



Masculinities and the Lived Understandings of Bystander Responses to Everyday Violence

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Abstract

Among criminologists there has been an expanded contemporary interest in measures that encourage bystander intervention in the social settings of escalating and potentially violent incidents. These broadly include partner abuse and domestic disputes, as well as confrontational social interaction and other forms of targeted harassment and violence (racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist etc.), in everyday life. This article considers the likely success or failure of seeking to foster such measures as a core strategy of violence prevention, with discussion of the author's Sydney-based study of the understandings of violence arising from young men's lived experience of its various forms. It particularly concentrates on the results of focus groups conducted with a mixed sample of young men (aged 16-25 years) between 2018-2020. These participants had personal engagements with violence and potential violence, that shaped their reservations and doubts about regular intervention and general male anti-violence advocacy as reasonable and achievable social practices.

Keywords: Violence; masculinities; bystander intervention; violence prevention.

Introduction¹

Engaging in interpersonal violence is a mostly pernicious social practice that is largely monopolised by men. Despite a contemporary interest in violence perpetrated by girls and women, debates about 'gender parity' in intimate partner conflicts, and other reporting and recording issues that confound research understanding of violence in different jurisdictions, this observation holds up well in studies of assaultive crime and particularly regarding the commission of serious physical attacks and homicide (Tomsen and Messerschmidt 2020). Similarly, men in younger age groups figure strongly in violence against women and domestic assaults (Messerschmidt 2004) and they comprise the bulk of offenders in episodes of public disorder and a broad range of confrontational disputes and attacks on strangers and acquaintances.

This strong evidence of the prominence of men in forms of violence can appear to bolster essentialist views of gender, with violence and aggression seen as innate and fixed in biology or human evolutionary psychology. Yet criminologists and social researchers who understand this violence as related to variable configurations of masculinity and uneven social struggles to attain or shore up contested notions of desired masculinity, have promoted the everyday use of male-led intervention strategies to block or limit the harms of male harassment and assault directed at women, vulnerable people, and minority groups (Schwartz and DeKeseredy 2008). This has further developed research on overcoming an inhibiting 'bystander effect' regarding violence and social crises that had its origins in post-war American social psychology, and studied the decision-making phases of onlookers who might view a social emergency, assume responsibility, decide to intervene, and by what means (Powell 2011). This early literature often focused on hypothetical rather than real incidents, but over decades it developed into more nuanced studies of variation in actual social responses (Banyard 2008; Bennett, Banyard and Gamhart



2013). Furthermore, it inspired a range of subsequent anti-violence programs in middle class college and university settings, high schools, community sporting groups, and workplaces (see Katz 2010; Powell 2011).

Bystander intervention programs have been designed to provide people with the necessary attitudes, confidence, and social skills to intervene in cases of violence and likely violence (Banyard, Plante and Moynihan 2004; Powell 2011). By changing attitudes (such as reducing rape myth acceptance and increasing empathic concern for victims), these programs seek to foster a sense of personal responsibility among bystanders and change the given 'social norms' of volatile situations (Dyson and Flood 2008). Researchers especially stress the potential of such a strategy among male peer groups that may tolerate or condone sexist abuse, assaults, and rapes that target women in educational and leisure settings (Baillie, Fileborn and Wadds 2022; DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2013). In recent decades, this positive vision of bystander intervention to counter harassment and violence has widened out to refer more often to racism (Murrell 2020; Nelson et al. 2010), and the targeting of other minorities including LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans) groups (Bang, Kerrick and Wuthrich 2016).

'Conformist' masculinity that is unchallenged among young men is generally seen as a particular obstacle to positive anti-violence practice (Carlson 2008). In line with this, bystander initiatives target young men who are viewed as immersed in outdated and restrictive gender roles as the more problematic witnesses or participants in assaults and social conflicts (Katz 2010). Nevertheless, the real potential, likely, or already existing role of different young men as actual anti-violence bystanders and their own *grounded* views about such practices remain under-researched. This article aims to fill part of this gap in research understanding of the male experience of violence and reservations about bystander intervention to prevent violence, with a discussion of the results of a series of focus groups that particularly concerned the balance between the necessity and real-world risks of such intervention.

