harsh treatment administered (Hymel et al., 2005).

Victims of bullying tend to be individuals in low social standing, those rejected by peers, those who manifest low self-esteem, and withdraw from social settings. These behaviors and the general dislike of the victim may signal submissiveness and invite victimization by those viewed as more powerful (Karna et al., 2010). Since there tends to be a negative bias towards the victims, many classmates and bystanders choose not to feel responsible for the transgressions of the bully. Due to the strong element of rejection, many of the bystanders feel that the aggressor's actions toward the victim are

warranted and just (Karna et al., 2010). Victim blaming is widely used to exonerate one from harmful, aggressive conduct towards others, feelings of guilt, and establishes moral disengagement from the situation. Blaming and dehumanizing the victim allows individuals to view the victim of aggression as the one who is responsible for the maltreatment through the victim's actions of low self-esteem, internalization and isolation. The victim is now responsible for malicious and inhumane behavior, and as a result, is deserving of the aggression (Hymel et al., 2005). Due to the cycle of victim blaming, the victim remains trapped in an endless cycle of targeted aggression and victimization, while the perpetrator is considered blameless. When the victim has poor coping methods and does not receive any support from peers, he/she then becomes an easier target for future aggressors. Since there is social acceptance of bullying, the passive bystanders do not need to fear retaliation from peers and victims. Submissive victims have poor social standing, are generally disliked, and are held responsible for their situation; they are then powerless to retaliate and are blamed for their own victimization (Kanetsuna & Smith, 2002). This establishes an acceptable standard for warranted aggressive behavior towards victims, and implies that the victim is the cause for the behavior and there will be no punishment for aggressors (Karna et al., 2010).

Bystanders are present to the demonstration of the dominance of the aggressor. These witnesses can encourage or prevent victimization of others through their actions in response to an aggressive situation. These witnesses play a pivotal role in the prevention of violence, especially in schools, as many bystanders are witnesses to acts of violence, or know about violent acts beforehand (Stueve et al., 2006). The failure to intervene has

resulted in not only small acts of aggression directed towards victims, but also in school shootings. It has been found that in more than three quarters of cases involving school shootings, individuals had information about this event and could have prevented the act of violence (Stueve et al., 2006). Although the extent to which violence occurs on campus may vary per school, evidence suggests that when there is an outburst of violence, bystanders are usually present (Stueve et al., 2006). Many acts of violence, about three quarters, reported by teenagers take place in the presence of third parties, a larger proportion than reported by older respondents (Stueve et al., 2006). Youths also are party to knowledge of potential violence, as more than three quarters of youths who became “school shooters” told peers or adults of the plans or engaged in behavior that alerted others to the possibility of violent behavior; and in nearly two thirds of these cases two or more people had information about the attack prior to the occurrence (Stueve et al., 2006). Many bystanders are labeled as passive; however, this is an incorrect label as the inaction of bystanders influences if and how extreme situations may become. These witnesses provide the social acceptance or sanction to violence, and as noted, the presence of bystanders in a dispute increases the likelihood that it will become violent (Stueve et al., 2006). It is crucial to note that although bystanders are participants in aggressive and violent situations, they are a separate group from aggressors and victims (Wiens & Dempsey, 2009). Since bystanders are separate from aggressors and victims, they are then motivated and influenced by different factors and reasons.

The acceptance and rejection of bullying is influenced by the social norms present in the classroom. When faced with a situation involving a bully and a victim, many

bystanders will recall upon the prior behavior and reactions of peers and will observe the present reactions. This allows bystanders to distance themselves from the situation, and not maintain feelings of responsibility when forced to decide whether to intervene on behalf of the victim (Gini et al., 2008). Bystanders tend to remain passive when their peers present are also passive and there has been passive behavior in the past. This creates silent “acceptance” of aggression (Pozzoli et al., 2012).

