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Mapping a Continuum of Adolescent Helping and Bystander Behavior within the Context of Dating Violence and Bullying

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Abstract

Although research has identified factors that support and hinder proactive bystander behaviors among adolescents, less is known about the more specific bystander responses viewed by youth as feasible, or whether these responses are likely to be ultimately helpful in the context of bullying and teen dating violence (TDV). Goals of this exploratory study were to describe specific bystander behaviors that adolescents perceive as possible for addressing bullying and TDV among peers, to assess the potential impact of these behaviors, and to examine similarities and differences in bystander behaviors across these forms of aggression.

In focus groups with 113 14-18 year old youth, participants identified more possible responses to bullying than to TDV, and more options for supporting victims of aggression than for interrupting perpetrators. Although many bystander responses identified by youth are promising for lessening the impact of bullying and TDV, some, such as "advising" victims of TDV and physically confronting perpetrators are likely not safe or helpful and may cause more harm than good. Findings point to the importance of better understanding how youth perceive their options as bystanders, and providing coaching to respond to peer aggression in specific ways that maximize their own and others' safety and well-being.

Key words: Adolescence, bystander behavior, bullying, teen dating violence, prevention

Public Policy Relevance Statement: Encouraging youth to be proactive bystanders in the face of peer to peer bullying or teen dating violence is an increasingly prevalent component of prevention programming. Findings from this qualitative study of youth's perceptions of realistic bystander actions suggest that youth may sometimes struggle to identify safe and ultimately helpful responses to these forms of peer aggression. Accordingly, schools implementing bystander-based prevention programming should account for student perceptions of the feasibility of bystander responses, and provide coaching and adult modelling of helpful, safe responses to bullying and teen dating violence.

Mapping a Continuum of Adolescent Helping and Bystander Behavior within the Context of Dating Violence and Bullying

School-based prevention programs aimed at reducing bullying among youth have long incorporated "bystander" components, or strategies designed to equip all youth in a school setting to try to interrupt bullying episodes, support victims, and/or enlist adult intervention (e.g. Frey et al., 2005). More recently, programs aimed at reducing teen dating violence (TDV) and sexual assault have incorporated bystander components (e.g. Miller et al., 2012). Across these programs, goals include empowering young people to interrupt aggressive incidents and supporting them to create positive peer climates in which aggression is not acceptable (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Such approaches have shown promise. Recent meta-analyses found that bullying-related bystander prevention programs successfully increase the use of intervening behaviors among elementary and middle school students in the context of bullying (Polanin, Espelage & Pigott, 2012), and among college students in situations that could lead to a sexual assault (Katz & Moore, 2013).

Understanding when to employ bystander behaviors is particularly important for adolescents, because they are often exposed to abusive peer behaviors in their schools and neighborhoods. Scholars suggest that bullying is a "group" phenomenon, in that it generally occurs in the presence of witnesses and within the context of complex peer and social dynamics among youth (see for review, Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Salmivalli, 2010). Evidence from one study with elementary school students found that, when children do intervene in bullying episodes, they are successful at interrupting those episodes over half the time (Hawkins et al., 2001), although to our knowledge, no comparable data exist for episodes that involve adolescents. Teens are also most likely to disclose abuse in their dating relationships to their friends or siblings (Fry et al., 2014; Weisz et al., 2007) and have reported a reluctance to involve adults (Edwards et al. 2015; Noonan & Charles, 2009). Although a goal of prevention programs is to increase young people's willingness to

enlist adult assistance, these findings reinforce that teens are often in the role of "first responders" to bullying and TDV within school environments and therefore need skills for responding to episodes of aggression in specific ways that will maximize their own safety and that of the victim's.

Although there has been considerable research on factors associated with a general willingness to intervene to help victims of bullying and TDV, there has been a more limited investigation of the particular actions that youth are willing to and feel confident employing. To date, much of the research examining or predicting adolescent bystander behavior has focused on fairly broad categories of "defending" (e.g. Salmivalli, Karhunen. & Lagerspetz, 1996) or intervening behavior, which generally include confronting the perpetrator, supporting the victim, or telling an adult. While it is critical to understand the factors that support youth to take action in these ways, these broadly defined response options may subsume very different bystander behaviors which are likely to have varying degrees of effectiveness at interrupting aggression or supporting victims. Further, the degree to which adolescents themselves view different, specific intervening behaviors as realistic within their complex social environments is less understood. The purpose of this exploratory study was to elicit and describe a more specific and detailed range of bystander responses to peer bullying and TDV that high-school aged adolescents perceive to be both feasible and possible, and to assess the extent to which identified behaviors hold promise for appropriately and safely addressing bullying and TDV incidents.

Examining bullying and TDV in concert

Studies of bystander programs and behavior often focus on a single form of aggression in isolation, such as bullying or TDV. While dynamics underlying these forms of aggression can differ, there is considerable overlap in the specific aggressive behaviors involved and the contexts in which they occur. Perpetrating bullying and physical aggression against peers is correlated with TDV perpetration (Rothman, Johnston, Azrael, Hall & Weinburg, 2010). As previously noted, both

often occur in the presence of or are known about by peers (Edwards et al., 2015; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2001), which means that intervening in either bullying or TDV necessitates negotiating subsequent fallout within peer relationships for youth. Further, in that behavioral tactics are similar across bullying and TDV (e.g., threats, physical abuse, insults, and rumor spreading), particular bystander intervention skills may apply equally for these forms of aggression. Little is known, however, about whether youth view specific intervening responses as similarly feasible in the face of comparable kinds of behavior (e.g. rumor spreading) in the context of bullying vs. TDV. Further, given that TDV prevention in schools is still inconsistently available (Hawley et al., 2016), youth may be more familiar with bystander-based prevention of bullying. It is helpful, then, to assess the degree to which bystander skills gained through bullying prevention may be generalizable to other forms of aggression from the perspective of teens. We therefore examine possible adolescent bystander responses to these types of mistreatment in concert.

How do adolescents intervene?