Method and Analysis

Between 2015 and 2020 the author used Australian Research Council and Western Sydney University funds to study aspects of young men's mixed understandings of masculine violence.² The use of focus groups has become a more widespread approach for research into this phenomenon as they can elicit individual and collective views about violence (Ravn 2018). In a first tranche of eight focus groups (2015-2018), 47 young men from Western Sydney were asked about involvements with violence in personal relationships, and at home, work, education, recreation, and nightlife settings. Questions and discussions drew out the distinction between direct participation in violence (as a perpetrator, victim, or both) and the more indirect role of talking about and viewing the violence of other people (see Tomsen and Gadd 2019). The major themes explored in these groups included a focus on the personal masculine elements of participation in or withdrawal from violence. Overall, this analysis found an ambiguous relationship between violence and the intention to defend claims of social honour or attain hegemonic masculine status (see Tomsen and Gadd 2019). Participants voiced a general opposition to violence and directly condemned the violence of others. Yet without any sense of irony, they sharply contrasted this with their own involvements. These were narrated and positively seen through a moral distinction between illegitimate and wrongful enactments, and idealised accounts of their own role in violent events as measured, fair and just.

This article reports on a later tranche of six focus groups that were conducted in Sydney's Central Business District (CBD) in a second phase of this wider study and analysed in 2018-2020, with a more specific focus on the risks and possibilities of different shared reactions to witnessing a range of acts of masculine violence. It reflects on the likely success of engagement in the bystander intervention pattern in crime prevention, given the results of these ongoing interview and group studies that explored the experience and attitudes towards engagement with violence in young men's daily lives. To do this, it discusses the analysis and results of these subsequent groups conducted with a mixed sample of 50 young men aged between 16 and 25 years. Key discussion themes included the distinctions between the private and public and individual and group contexts of violence; notions of understanding including respect, blame, and fairness; the status of different abused or assaulted victims; the physical danger and other serious risks of intervention in disputes; and the gendered elements of participation in violence or interventions against violence.

As with the original tranche of focus groups in 2015-2018, these recruited an ethnically diverse sample. This mix of Anglo-Australian, British, Asian, Middle Eastern, and East European young men included many tertiary students and hospitality workers. However, given the city location notably more participants were in white collar, semi-professional or early-career professional roles in administration, travel, information technology, finance, banking, and law. Also as in 2015-2018, these participants were recruited with an express willingness to discuss their experience of seeing violent incidents or any involvement in these. Their privacy and anonymity were guaranteed. Groups were conducted in early week-day evenings at a private meeting room in the CBD. These groups typically ran for one hour or slightly more. A mixed level of effective engagement was reached as care was taken to counter any domination or under-participation in discussion and to ask each participant for their view on key issues. Each focus group was recorded on site, and then later transcribed and carefully read to note key themes and the patterns of discourse used in describing issues of violence.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of key themes and general understandings of violence drew out an openly stated opposition to violence, and a shared dislike of people who use or threaten to use violence to bully or intimidate partners, family, friends, and others. On the surface, this general rejection of physical force as the means to resolve conflicts seemed like an optimistic result for the pursuit of anti-violence initiatives among young men. Yet in these group discussions it was the exceptions, qualifications, and contradictory understandings emerging around the further explanation of this opposition to violence, that signalled caution about this result.

As in the earlier groups (Tomsen and Gadd 2019), all young men in this research believed that there was a moral line of 'respect' that may be crossed when the unacceptable acts of others will necessitate an aggressive warning or likely violence. Once again, study participants distanced themselves and their use of any force from negative intentions while they voiced an underlying belief in the violence they saw as legitimate and necessary. These collective beliefs appeared to filter and reshape the anti-violence totalism of official prevention and bystander campaigns. Furthermore, participants also voiced reasoned views about non-intervention in a broad range of disputes and abuse that they deemed as having a significant and unjustified level of risk.