### **Personal Variables**

The response of the bystander is motivated through personal (e.g. age, gender, race, and SES) and situational variables (e.g. type of bullying) (Oh & Hazler, 2009). Previous research has revealed that age, gender, and the type of bullying tend to indicate whether a bystander will remain passive or not. In addition, class norms influence action (Pozzoli, et al., 2012). Younger and female bystanders tend to intervene more in comparison to their older and male counterparts. There are also several gender differences with respect to the types of bullying intervention strategies offered (Rock & Baird, 2011). Female peers tend to offer the “Help Victim” response more often than their male counterparts, which may reflect the differential socialization of females to endorse empathic responses over confrontational responses (Rock & Baird, 2011). Also, if the bullying is direct, physical or verbal aggression, there is a greater chance of intervention (Oh & Hazler, 2009). The level of direct physical or verbal aggression also impacts the type of response that children deem appropriate. Children are more likely to suggest getting a teacher or adult in response to physical aggression, and are more likely to assist the victim non-confrontationally in response to a non-aggressive situation, such



as exclusion (Rock & Baird, 2011). Further research suggests that about 50% of peer interventions in bullying situations are nonaggressive in manner. However, when interventions were targeted toward the bully, bystanders were more likely to use aggressive strategies (Hawkins et al., 2001). In addition, research suggests that boys are more likely to intervene when the bully or victim is male, and girls are more likely to intervene when the bully or victim is female (Hawkins et al., 2001). Furthermore, research indicates that peer interventions in bullying situations have been found to be effective in stopping bullying over two-thirds of the time (Hawkins et al., 2001). Research suggests that intervention is successful regardless of the gender of the bystander who intervenes and the nature of intervention; intervention is not as successful when it is long in duration (Hawkins et al., 2001). Since research supports the idea that peer intervention is effective in stopping bullying, it is essential to discover the reasoning as to why some peers fail to intervene.

Bystanders also tend to intervene depending on the predicted outcome for intervention. They tend to base the decision of intervention on how the outcome will affect themselves. If the bully would then target the bystander, in addition to the victim, the bystander is less likely to intervene. Also, if the bystander feels that intervention will not alter the aggressive situation, the bystander again will not intervene (Poyhonen et al 2012). Since few of those who witness aggressive behavior and bullying tend to intervene, further research is needed in order to create awareness of the role of the bystander, provide greater understanding into the mindset of bystanders, develop techniques to instill personal responsibility, and allow one to develop techniques that

could be used to encourage the intervention and action of bystanders. Bystanders have the power to stop bullies by taking away power. In order to develop better prevention programs, the aggressive situations must also be examined from the perspective of the bystander, and the role that they play (Wiens & Dempsey, 2009).

This departmental thesis is a quantitative study examining individual responses to bullying based on a number of factors. These factors include: gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status (SES), whether the individual was a victim of bullying, or a perpetrator of bullying, and the type of bullying. The factors will be examined to determine if there is any relationship between them and the decision to intervene in a bullying situation.

### **Method**

The participants for this study were drawn from a larger project on bullying involving undergraduate students (N = 11,895) from three universities/colleges in the Southern United States between November 15, 2010 and January 15, 2011. Using Survey Monkey, a secure online survey mechanism, self-report data was collected from a sample of university students to examine student what variables predict intervening in a bullying situation. Prior IRB approval was obtained from all universities. Undergraduate students enrolled in three southern universities were sent an initial recruitment email inviting their voluntary participation in the study. The initial recruitment email described the study, included a questionnaire requesting demographic information, information on prior experience with bullying, and whether the student intervened in a bullying situation on

behalf of another. Additionally, the invitation email guaranteed confidentiality and provided a hyperlink to access the survey website. Information advising students to seek assistance at their universities' counseling center if they were emotionally affected by the questionnaire was also included in the invitation. Non-respondent students were sent reminder emails twice during the sample time period. The electronic survey system ensured that only non-respondents received additional invitations to avoid duplication. The overall response rate of undergraduate students was 11.6% (N=1,387) across the three sites. However, 452 cases were excluded because they indicated they had never witnessed anyone being bullied. Thus, the sample used in this analysis included 935 cases. Although the response rate may appear low, survey research addressing sensitive issues often reports less than a 25% response rate (Hensley, Tallichet, & Dutkiewicz, 2011; Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

## **Measures**

### *Independent Variables*

Information concerning demographic characteristics of respondents was also collected. Demographic information included age in years, sex (0 = male, 1 = female), race (0 = white, 1 = nonwhite), sexual orientation (0 =heterosexual., 1 = homosexual., bisexual., other), and socio-economic status (0 = lower, 1 = middle/upper). Previous experience with bullying in middle or high school was examined both as a victim (0 = no, 1 = yes) and as a bully (0 = no, 1 = yes). Bullying was described to respondents as abusive treatment of someone either by force or coercion, is intentional and repeatedly occurs, and can either be physical (hitting, kicking) or verbal (name-calling, teasing)

(Campbell, 2005). Cyber bullying was also included in the definition of bullying. Method of bullying (physical and cyber bullying) was also examined to determine if bystanders were more likely to intervene (0 = no, 1 = yes) in differing types of bullying situations.