On balance, more research has examined bystander behavior in the context of bullying than TDV. Most of this work, however, looks at *predictors* of pre-determined "defending" or intervening behaviors, and less often at teens' perceptions of the range of behaviors that collectively constitute a "defender." Often, three possible proactive responses are examined; comforting or supporting the victim of bullying, confronting the bully, or enlisting adult help, although these are also sometimes aggregated into a single "defender" variable (e.g. Salmivalli, et al., 1996). Emerging and largely qualitative research suggests that these categories may contain very different, heterogeneous responding behaviors. For example, in open-ended questions answered by 3rd-5th grade students in the U.S. about their likely response to gender-based bullying, Brinkman & Manning (2015) found a small range of fairly different specific bystander behaviors within a larger category of "assertive"

responses, including befriending the victim, physically fighting the bully, and verbally confronting the bully (e.g. telling the bully he/she is “mean”).

Less research has focused on the intervening behaviors that adolescents use or view as realistic, and this is particularly true in the context of TDV. Middle school students generally report a reluctance to intervene in other’s relationships (Noonan & Charles, 2009; Weisz & Black, 2008). Yet, a handful of studies suggest that youth sometimes try to help others impacted by TDV and do so in ways that are similar to how they handle bullying. Edwards et al. (2015) found that over half of the high school aged youth in their sample who had become aware of an abusive relationship tried at least one strategy to help. These strategies mirrored categories of intervening behavior in bullying and included behaviors intended to support the victim, confront the perpetrator, or enlist adult aid. Youth in other studies also identify “helping” or “protecting” the victim as possible responses (Weisz and Black, 2008), along with options such as “giving advice” or seeking guidance from an adult or hotline (Fry et al., 2014). Encouragingly, in a study of U.S. high school aged youth, teens who had disclosed TDV to a friend or family member reported most commonly receiving a “nurturing” response (defined as sympathetic and asking about feelings; Weisz et al., 2007).

Adolescent intervening behaviors; helpful or harmful?

While evidence suggests that adolescents sometimes intervene to prevent aggression, it is also important to assess the degree to which a chosen intervention is safe and helpful. Subsumed within some of the above larger categories of ‘helping’ behavior (such as “supporting the victim”) may be more specific behaviors that are very different from one another, and which are not uniformly *helpful* or safe. While few studies measure the actual impact of different bystander responses on incidents of TDV and bullying, guidance on which responses are likely to be safest and most supportive to victims can be found in the research literature. For example, reduced social isolation (Wang, Ionnotti & Luke, 2013), and family support (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013) are linked

to more positive outcomes (such as school success) for bullying victims, while coping by trying to ignore bullying or by internalizing the problem and blaming oneself are not (Kichenderfer - Ladd and Skinner, 2002). Bystander responses that offer social support, while not encouraging the victim to internalize or ignore the negative impacts of bullying are likely effective strategies to buffer the harmful emotional costs of bullying. Reduced social isolation is also a strong predictor of safety and other positive outcomes for survivors of intimate partner violence (Goodman et al., 2006), while uninformed advice-giving or encouraging victims to leave abusive relationships without adequate attention to safety concerns can isolate or alienate victims or place them in greater physical danger (see for review, Davies & Lyon, 2013). At the extreme, using violence or physical aggression to intervene in response to TDV or bullying (i.e., physically fighting a perpetrator) is concerning because it not only reinforces the social acceptability of using violence to resolve conflicts, but also places the victim, bystander, and perpetrator at greater physical risk.

Preliminary evidence from studies of youth bystander behavior suggest that both supportive and potentially ineffective intervening behaviors may be obscured when intervening is defined as larger categories such as “supporting a victim” and “confronting a perpetrator.” For example, qualitative research with middle school youth suggests that, for young people, “helping” a victim of TDV can include both potentially supportive responses such as listening, and encouraging the victim to tell an adult or call a hotline (Fry et al., 2014) and potentially unhelpful or even dangerous ones such as simply telling a victim to leave the relationship (Fry et al., 2014; Noonan & Charles, 2009). Similarly, youth in the study by Edwards et al. (2015) spoke about intervening with a perpetrator of TDV in terms of verbally confronting that person or creating a distraction so that a victim could leave an incident (potentially positive approaches), but also identified physically fighting the perpetrator as a legitimate choice. Brinkman & Manning (2015) found a range of more specific bystander behaviors within a larger category of “assertive” responses to bullying, including

positive responses such as offering to play with the victim, and potentially less safe or helpful options such as physically fighting the bully, and calling the bully names. Although this handful of studies has begun to parse out some more specific adolescent bystander behaviors, the range of behaviors identified is still fairly limited. Further, in some cases, it may not be clear what adolescents mean when they endorse specific behavioral responses they have taken as bystanders. For example, Fry et al. (2014) found that over 90% of youth who had helped a victim of TDV "offered suggestions," and over 80% had "given advice," behaviors which could be either helpful or unhelpful depending on the specific words chosen. This highlights the importance of more closely examining the particular behaviors that may be embedded in larger bystander response categories, and recognizing that helpful behaviors (e.g. encouraging a victim to tell an adult), and unhelpful behaviors (telling a victim to leave) could be conflated when bystander behavioral responses are measured broadly.

Summary and purpose of the study:

In summary, significant research has documented the factors that may support or hinder proactive bystander behavior among adolescents, but less evidence is available about the specific words or actions that youth view as feasible in response to bullying or TDV and the degree to which these responses may be effective at supporting victims. Prior research has largely looked at general categories of intervening behavior, which may subsume very different specific bystander actions, and to our knowledge, no research has examined whether these more specific actions are viewed by youth as salient for addressing similar aggressive peer behaviors in the context of bullying versus TDV. Better understanding the more particular bystander behaviors that youth view as realistic may help to illuminate the areas in which youth need more support, knowledge, or skill building related to effective and safe responses in the context of both bullying and TDV, as well as to understand the degree to which "intervening" behaviors are similar across these forms of aggression. To this end,

the goals of this exploratory qualitative study with high school aged youth were to deepen our understanding of youth's perceptions of feasible bystander behavior by 1) describing and delineating a very specific range of bystander behaviors adolescents perceive as possible and appropriate for trying to address bullying and TDV among peers, 2) examining similarities and differences between adolescent-identified intervening options across TDV versus bullying, and 3) assessing the degree to which intervening behaviors reported by youth are likely to be safe and effective means of supporting targets of bullying and TDV.