The general reluctance to intervene in situations of violence was understood by reference to six key themes that most participants spoke about and shared with each other. These were their mixed understandings regarding how to: 1. ascertain the level of *real or likely harm* from a dispute or conflict; 2. know and react to the *moral status of an apparent victim*; 3. perceive and calculate the *level of physical risk* to themselves and to others; 4. anticipate the negative *outcomes of intervention and help seeking*; and 5. deal with *pseudo-intervention by troublemakers* and 6. avoid violence but also be ready to use *credible force* if necessary.

Gauging Harm

Group participants saw 'real' violence as actual or very likely physical force. They could not agree if there was a contemporary increase in the types and seriousness of community violence or just a much greater level of mainstream and new social media focus on this. Nevertheless, the repeated group consensus was that violence is a serious blight on contemporary life that everyone was aware of. They noted that violence is officially disavowed but also widespread or even fostered and rewarded in contact sports, media, and other culture. Most of these young men were familiar with campaigns to counter domestic violence and various local urban initiatives and nightlife lockdowns to prevent 'king hit' assaults. These latter initiatives were seen as an inconvenience for young drinkers but the focus on excessive alcohol use appeared justified as many intoxicated aggressors overreact to petty insults in quick explosive incidents.

For any considerations of intervention in their social interactions, they had to see an actual assault or an imminent corporeal threat rather than just the mere possibility of escalation and harm. There was a strong imperative to defend partners and friends, though in practice it was often hard to gauge when this likelihood of significant harm was reached. Even among friends and acquaintances, and especially among strangers, it was often difficult to quickly understand confusing social scenarios and related heated incidents with any degree of accuracy. Crowded social circumstances, the possible use of alcohol or intoxicating drugs, and no knowledge about which parties were or were not inclined towards serious violence, all clouded perceptions about imminent harm. So too did witnessing just one part of an incident or an episodic pattern of conflict or abuse from people who were angry or volatile. Unsurprisingly, some insisted that intervention in a mere loud argument or abuse was not warranted:

You really have to be able to assess the situation. You can't be too quick to judge... the guy might be emotional and just angry and its okay to yell, everyone can yell at a person. And he might be yelling but there is no physical abuse, so he really hasn't done anything. You need to know where you would step in, when you would get yourself and other people to say something. (Gabrijel, Group 5)

Are you in a good frame of mind to step in, are you thinking straight, or just brash in that moment? Are you stepping in just because you think it would look good, or do you actually feel this person is in danger? (Sean, Group 5)

Victim Status

Participants who stressed the constant uncertainty of knowing the likelihood of real physical harm to other people or the danger from it, elaborated on the most significant circumstances that could direct any responses and their views about cause and responsibility in different incidents. This informed a discourse about the moral status of apparent victims and the importance of this. These young men mentioned people who were seemingly targeted with unprovoked harassment or force, were alone or just a few in number, and were more vulnerable due to their age, gender, size, and apparent physical ability.

These different factors were regarded as possible features of victims who deserved watching and protection, though many other incident characteristics might also shape this degree of apparent vulnerability:

I am more inclined to protect vulnerable types. It would take a lot to trigger me – a mother, a child, someone disabled, there's a whole thing of weighing up of so many variables. (Mitchell, Group 3)

If it's a street dispute with two druggies trying to stab each other, I'd just walk past. I'm sure I'd not play the hero in that circumstance. (Steve, Group 2)

Paradoxically, some of the most vocal participants felt their judgments about legitimate victims and vulnerability were most effective in the circumstances of stranger disputes. Despite the reservations expressed about not quickly gauging likely harm in incidents that were not well understood, some argued judging the moral status of strangers could be based on physical appearance and brief social interaction. Yet this judging was more difficult when witnessing the abuse or force between known intimate partners, friends, and family, that might arise in domestic space. In such instances of conflicts that were deemed more complex, they saw that the chance of taking respectable action to save an unblemished 'victim' was strictly curtailed.