#### *Dependent Variable*

A dichotomous dependent variable was used to determine whether the bystander chose to intervene. Data was collected on the single item “Did you ever try to stop your friend(s) from being bullied” (0 = no, 1 = yes).

#### **Analytic Strategy**

First, the relationships between the independent and dependent variables were explored at the bivariate level utilizing a Pearson Correlation Analysis to determine whether respondents intervened in bullying situations to assist a friend. Next, logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between the independent variable and the choice to intervene. Specifically, gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, past history as victim or bully, and method of bullying was regressed on the dependent variable of “Did you ever try to stop your friend from being bullied.”

#### **Results**

Of those who completed the survey (N = 935), 71.3% of the sample consisted of females while males accounted for 28.3%, with 0.3% missing (see Table 1). While it is common for females to outnumber males on college campuses, females represented just over half of the population on the college campuses sampled, thus indicating an

overrepresentation of females in the study. Just over 87% of the sample reported their race as white while 12.6% reported their race as nonwhite. Sampled individuals overwhelmingly reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual., 89.4%, and approximately 10.2% of sampled individuals reported their sexual orientation as homosexual., bisexual., or other. The vast majority of respondents, 77.2%, described their socio-economic status as lower class, and approximately 22.8% of respondents described their socio-economic status as middle and upper class.

Of the respondents surveyed, approximately 69% reported being a victim of bullying in middle and/or high school. Additionally, over a quarter of the sample, 26.5% reported being a bully. Of the methods used, 40.2% reported physical bullying and 25.9% reported bullying over the internet.

**Table 1:**  
Description of Variables of Major Variables (n = 935)

<b>Variable and Coding</b>	<b>Distribution and Descriptive Findings</b>
Gender (Male = 0)	Male = 28.4%; Female = 71.6%
Race (White = 0)	White = 87.4%; Nonwhite = 12.6%
Sexual Orientation (Hetero = 0)	Heterosexual = 89.8%; GLBTQ = 10.2%
Economic Status (Lower Class = 0)	Lower = 77.2%; Middle/Upper = 22.8%
Victim (No = 0)	No = 30.8%; Yes = 69.2%
Bully (No = 0)	No = 73.2%; Yes = 26.8%
Method Physical (No = 0)	No = 59.8%; Yes = 40.2%
Method Cyber (No = 0)	No = 74.1%; Yes = 25.9%
Bystander Intervention (No = 0)	No = 25.1%; Yes = 74.9%

Beginning with bivariate analysis, Pearson Correlations Analyses were examined for each of the predictor variables and the attitudinal value toward intervention. At the bivariate level, race ( $r = 0.034$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and type of bullying (physical:  $r = 0.108$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; cyber:  $r = 0.107$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) were associated with intervention in bullying situations (see Table 2). Being white, and a prior witness to direct bullying, such as physical bullying and cyber bullying, were significantly related to one's willingness to intervene.

**Table 2: Bivariate Analyses for Intervention of Bullying**

	Sex	Race	Sexual Orientation	SES	Victim	Bully	Bully Physically	Bully Internet	Bystander Intervene
Sex	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Race	0.031	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sexual Orientation	-0.066*	-0.007	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
SES	-0.013	0.0055*	0.099**	1	-	-	-	-	-
Victim	-0.030	-0.062*	0.151**	0.053	1	-	-	-	-
Bully	-0.138**	0.001	0.033	-0.032	0.143**	1	-	-	-
Method Physically	-0.107**	-0.010	0.125**	0.106**	0.234**	0.142**	1	-	-
Method Internet	0.079**	-0.057*	0.066*	0.035	0.168**	0.098**	0.329**	1	-
Bystander Intervene	0.040	-0.081*	-0.054	0.012	0.052	0.003	0.108**	0.107**	1

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01

A Binary Logistical Regression model was used to determine the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable: attempt to intervene in the bullying situation for a friend. The results indicated that race ( $b = -0.510$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and sexual orientation ( $b = -0.492$ ;  $p < 0.050$ ) were both significant predictors of intervention in a bullying situation (see Table 3). Whites and heterosexuals were more likely to intervene. Additionally, direct bullying including cyber bullying ( $b = 0.425$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), and physical bullying ( $b = 0.375$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) were significant predictors of intervention in a bullying situation, indicating that bystanders are likely to intervene in direct bullying situations.