Methods

Overview and Sample:

Data for this analysis are from a sample of 113 U.S. adolescents aged 14-18 (mean age = 15.8) who participated in both local, face-to-face focus groups, and virtual (online) focus groups. Of these, 74 (65.5%) identified as female and 39 (34.5%) as male; 20 (17.7%) reported their race as African American, 2 (1.8%) as American Indian/Native American, 5 (4%) as Asian or Asian American, 16 (14.1%) as Latino/a, 2 (1.8%) as Middle Eastern or "Arab," 12 (10%) as multi-racial, and 56 (49.5%) as White. Females were slightly more represented in face to face groups vs. online focus groups (73% vs. 58%), but racial composition of face to face vs. online groups was not substantially different. The exception to this is that fewer Latino/a youth were represented in in-person groups (9% vs. 18% in online groups), while multi-racial youth or those specifying "other" were more numerous in face to face groups (19% vs. 3% in online groups). All major geographic regions of the continental U.S were reflected among online focus group participants. Procedures used in the study were reviewed approved by the [authors' institution] Internal Review Board.

Two complementary approaches to focus groups were selected in order to capture a wide understanding of adolescent bystander behavior. The national sample in the online focus groups allowed for the identification of adolescent perceptions that are not geographically dependent or

specific to particular schools. Because youth in online groups participated anonymously and were not previously known to each other, these groups also reduced the potential impact of power dynamics and pre-existing relationships between participants. In person-focus groups, in contrast, allowed for the safe inclusion of self-identified GLBTQ students and provided an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of youth responses.

Procedures

In-person focus groups. Eight in-person groups with a total of 53 youth were held in a specific urban geographic region [blinded for review]; seven of these groups were held in high schools, and one at a drop-in and support center for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer-identified (GLBTQ) youth. Focus groups conducted in schools were done with support from the school district. Youth respondents in these groups assented to participation and active parental consent was required of all youth who agreed to participate. In each high school, research staff provided information about the study in several classes selected for their diverse enrollment along dimensions of gender, age, and race/ethnicity. High-school based groups occurred in on-campus private spaces directly after school hours (one group was held during a lunch hour).

Parental consent requirements were waived by the IRB for the lone group implemented at the GLBTQ youth support center to protect participants' confidentiality and safety. Information about the study was provided to attendees during drop-in hours at the center. The focus group occurred during evening hours in a private space at the center and included youth who assented to participate. With the exception of the focus group at the drop-in center, all groups were stratified by age, with 14-15 year old youth and 16-18 year old youth participating in separate groups. At least two research staff facilitated each focus group discussion. The conversations were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed, and resulting transcripts were then re-checked for accuracy. Focus groups were timed to last 90 minutes.

Online focus groups. InsideHeads, a private online focus group company, was contracted to recruit participants for and facilitate four real-time online focus groups. Sixty youth from all regions of the US were recruited through InsideHeads' standing panel of adult research volunteers. Panel members with adolescent children were contacted via email and asked for consent to contact their children about participation in the study. Youth with parental consent were then invited via email to participate in the focus groups. Prospective participants' identities were verified via phone checks prior to the focus groups. Focus group participants accessed the online discussion though unique links sent by email and youth participated anonymously by typing into the groups' chat feature. The discussion was facilitated by InsideHeads staff, with research staff providing real-time guidance through the duration of the group. Online focus groups also lasted for 90 minutes.

Measures

Focus groups were facilitated using a semi-structured interview guide. Each group began with an overview of guidelines for discussion (e.g. confidentiality and respect), and a review of definitions and examples of bullying and dating violence behaviors. Youth were asked not to disclose personal experiences of bullying or violence, but to describe situations and perspectives they viewed as normative among their peers. Youth shared examples of bullying and TDV they viewed as common among young people like themselves. Specific examples of bullying and TDV generated by the group were then used as discussion starters regarding behaviors that youth could or would employ as bystanders to these types of situations. Selected examples were unique to each group, and included scenarios such as sexual rumor spreading online, and a young man yelling at and physically intimidating his girlfriend at school. Following each example, we asked youth, "How might you or young people you know help a person who is being targeted in this situation? What are some of the things someone could do?" Follow-up probes included questions regarding how young people would decide which action to take, how realistic the proposed actions were, and what

the possible outcomes of these bystander responses might be. A full list of questions is available upon request from the lead author.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the qualitative software program Dedoose (version 5.1.26), and proceeded in two phases. First, transcripts were analyzed thematically with all text related to examples of bystander behavior grouped together for deeper analysis. At least two coders verified the accuracy of categorizing data as relevant to bystander behaviors. Second, guided by a sub-set of grounded theory techniques described by Charmaz (2006), the primary coder conducted inductive, line-by-line open coding of the relevant text across all focus group transcripts to identify specific types of bystander behaviors and the qualities of those behaviors. Consistent with techniques described by Corbin & Strauss, (2008), particular attention was paid to the dimensionality of behaviors identified by youth in terms of the timing of employed behavior, directness of the approach, affective content, and the target of the intervention (e.g. perpetrator or victim).

To identify larger categories of behaviors emerging across transcripts, a constant comparative approach was employed both within and across cases. This process was aided by the creation of a data display matrix (Miles & Huberman, 2014), containing all identified bystander behaviors and organized by transcript, to examine how more specific behaviors tended to cluster in larger categories within and between focus groups. For example, many youth reported using brief, supportive check-ins with targets of bullying and described using a variety of approaches to do this. These coalesced into two larger categories of behavior - general verbal check-ins that did not specifically address the bullying, and more directed support unambiguously related to a bullying incident. This comparative process resulted in 18 categories of behaviors, organized by target (perpetrator vs. victim), and timing (in the moment vs. later). This preliminary list of behavioral categories was then re-checked by the second author on a subset of six transcripts. All but two of

the behavioral categories were affirmed by the second researcher, with the remaining two categories representing constructs that were merged with other categories through a process of researcher discussion. For example, a preliminary category of coaching a victim to seek adult assistance was merged with the larger behavioral category of enlisting adult help. As a final step in this process, the first author re-audited all full transcripts and sought disconfirming cases to ensure that final behavioral categories represented the data across all transcripts. Auditing also verified which bystander responses were unique to bullying and TDV, and which were common across the two types of aggression. The matrix created in the second phase of analysis also provided data about the proportion of focus groups in which each behavioral category appeared – this information is included in the description of these categories below.