Physical Risk

Group participants all held views about the paramount importance of limiting physical risk to themselves and other onlookers. This was behind many of the decisions they had previously made, or they claimed that they would make, to intervene or not in heated conflicts or moments of violence. The general problem for them was that any level of risk was difficult to know in advance. Like the potential for harm to others, this risk turned on many known and unknown factors, but it was the most vital issue around intervention. Relevant factors included the nature of a specific social scenario, normative expectations around behaviour (including relaxed attitudes to rough or raucous conduct), the number and types of people present, argumentativeness and displays of aggression, physical size, levels of apparent intoxication and/or drug use, and possible mental health issues. There was further importance in the knowledge or likelihood of anyone having a dangerous weapon (a gun, knife, broken bottle etc.). In combination, these factors had to be considered as parts of a type of quick 'risk calculus' that was often unreliable though always engaged in:

I think it's a bit of a cost benefit analysis. There are so many parts involved in intervening. (Luke, Group 4)

If you're by yourself and there are two people getting in a fight, it's hard to stop that by yourself; if you've got friends then you can at least intimidate them by numbers. (Prab, Group 1)

It depends if you think you can stop anything. If the guy has got huge muscles, he's going to beat you up, then you think 'oh I can't do anything....' You can say to yourself, and it happened to me, you think 'should I say something? Is someone else going to say something?' and you are losing seconds while this person is getting picked on. I'd like to say in every situation I was the one who said 'oi' but sometimes the moment has passed. (William, Group 6)

Most participants agreed that self-preservation was vital, and that people should not act or intervene in situations of high danger. The potential intervener's sense of self-reliance and confidence about coping with conflict and resistance were also significant:

It's all theoretical until you're actually in that situation, and in all likelihood I probably wouldn't do anything because I would just be too afraid about putting myself at risk. (Paul, Group 2)

I assess the situation, and if I don't think I could have any sort of [positive] impact, then I would definitely try to avoid it. While I might want to be the hero, maybe I also know the consequences for myself. All these things run through my head. (Andrew, Group 3)

In this regard, a mentioned source of doubt and even disappointment for those inclined to intervene in a range of matters was the unreliability of many other people. These participants obviously did not favour any sole ('lone wolf') male vigilante approach as the most effective intervention. However, they referred to an uncertainty about whether a well-meaning intervention on their part would win any or sufficient backing from a mix of onlookers. In an ideal situation their action or comments would spark a collective response from others that would then dampen everyone's aggression, but this was not the general real-world experience. People who sat or stood in silence, spoke but stayed away, or only used phones to discreetly film fights and violence, were not seen as helpful. A few participants also had their own troubling experiences of victimisation in incidents where people did nothing to support them:

I was on a bus a few years ago and in the back with this guy who was probably homeless. At that time, I used to wear a turban. So, he said, 'oh you're a terrorist' and that sort of thing. There were heaps of people on the bus and I was in my school uniform. I had to stand up for myself and no one did anything. (Prab, Group 1)

The chances of help from others, were spoken of as very unpredictable in public scenarios where people were strangers and with a wholly unknown level of interest or allegiances in relation to an incident. In scenarios where the aggressiveness or violence of others was more known, individual and group judgments about who did have a valid right to intervene were still constraining. Participants drew out these aspects of risk with accounts of unpredictable negative and hostile responses from perpetrators and others, with one noting 'you hear of those sorts of situations all the time where it can really backfire on the person who is trying to do the right thing.' (Bradley, Group 2)

In such cases, it was argued that a perpetrator with ambivalence about directing full harm against a target of abuse or harassment, could instead switch their aggression towards anyone intervening in a manner they perceived as interfering and unjustified. This was seen as a risk in relation to both confrontational stranger violence and in instances of intimate partner violence:

Sometimes, I would step into a dispute, but if it was between drunk strangers I probably wouldn't because the chances of them getting more aggressive towards you are quite high as in you're trying to stop them, both men can turn around to you and go 'what are you doing in this?' ... And then when that is more like a private thing, it's also harder to get into the middle of that. Because a lot of the time, even the woman... will also be like 'piss off - it's our own disagreement' or whatever. And then obviously the guy is likely to turn on you as well. (Prab, Group 1)