**Table 3:**  
Binary Logistic Regression Analyses of Bystander Intervention

Variable	Model 1	
	Bystander Intervention $\beta$	Std. Error
Sex	.054	.182
Race	-.510 *	.223
Sexual Orientation	-.492 *	.042
SES	.039	.191
Method Physical	.375 *	.174
Method Cyber	.425 *	.198
Bully	-.175	.179
Victim	-.003	.173
<b>PseudoR<sup>2</sup></b>	.03	**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$



## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between individual responses of bystanders to bullying situations and the personal variables of bystanders. The results reveal that bullying continues to be a problem, with 69% of respondents reporting that they had been bullied in middle/high school, and that bystanders still play a large role in the bullying environment.

As hypothesized, the analyses reveal that there was a relationship between one's individual choice to intervene, direct forms of bullying, and personal variables, specifically race and sexual orientation. The findings of the study, however, failed to support the hypothesis that personal factors such as gender, socio-economic status, and a history of being a bully and/or victim, had an effect on the individual choice to intervene in the bullying situation, which is contradictory to the extant literature.

### *Intervention and Race*

The analyses of this study indicate that there was a significant relationship between an individual's race and the choice to intervene in a bullying situation. Individuals who identified as white were more likely to intervene than those who identified as non-white. The findings of this study extend the framework of race and its relationship to bullying situations, as few studies of bullying involvement have systematically examined race (Goldweber, Waasdorp, Bradshaw, 2013). Prior research indicates that little is known about how being non-white may relate to different patterns of bullying involvement; however, non-white youth were more likely to be characterized as members of the bullying subgroup and perpetrate

bullying (Goldweber et al., 2013). Based on prior research regarding race and bullying, the aggressive behavior directed at peers displayed by non-white individuals and their decision to not intervene during bullying situations may be due to the environment and culture that one grows up and develops in. Non-white individuals may be more likely to grow up in low-income, urban communities, which have higher rates of violence relative to suburban communities (Goldweber et al., 2013). The difference in environment may indicate that exposure to community violence may influence the way youth view and respond to conflict. The results garnered in this study may be due to the large percentage of the sample that identified their race as white. Based on these results, one explanation for intervention may be that a youth is more likely to intervene if the victim is similar to his/her self. Youths may feel more comfortable intervening for a victim that is similar to him/her, and is then more likely to stand up to the bully. Further research is needed to fully examine the differences in race and intervention choices.

#### *Intervention and Sexual Orientation*

The analyses of this study also indicate that there was a significant relationship between an individual's sexual orientation and the choice to intervene. The results indicate that heterosexual youth were more likely to intervene in a bullying situation than homosexual/bisexual youths. One explanation for non-involvement may be that non-heterosexual youth tend to have a higher risk for victimization (Wensley & Campbell, 2012), and reports indicate that homophobic bias-based harassment is common (Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2012). LGBTQ

youth may not feel comfortable intervening in a bullying situation as they may become targets of bullying. Estimates indicate that 85% of non-heterosexual youth have experienced verbal harassment while 40% of non-heterosexual youth have experienced physical harassment due to homophobic bias-based harassment (Poteat et al., 2012). Additionally, the social identity theory may influence a non-heterosexual youth's decision to intervene in bullying situations. The social identity theory states that an individual adopts ingroup normative beliefs and behaviors to differentiate selves from outgroup members, and protect themselves from becoming targets of bullying (Poteat et al., 2012). Heterosexual individuals may not feel the same outside pressures as non-heterosexual individuals do, as they are not typical targets of homophobic bias-based bullying. Consequently, heterosexual individuals may not feel the same need to conform to the ingroup beliefs and behaviors and are more willing to intervene for the victim in bullying situations since they do not feel as threatened as their sexual preferences are not attacked.