Results

Across TDV and bullying, youth reported 16 categories of possible bystander behaviors, depicted in Figure 1. For parsimony, we organized these themes across three dimensions; the context in which they occur (bullying, or TDV), the target of the intervening behavior, and the timing of the behavior. Responses fell along a spectrum in terms of the degree to which the bystander intervention directly addressed the problematic aggressive behavior and/or occurred during an actual incident of bullying or TDV versus at a later point in time.

While youth generated a substantial number of options for directly or indirectly intervening in problematic behavior, the two most common responses to the question of what an adolescent might do to address bullying or TDV were to not do anything, or to express ambivalence about what an effective interventive behavior would be. This hesitancy was mentioned in all 12 focus groups. One younger male participant exemplified this uncertainty by stating: “I don’t know… I don’t know. Just in the past… I don’t know how I would handle it.” Reluctance to take action was more often mentioned in the context of TDV scenarios, and tended to coincide with a pessimism that

trying to intervene would help resolve the underlying situation. Additionally, participants expressed a reluctance to intervene when the victim or perpetrator were not known to or friends with the bystander. One older female participant stated, “Unless I really know them – like I don’t know if I would, actually do something, unfortunately.” A full discussion of the attitudinal, contextual, situational, and peer influences on bystander decision-making is beyond the scope of this article, and is reported in a companion article focused on theoretical modeling of bystander thought processes (authors, 2016). Although the current article is focused on the range of specific behaviors identified by adolescents as feasible, it is important to situate the forthcoming discussion of potential bystander responses within the reality that many participants expressed a sense of uncertainty about whether and how to intervene, and a general skepticism about the utility of employing bystander behaviors in response to bullying and dating violence.

Below, we describe possible responses to victims and perpetrators of bullying and TDV separately. While private and in-the-moment responses were generated for both targets and perpetrators, the actual words, behaviors, or skills needed for supporting a victim versus confronting a perpetrator were very different, and are thus discussed sequentially here. The bystander behaviors listed below also represent a combination of responses that youth described actually using in the past as well as those they imagined to be feasible and possible.

While focus groups make it difficult to assess the degree of endorsement of specific behaviors among all *individual* participants, we note in what proportion of focus groups overall each intervening behavior was mentioned as a way of distinguishing between the bystander responses that were most frequently identified by youth and those that were mentioned less often. Where present, we also note trends by age, gender, and type of focus group (in-person vs. online). The bystander responses listed below are not mutually exclusive – most youth generated more than one possible response, and often stated that they would use more than one of the following

behaviors to address a specific incident of bullying or TDV, such as telling a perpetrator of bullying to stop in the moment, and following up with the target later. Finally, although we group responses into larger categories, in the following description we also unpack the range of ways that youth described the more specific behaviors that constitute each category.

Private interventions with victims

Youth identified five feasible bystander options for addressing targets of TDV and bullying outside of or after specific incidents of abuse; three were specific to bullying or TDV; and two were common across these forms of aggression. The first two behaviors involve offering generalized support and were mentioned solely in the context of bullying. First, youth noted that they generally try to *befriend* other young people who have been targets of peer aggression. While not necessarily confronting the mistreatment directly, some youth stated that they try to neutralize the negativity those targets may have experienced by being "nice" to them, complimenting them, including them, and generally being friendly. This option emerged in half of the focus groups. "I would just talk to her and compliment her," noted an older female participant in an in-person group, in reference to a first year-student who was being teased by "upperclassmen." Similarly, an older female participant in an online group stated she would respond to the target of teasing by "being his friend." Next, half of the focus groups contained youth who noted that they try to generally "*check in*" later with targets of bullying about their emotional well-being, though not necessarily about the mistreatment directly. For example, noting how she might assess the well-being of a victim of homophobic teasing, one younger female in an online group stated,

> You don't have to walk up to somebody and be like, 'So I heard you're gay. I'm cool with that, but everyone is being a dick.' I mean, you don't have to walk up to somebody like that. You could walk up and be like, 'Hey, you cool?' You know, just in general as compared to bringing up things that they may not want you to know.

The next two behaviors more directly address the actual mistreatment that occurred during a bullying or TDV-related episode, but, while well-intentioned, are also less emotionally supportive. Specific to TDV, youth in two focus groups reported that they *withdraw* from friends who are in abusive relationships as a way to communicate their disapproval and frustration with the problematic relationship. For example, a younger female student shared her annoyance with a friend who was a victim of TDV, "So they broke up and she wanted him back. I got mad at her, because I was like 'Why would you want him back if he's controlling you?' I didn't talk to her for like a month because [of] her actions." Second, and relevant to both TDV and bullying, a commonly identified response was to try to *advise* and provide information or advice to the victim/target. For bullying, this was mentioned in 5 of the 12 focus groups, and took the form of notifying someone about rumors being spread about them, telling targets to ignore teasing behavior or delete relevant social media accounts, or to stop replying to online harassment. One younger male participant in an online group exemplified this approach, stating that he'd respond to teasing by saying 'hey man, don't pay attention to these clowns. They do this all the time. If you ignore it, it'll stop."

"Advising" victims of TDV was one of the most commonly mentioned potential bystander responses to dating violence, emerging in 10 of the 12 groups. Advising included telling a victim that the abuse was not okay, telling the victim to leave an abusive partner, trying to figure out what was "wrong" with the victim that would allow him or her to subject themselves to this treatment, or telling the victim not to "take" the behavior from their partner anymore. Responses in this category generally suggested that participants perceived victims of TDV as agentic in the relationship or even complicit in their own abuse. One younger female in a face to face group stated, "with friends, like, I'll tell them, 'he's calling you like a "B" word, and calling you all this stuff and you're letting it slide – it's not okay.'" In an online exchange, one older male reported, "I would tell her this... 'It's your life, you can do what you choose, but you should really consider leaving that guy. Or,

maybe give him an ultimatum, tell him if he doesn't treat you right, he will be out that door in a flash.'" Finally, an older female participant in an in-person group shared a conversation she had with a friend who was dating a person who was disrespectful to that friend,

> So going and talking to her was – it was difficult for me, because I didn't understand why she would do something that stupid because she wasn't a stupid person. And she, basically, told me that, well, it made her feel better because he wanted to see her like that and he accepted her for who she was, and things like that. And so, I was just, like, 'well, I don't think that you should let a guy, like, determine your worth.'