Negative Outcomes

A few participants who referred to the problem of perpetrator blowback, gave accounts of incidents where a well-intentioned intervention meant being dragged into a conflict and/or completely failing to counter violence. With some of these there was no shared interest in ending a dispute, and intervention quickly transformed into direct involvement in a growing fight. Critical situations where there was little time to reflect, but a need for immediate action were among the highest risk:

I was at a beer festival thing and my flat mate got kung fu hit from behind. We hadn't even noticed the people who were involved. As he was down, he got hit and kicked repeatedly, another friend jumped in to stop it and help him, but he got clumped on the head with a glass and [afterwards] he needed 20 stitches in his head and a stay in hospital as well. He intervened and ended up worse off than the initial victim... excess alcohol, I think, was involved. It was unprovoked completely. I still don't know why it happened. (Andrew, Group 2)

Furthermore, in different scenarios there was no possibility that authorities (typically police and security) could be summoned, or if so, that they would offer any real help. In some instances, they had no interest in a matter or even became irritated with efforts to intervene:

A few months ago, in Chinatown two groups came out of a bar and they're fighting, and this big East European guy is just laying into this small Asian guy ... and then the East European guy leaves to go and get a taxi. ... All these girlfriends were saying to the small guy "what are you going to do? Are you going to just get bashed like that?" I tried to grab him and stop him from chasing... But the security guards who weren't helping me at all, were saying 'you can't hold him. Don't do that. That's assault. If you're restricting him like that'... I'm getting blood all over me. Eventually, I let him go, he runs across the road, and just as he ['the big guy'] was about to get in the taxi, he ['the small guy'] was thumped again. It was horrible. I felt terrible for weeks. The bouncers got aggressive with me. I didn't think they would not do their job or the right thing. (Jack, Group 1)

Some participants voiced regrets about incidents where they did not call police, but others also spoke about how doing this would result in a slow, limited, or confused police response. As reported before (Tomsen and Gadd 2019), the young men across these focus groups expressed limited faith in police to act justly on violent incidents after they had happened. Police may interpret confusing incidents without very serious personal harm, including those involving night leisure and intoxicated people, as public order issues with group blame (Wadds 2020). Such scepticism about the results of the recommendation to summon police in all difficult incidents grew out of the personal and collective experiences of participants. More broadly, doubts about this form of bystander intervention in relation to a range of matters do appear reasoned if they are considered in the light of critical concern about police misconduct. These include undue coercion, and the excessive use of weapons, and force, by police in their many dealings with non-white and Indigenous people, the poor and homeless, and those with mental health, injecting drug and other substance use issues (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2023; Cunneen 2023).

'Troublemakers' and Pseudo-Intervention

An occasional pattern noted in several participant's accounts of intervention into likely violence, reflected the uncertain circumstances of many conflicts among strangers, acquaintances, family, and friends, or observed instances of intimate partner abuse. This was the possibility that violence-inclined individuals could shape their own provocative actions and statements as a justified, though somewhat exuberant bystander response to a perceived or witnessed harm against others. As described by participants, these seemed much like the aggressive men frequently preoccupied with their response to petty insults to honour, that most participants across these groups considered to be regular 'troublemakers' (Tomsen and Gadd 2019).

Despite the apparent public-spiritedness of all men who stayed near an incident and spoke out against a perpetrator, the real intention to participate in violence was sometimes raised as the far less virtuous reason for some to become involved:

If you are someone just being threatened or you see someone else just being threatened and that's all, and if you have the option to get out, I'm pretty sure you'd take the option to get out. It all depends on the kind of person you are, but if you're actually looking for a fight you might stay. (Konrad, Group 1)

Especially if people have been drinking, sometimes you see things and someone who does not even know who or why they are hitting, they just want to get involved and maybe look good. (Sam, Group 3)

With the unseen elements of interaction in many social clashes, and the frequent unreliability of police and security when a matter is reported, some individuals who presented as interveners were understood by these participants as troublemakers who merely exacerbated conflicts. In effect, they did this by trading on the confusion of some people entangled in disputes, as well as onlookers and late involved authorities, as regards the true underlying causes of different incidents.