#### *Intervention and Forms of Bullying*

The results of this study indicate that those who witness direct forms of bullying, physical bullying and cyber bullying, are more likely to intervene. As intervention behaviors are not very common among bystanders in bullying situations, those who witness direct forms of peer aggression may experience a moral conflict, which drives their response (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). This moral conflict of the innocent bystander occurs when an individual witnesses another in distress and experiences a moral conflict of whether to help or not (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012).

Bystanders who witness physical aggression may feel a stronger moral conflict, and are more driven to respond. The bystanders who intervene in cyber bullying situations may not feel as though they are taking a major risk, as the electronic communication is not as robust or threatening as face-to-face confrontation (Jose et al., 2011). The defending behavior associated with cyber bullying is not as risky as the confrontation may not occur face-to-face and those who cyber bully may not pose as much of a risk for being a target of bullying, as compared to those who bully directly in the school environment (Jose et al., 2011). Additionally, bystanders may intervene in cyber bullying situations, as they may not be exposed to the situational cues and the cues of others. This may be due to the extended forum of cyberspace, and as a result, bystanders may feel a stronger moral conflict to intervene; the bystanders of cyber bullying may be more likely to attribute victim suffering to the peer aggressors and the medium in which the aggression occurs (Morrow & Downey, 2013).

### **Implications and Directions for Future Research**

Peer intervention is critical in reducing the rate of aggression and bullying situations. Bystanders have the power to stop bullying, as intervention strips the power of the bully. Many bystanders, however, choose not to intervene for fear of retaliation, feelings that their actions will not make any difference in the situation, and a lack of personal responsibility. In order to develop peer aggression prevention programs, the investigation into mindset and perspective of bystanders is extremely essential as bystanders play a major role in bullying situations. The findings of this

study indicate that there is a relationship between a bystander's choice to intervene and the race of the bystander, the sexual orientation of the bystander, and the type of bullying that the bystander witnesses.

The findings from this study will be useful in further understanding the behavior and mindset of bystanders. Understanding the mindset of bystanders is critical in developing effective prevention programs, as bystanders have the power to stop peer aggression. The findings from this study indicate that further research is needed, with a more diverse sample. Further research into racial differences in intervention should be investigated. These efforts could lead to a more critical understanding of how these behaviors could ultimately end peer aggression and discrimination among youth. Additionally, further research should be conducted on examining the differences in intervention between direct and indirect bullying

The study failed to reveal a relationship between gender of the bystander, which has been examined by research in the past. This may be due to the sample surveyed, as the majority of the respondents were female. It is important to acknowledge that intervention is successful regardless of gender, as any intervention takes power away from the aggressor. Additionally, only a small percentage of the variance with the model could be explained, which could limit the application of these results beyond this study. Actual defending behaviors in peer aggression situations are not as common as expected (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012), which may have impacted the results of this study. While the inferences made from the analysis of

this study may remain limited, this study is based on established theories regarding peer aggression and intervention.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are several limitations associated with the sampling technique of surveying, and this study relied heavily on self-report data. This may lead to misrepresentation in answers due to the potential pressure for social desirability (Pozzoli & Gini, 2012). Regarding self-report data, respondents are not always honest when completing surveys, and may be embarrassed of their answers and may feel compelled to lie. Additionally, since the data is derived from self-report measures, the participant's response may not reflect the truth, but instead reflects the socially acceptable action or ideal behavior. It is possible that respondents introduced recall and reporter biases in their involvement in bullying intervention (Wang et al., 2012). The respondent may answer questions in a way that the respondent feels that the researcher wants. Specifically, online surveys may have low response rates, and an interviewer effect in which the interviewer induces socially desired answers and creates bias. Additionally, since the only method of data collection was through use of a survey, there may be common metric bias. The common metric bias is a constant error and would be due to the method of collection. In addition, when generalizing the findings of this study, care should be taken due to the representation of the sample surveyed as the majority were female respondents, and possible selection bias in participant recruitment as the respondents were undergraduate students at southern universities (Wensley & Campbell, 2012). The

findings of this study may be difficult to generalize to the target population as the representation of the sample mainly consisted of female youths and white youths.

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