The final two victim-related bystander behavior options occurring outside of specific incidents of TDV or bullying were common to both of these forms of aggression. First, youth noted that they would offer specific victimization-related *support* to the target. This was a commonly identified bystander response in the context of bullying, appearing in two thirds of the focus groups. In response to bullying, several youth noted that they would try to comfort the target of the behavior later, or would "talk to them about what happened and see if they're okay" (younger male). An older female student said that in response to online rumor spreading she would "probably talk to that person, the person that's being attacked… and [ask] … 'do you need, like, extra help?' And if so help them out in some way or another." A younger female student related the following story of helping after an incident:

> Yesterday, I watched one boy push a boy that was mentally not all there down. I stopped in the hallway and asked if he needed a hand up. I helped him up because he just got pushed down. I asked if he was okay… So I just tried my best to be nice and say, 'here's a hand up. Are you okay? Where's your next class?' That kind of thing.

Supportive responses to victims of TDV, appeared in 4 of the 12 focus groups and tended to articulate the need for on-going emotional support and "being there" for someone. In response to a

TDV scenario in an online focus group, an older female noted, “The best way to assist [the victim] is to listen to her, talk to her, and be there for her without being judgmental.” Similarly, a younger female student in an-person group drew from her own experience stating,

> What I’ve noticed from watching my brother go through a really abusive type of girlfriend is that you have to be there for them even though you know that the decisions they’re making are wrong. You can’t tell them [what to do] because they’re just going to hate you for it because they feel ‘I have to be with this person because they’re the only person that’s going to love me.’ It’s like you have to be their friend and still be there for them.

Intervening on behalf of victims in the moment

Youth mentioned three intervening behaviors that could be feasible responses to victims during actual incidents of bullying or TDV, although these tended to be infrequently mentioned. The first, speaking up on behalf of or *defending* someone being targeted with in-person or online teasing or rumor spreading, was referenced only in the context of bullying and only in 5 of 12 focus groups. While not directly confronting the perpetrator, necessarily, these behaviors constitute “sticking up” for targets in the moment, exemplified by younger female student who told her friends during an episode of teasing, “she’s [the target of bullying] really nice and she’s not that weird at all.” Other students, such as one older female online participant, stated that they speak up “by saying those things are not true,” to challenge rumor spreading. Mentioned in the context of both TDV and bullying was the option of *creating a distraction* that would allow a target to get away from a specific episode of aggression or teasing. This option emerged in only two of the 12 groups. Youth were fairly general in describing it as a strategy, suggesting that creating a distraction might be seen as a feasible approach, but not one that many youth had actually used in the past. In an exception to this, one younger female student offered a specific example of a strategy she uses when

she sees teasing happening in the school hallway, "I find it really hard to just kind of like watch somebody do something [bullying]. So, I always kind of step up and introduce myself and get in between the two people. Then I kind of move the other person away from the other person."

Finally, a small number of youth recounted times when they responded to an incident of either bullying or abusive behavior between dating partners by *removing* the victim from the situation in the moment. This emerged in two groups in the context of bullying, and four in the context of TDV. Speaking about fighting and psychological abuse within couples, one older female participant stated, "I've actually physically pulled my friends out of situations where I'm just like, 'You're done talking,' and I just – I grab them and walk away because I'm like, 'I don't care. You're done with this.'" Similarly, responding to a scenario involving a group of kids taunting a younger student, one younger male noted that he would simply "take him away from them, at least."

Private interventions with the perpetrator

Youth identified two possible strategies to peers who were using bullying or abusive behaviors toward others which could occur either outside the context of a specific incident of mistreatment, and/or more privately. The first two of these were specific to bullying. Youth in three focus groups noted that they *disengage* from friends or peers who are teasing others or spreading rumors. Goals of disengagement included indirectly communicating displeasure with the peer's behavior, removing the audience for the behavior, or simply not having to see it anymore. Describing a time that a friend was making derogatory online comments toward a "special ed[ucation]" student, one older female participant stated, "I just kinda deleted her as a friend so I wouldn't have to see it anymore and I wouldn't have to be part of it." Similarly, a younger male student said that he would try to ignore rumor spreading, and to get others to ignore it as well,

> You know, like get other people to not gossip about it anymore. If nobody's interested, like – If he's trying to tell me something, if I'm not interested, he's not

> going to tell anybody else because he's not going to think that anybody else is interested as well.

More commonly, youth noted that they would *engage in conversation* with a peer who had enacted bullying or TDV. This was mentioned more commonly in the context of bullying than TDV (eight vs. five focus groups, respectively). Participants stated that they would try to engage friends in a conversation to get a friend to consider the reasons behind their problematic behavior and the impact of the behavior. Some youth reported that they would express disapproval about the behavior, share their own reactions to the behavior as a way to encourage empathy, or would try to educate their friend or peer. Most examples consisted of initiating the conversation in private, such as a younger female participant who stated that she would try to talk to peers who were spreading rumors, "I'd say, 'how would you feel if you were them… how would you really feel?' I would let them start thinking and try to feel how you would feel, and – [say] 'what comes around goes around.'" Referring to an incident of online bullying, an older male participant noted that, "I didn't like what my friend had re-tweeted. It wasn't his tweet, but he agreed with it. Instead of talking to him about it on Twitter, I sent him a text message saying that I didn't like that."

In contrast, initiating a conversation with someone using violence in a dating relationship came up only in response to additional, specific moderator prompts about whether anyone would talk to a perpetrator of TDV. At least one student in each focus group reported that they would not engage the person using abuse in a relationship, or felt conflicted about this, as evidenced in the following online exchange among older youth about whether to talk with a young man psychologically abusing his girlfriend:

> Female 1: "I wouldn't talk to her boyfriend. He would probably get angry at her and not at me."
>
> Male 1: "I think talking to her boyfriend is just going to make things worse."

Male 2: "Well, he could get mad and try to hurt me or her, so that's bad… but then again, he could understand and change his ways."

In contrast, youth in five groups thought they might try to engage the perpetrator privately, such as one older female student who noted that she might "talk to the boyfriend and ask him what's going on in his life right now and how he's feeling, that would make him feel like he needs to hurt someone else (if he even listens)." Another older male participant stated that he might, "have a discussion with [the perpetrator] and let him know that's not how you treat females."

Intervening with perpetrators in the moment

Youth identified five possible strategies to intervene with someone engaged in bullying or violence toward a dating partner during an incident itself. The first, a *short verbal response*, was mentioned in the context of both bullying and TDV, although again, much more frequently in the context of bullying. Youth in eight focus groups said that they had told or would tell a perpetrator of bullying to "stop," "cut it out," or "dude, that's gross" (older female student), and leave it at that. Some of these students noted that they would "say something," to the person doing the bullying, but were not always specific about what they might say. An exception to this lack of specificity came from an older female student who reported that if she saw one student being targeted with mocking by a larger group, she would say, "Hey, watch your mouth. You have no right to say that to someone when you're the tacky one picking on someone younger than you." Youth often paired this potential bystander response with pulling the victim away from the bullying incident. Potential short verbal responses to perpetrators of TDV came up in five groups and were typically predicated on knowing the perpetrator. One younger male in an online group noted, "If you were a close friend of [the perpetrator], you could say something along the lines of 'Hey c'mon man, knock it off.'"

Similar to the abovementioned strategy of engaging a peer in conversation, youth in four groups identified *lecturing* the perpetrator as a possible in-the-moment bystander response

exclusively to bullying. Goals of this longer verbal intervention in the moment included focusing the peer on the impact of the bullying behavior and considering others' experiences of what was happening. For example, reacting strongly to a discussion of homophobic teasing, one older female participant noted that she would both encourage the speaker to reflect on what it would feel like to be targeted, and try to educate them:

> So – if [someone] was like, 'well, little Timmy, I heard he's a faggot, blah, blah, blah.' I'm like, 'Oh really? Tell me something you refuse to tell people. Tell me something you have hidden for – about however you are!' And, I'm like, 'No. You don't get to say that at all. Do you even know what you're saying when you say that word?' And they're like, 'well, of course, it means gay.' And I'm like, 'No. Like you have to look at the facts to all these words that you're saying to people whether or not its faggot or slut or trollop or any other word that you choose to put to someone.… People just don't know the back story.

A third response to a peer engaged in bullying was to turn the tables and *target* the perpetrator with similar treatment. Mentioned in half the groups, participants variously described this as "chewing out," or "attacking" the bully. Exemplifying this approach was a response to rumor spreading used by one of the older female students; "Shut up. You have no room to judge, you nasty ho." Describing a typical response to appearance-based teasing among her peers, one older female participant stated that "They [bystanders] will typically start talking about the person's clothes, like attacking the other person [bully]. Like, if somebody's attacking somebody on their clothes then somebody else will attack that attacker. Like talk about what they're wearing."

The final two strategies were specific to responding to perpetrators of TDV in the moment. The first, *stepping between* the parties involved, came up in only three groups and exclusively by male youth. One older male participant described a situation in which he stood between a person

who had just hit his girlfriend and the victim, saying "I don't think you should be doing that." Outside of this example, stepping between parties was mentioned largely hypothetically, and young men seemed uncertain about what they might actually say. "I'd step in and be like whoa, what are you doing, man? You think this is alright? Then just talk to him about it. Well, not really talk to him – then he'll get mad and go off on you" stated an older male in response to a hypothetical TDV situation. The more common response that youth, again mostly males, anticipated using was to *fight* the perpetrator. This option emerged in five focus groups. "I'd run over there and go pop the guy" stated a younger male; another younger male in an online group typed that in response to TDV he "goes up and punches [the] guy's pretty little girl-insulting face." Similarly, a third younger male participant stated he might "beat the crap out of [the perpetrator]." It should be noted that when fighting a perpetrator was mentioned, young men were generally speaking hypothetically; this may be less a regularly-used bystander strategy than young men verbalizing their own notions of what males "should" do in response to seeing a girl victimized by her dating partner.

Responses to a situation as a whole

Finally, youth frequently mentioned *telling an adult* as a likely and feasible bystander behavior, either during an incident of bullying or TDV, or later on behalf of a victim. Enlisting adult support was the next most commonly identified response after doing nothing or not knowing what to do, and emerged in 10 focus groups in the context of both TDV and bullying. Some respondents also discussed encouraging or accompanying a victim to seek adult support. Youth most commonly identified school personnel, such as teachers, counselors, or school resource officers, as the adults to whom they would turn. Youth in four groups – all online - noted that they might tell their own parents or the victim's parents about the mistreatment, and fewer still said they would report to law enforcement. The option of turning to an adult coincided more often with incidents involving TDV, bullying that was physical, and/or situations in which reporting anonymously was an option. Telling

an adult also came up in all groups with younger, 14-15 year old youth, with a couple of the older groups of youth not identifying this option.

Discussion

Young people in this study identified a wide array of specific possible actions they could use to address peer aggression, and particularly bullying. While previous research has begun to document examples of more discrete behaviors that can be captured under the banner of "helping behavior" (e.g. Edwards et al., 2015; Trach et al., 2010), this study extended those findings by identifying a far more specific continuum of intervening behaviors within 16 broad categories of actions that teens view as both feasible and relevant bystander responses. Examining bullying and TDV concurrently allowed important distinctions to arise around the degree to which similar helping responses are salient across these interrelated types of aggression. These findings add to a growing body of evidence about what youth are actually doing, willing to do, and what they may potentially do in the future—important distinctions for supporting the development of intervening skills among youth, and studying bystander behavior quantitatively in future studies.

The first two aims of this study were to elicit bystander responses that youth view as feasible, and to identify similarities and differences in likely responses across bullying and TDV. In general, adolescents in this sample more readily identified possible intervening behaviors in the context of bullying than in TDV. Further, many responding behaviors identified as relevant to both bullying and TDV, (such as the range of strategies within the larger category of "supporting victims"), were mentioned much more frequently in the context of bullying than TDV. This may reflect the reality that teens have had greater exposure to bullying prevention starting in elementary school. It may also signify a tendency to hold victims of TDV more culpable than victims of bullying, and therefore less eligible for empathy, as evidenced in participant comments regarding their frustration with victims. Regardless, there is a lost opportunity here, as some helpful responses

to bullying (such as befriending and generally checking in with a victim they do not know) were not mentioned by youth in the context of TDV, but could be powerful forms of disrupting the isolation that teens struggling with TDV face. Thus, regardless of the specific focus of bystander-based prevention programming (e.g. bullying, sexual assault, or TDV), bystander training can be enhanced by reinforcing the relevance of victim-supportive behaviors across multiple forms of aggression.

Youth also generated more options for responding to victims of aggression than to perpetrators, as well as for handling situations privately or later rather than directly in the moment. The finding that youth can readily identify ways to provide emotional and social support to targets of bullying (and, to a lesser extent, TDV) constitutes a strength which bystander-based programs can continue to leverage; the pre-existing skills and desire to help victims among many of the youth in this sample can be further honed in the context of prevention programming. At the same time, the accompanying, pervasive uncertainty about taking action in a public way with peers who are using aggression represents an area of continued growth for youth and for the prevention programming to which they are exposed. Part of the stated goal of bystander programs is to shift social norms by publicly challenging disrespectful behavior and making expectations for respect and safety explicit (Banyard et al., 2007). Indeed, people who use intimate partner or sexual violence often over-perceive other's approval of or use of this kind of behavior (e.g., Neighbors et al., 2010), rendering public displays of disapproval for disrespect a powerful preventative tool. Yet, it may be the very public nature of bullying (and to a similar but lesser extent, TDV) that renders intervening with perpetrators in the moment difficult. Bullying behavior among adolescents is, in part, a means to establish or maintain status relative to peers (see for review, Salmivalli, 2010), and youth weigh their own status and relationship goals as they decide whether and how to intervene (Thornberg et al., 2012). Additionally, because of the school context in which youth are operating, the decision to intervene is not only about the event in the moment, but about a youth's ability and willingness to

negotiate on-going and complex social interactions that choosing to intervene will trigger (Casey, Lindhorst & Storer, 2016).

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, in the moment strategies with a perpetrator were the most challenging for youth in this sample to identify. In part, this suggests that they are not receiving enough support and practice related to acquiring a specific and safe range of options for letting an aggressive peer know that their behavior is not normative or acceptable. More broadly, this signals the need for continued attention to peer and setting-level intervention infused in or complementing bystander-based prevention programs. At the peer level, for example, social norms approaches may be relevant. Many of the youth in our groups expressed frustration with the persistence of bullying in high school, and perceived (perhaps inaccurately) that "other" young people were okay with it. Social norms campaigns address attitudes towards social problems (in this case, peer aggression), and then advertise the "true" and usually high level of endorsement of expectations for safety and respect among community members via social marketing (Perkins et al., 2003). These approaches have been used in the context of intervening in sexual assault, in which young people often underestimate each other's willingness to intervene in coercive behavior (Fabiano et al., 2003). Addressing social norms may help young people to see that their discomfort with disrespect is shared with others, and support them in mustering the bravery to respond. It is also important to note that intervening publicly and with bullying or dating violence perpetrators is not always be a realistic or fair "ask" of young people in many situations, and that youth also need both permission and skills to discern when aggressive situations are too unsafe or complex to become directly or indirectly involved in without adult aid.

Transforming good intentions into constructive bystander behaviors

A major finding of this study, and relevant to our third aim, is that embedded within possible youth bystander responses are both behaviors which may support victim and bystander safety and

well-being ("victim-centered" responses), and behaviors which are less likely to do so. To the extent that existing research examines unhelpful behavior within larger bystander behavioral response categories, findings generally center on identifying physical aggression toward a perpetrator of bullying or TDV as a potentially harmful manifestation of "helping" (Brinkman & Manning, 2015; Edwards et al., 2015). This study is somewhat unique in surfacing more nuanced and potentially unhelpful responses to victims, particularly in the context of TDV.

Adolescents in this sample sometimes proposed stigmatizing and victim blaming responses such as distancing themselves from friends who "decide" to stay in abusive relationships, or challenging victims for "allowing" their partners to behave disrespectfully. The intervening strategies identified by youth indicate a limited understanding of both the dynamics of TDV and the reality that some of the "helping" responses to victims identified could further isolate them and compromise their safety (Davies & Lyon, 2013). Evidence suggests that survivors of relationship violence feel supported and seek further support when others listen, respond non-judgmentally, offer options without telling a survivor what to do, and stay connected to the survivor (see for review, Lindhorst, Casey & Meyers, 2010). Additionally, responses that reduce social isolation are likely to increase longer-term positive outcomes for victims of both bullying and TDV (Goodman et al., 2005; Ladd & Skinner, 2003). To enhance the likelihood that youth can respond in these ways, they need more information about the complexity of dating violence including but not limited to the challenges and safety concerns inherent in ending an abusive relationship and the range of abusive behaviors and tactics beyond physical abuse that often accompany TDV. Because of the complexity of and safety issues inherent in TDV, it is especially critical that young people find adult support when faced with abuse as a victim or bystander. Many of the young people in this sample expressed a willingness to enlist adult support – emphasizing the importance of this bystander response (and

ensuring that well-trained adults are available in school settings) remain important components of bystander prevention programming.

Finally, similar to previous research (e.g. Fry et al., 2016; Trach et al., 2010) youth in this study shared that one of their most likely responses to witnessing aggressive behaviors would be a desire to "support the victim," particularly in in instances of bullying. This desire to help is often not concretely operationalized by youth in previous research (Trach et al. 2010), nor was it adequately elaborated on here. Instead, youth express helping in very vague terms of offering support. This difficulty identifying specific words may be attributable to teens lacking the skillset to identify more tangible components of "supporting a victim," or the opportunity to put these skills into action. Youth also report hearing general messaging from school personnel or prevention programming to "do something," or to "step up" (Casey et al., 2016), but may not always receive more concrete guidance or skill building about what specific words best constitute "doing something" in a real way across myriad situations in which bullying or TDV might occur. Many bystander programs at the college level (e.g. Bringing in the Bystander; Banyard et al., 2007), and aimed at bullying (e.g. Steps to Respect; Frey et al., 2005), build in opportunities for substantial skill building and practice related to very specifically operationalized helping behaviors. As the bystander approach is further adapted to address TDV, it is important to emphasize this component. In addition, this coaching needs to take into account other contextual factors that impact bystander decision making and the specific words they might choose; the intervener's relationship to the victim or the perception of the victim's culpability in contributing to their victimization can play an important role in influencing teens' decision-making about whether and how they "would be there for her" (Casey et al., 2016).

The finding that youth may sometimes only have a vague idea of what some bystander actions such as "supporting a victim" might mean also has implications for future research. When

youth indicate in quantitative surveys that they "tried to help the victim" or "tried to interrupt the bully," they may have very different behavioral responses in mind – some appropriate, and some not. For example, both the youth who noted they would tell a bully to "cut it out," and the young woman who chose the memorable phrase, "you have no room to judge, you nasty ho," would likely endorse a broad quantitative item capturing an attempt to "interrupt the person doing the bullying." Although survey length and participant demand are always challenges in quantitative research, research is needed that assesses more specifically what actions or words adolescent bystanders actually choose, and what the effect of those responses are on the victim, perpetrator, or bystander.

Limitations

Limitations include the self-selection of participants into the study and the requirement to attain parental consent; teens able to secure this consent may be systematically different from those who could not. Although efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample, female identified teens are overrepresented here. As with all focus groups, there is the possibility that all viewpoints were not expressed equally, and there may be an overrepresentation of more dominant viewpoints (i.e. group think). It is difficult to analytically assess for individual-level level agreement on content expressed throughout the focus groups. Lastly, the decision to employ different focus group methodologies allowed for a more geographically diverse sample, but also created complementary limitations related to the presentation, depth, and possible biases within the data. The responses in the online groups, for example, were comparatively more truncated, but were free from group dynamics and power differentials as the participants did not know each other, were responding anonymously, and were typing responses simultaneously rather than in response to others' comments. In contrast, the in-person groups generated more in-depth responses, but were vulnerable to the suppression of ideas given that youth were known to each other and potentially brought power differentials into the room based on gender, race, or past experiences with bullying. The researchers attempted to

compensate for these limitations, in part through the use of different focus group methodologies, but also with more frequent probes and requests for elaboration in the online groups, and careful attention to confidentiality and interpersonal dynamics in the in-person groups.

Conclusion

While adolescents can generate an impressive array of potential responses to bullying and TDV among peers, some of these responses lack specificity or the promise of being truly helpful in these situations. Bystander research is needed that unpacks heterogeneity within quantitatively-measured categories of bystander behavioral responses, and that assesses the differential impacts and efficacy of specific intervening behaviors over time. Above all, these findings underscore that dictates for teens to “step up” or “do something” are not enough; bystander –based approaches need to be inclusive of defining and providing greater specificity on what “helping behaviors” will actually promote victim safety, helping teens practice context-specific behaviors and words that hold promise for being helpful, and building skills for assessing when it is safe and appropriate for youth to actually take proactive actions. This is particularly true in the context of TDV. While bystander intervention programs hold great promise for nurturing school climates that are intolerant to bullying and dating violence, teens, specifically, need support to translate their intentions into safe, supportive actions and a willingness to enlist the help of supportive adults.

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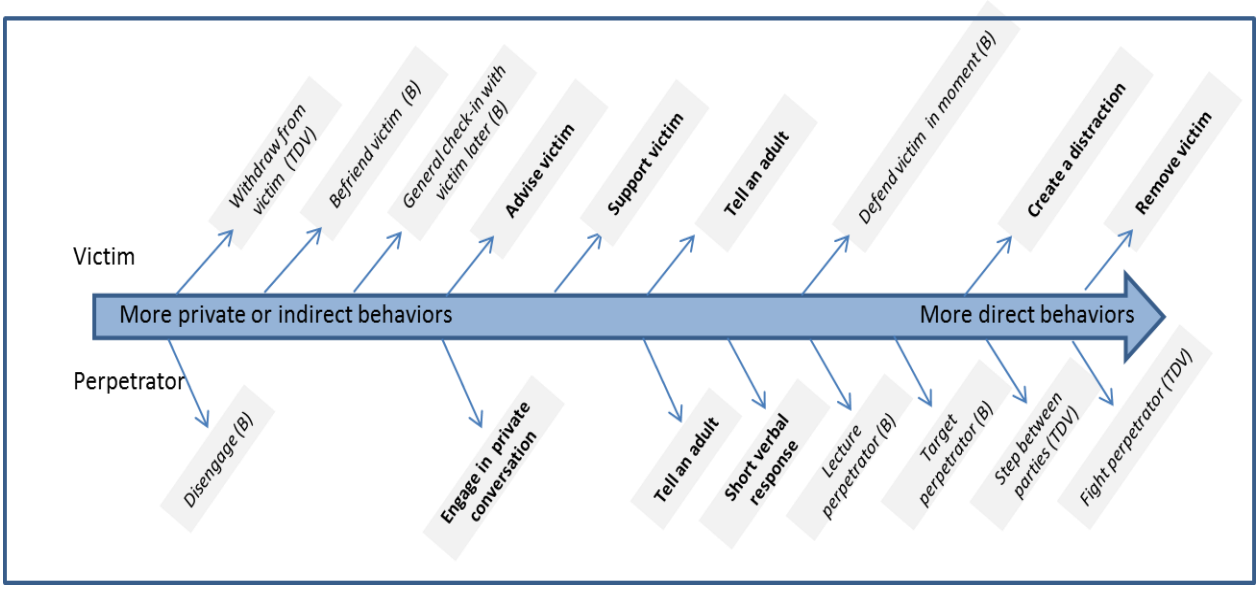
FIGURE 1. Continuum of adolescent-identified helping behaviors in the context of bullying and TDV



Note: Behaviors that are common across bullying and TDV are in bold. Intervening behaviors specific to bullying (B) or teen dating violence (TDV) are italicized.