Readiness and Credible Force

When discussing how to deal with the perpetrators of abuse and violence in a range of incidents and any failure to dampen perpetrator aggression, the young men in these groups claimed that some harm can only be stopped by the measured use of believable threats or physical force. This was anathema to the defusing strategies to avoid worsening conflict that have been commended by advocates of bystander intervention. A set understanding of measures to counter violence was deemed impractical by participants. For them, the potential use of physical force was always a possible outcome of a decision to become directly involved in any unpredictable and heated social conflict. A final point can be quickly reached where restraining force as 'violence' was the most viable solution to violence and interveners should be ready for this:

If someone needs to be physically stopped, then violence is sometimes necessary. If someone else is being harmed physically, it's kind of acceptable to prevent assaults. I try to talk to them out of it first, but if you can't, you have to resort to violence. Then it's unfortunate but something you have to do because you don't want real harm to come to another person. (Matt, Group 1)

Participants reinforced this endorsement of force in serious incidents, by arguing that decision-making about whether to take direct action can rely on visible bodily strength and a real sense of threat conveyed to a perpetrator. In this way, the anti-violent sentiments of participants became endorsement of the need for what they saw as positive force. Similarly, they viewed experience and training to develop fighting confidence as a useful attribute for people engaged in interventions without the expectation of an always peaceful result:

I think there are situations where it's totally acceptable to use violence. For example, if you are seriously threatened, or someone else is seriously threatened, and the way to protect yourself or someone else is through violence, then that is acceptable. There are situations where you are not going to be able to reason with people if they're already at that point of resorting to violence. You're going to have to be able to overpower them or threaten them in some way that's going to make them back down because of [your] threat to them. (Bradley, Group 2)

Even a restrained intervention with questions and verbal warnings can inflame incidents that become more dangerous. Participants understood the real risks in intervention against the abuse and physical violence they witnessed in everyday social interactions, as being considerable. Furthermore, most of these participants had a glibly realist view of the use of force in such matters. They believed that in many circumstances intervention relied on making credible physical threats with intimidation and a display of apparent strength, and people who become directly involved in attempts to end serious abuse and assaults should accept this.

As some participants did mention, a regular number of homicides (such as the 2014 death of Daniel Christie after an assault in Sydney's Kings Cross, see Needham and Smith 2014), and other serious incidents with victims described as 'good

Samaritans', arise from misjudged interventions against violence in both public and private settings. For these young men, such risks and consequences appeared to be downplayed by any full anti-violence advocacy in a way that reflected naivety about the necessity and most likely means of countering aggressors in a range of social conflicts.

Conclusion

As in the earlier phase of this study of young men and violence (Tomsen and Gadd 2019), participants typically assumed an anti-violence stance. They declared an open dislike of violence-prone 'troublemakers' who quickly engage in physical fights and have an exaggerated sense of honour or the aim to attain hegemonic status in violence. At the same time, they were resigned to the ubiquity of violence in contemporary life and were sceptical about what means they could reasonably adopt to counter it. In these (2018-2020) focus groups, 'bystander intervention' was seen as a serious undertaking, and it was most necessary when harm was faced by legitimate vulnerable 'victims', partners, friends, and close family. These participants understood decisions to intervene are often high risk and based on a limited understanding of a public or private incident, and any involvement could set off major negative outcomes for themselves and others.

The implications of these findings for violence prevention, policy and intervention are complicating. They signal a need for greater appreciation of young men's resistance to participation in anti-violence and bystander activities, without an a priori judgment that this is due to irrational commitments to masculine status and group esteem. The real unpredictability and danger of intervention in a range of social scenarios, must be appreciated beyond platitudes to only ever act or 'distract' when feeling 'confident', or if a matter is seen as 'safe' (American Psychological Association 2022; Moschella and Banyard 2020). A key source of this reservation about intervention from young men concerns their own bruising experiences of harmful incidents that obviously merit inclusion within a broad range of different forms of 'gender violence' (see Pease 2021). Young men may also be cast as non-legitimate witnesses or inappropriate interveners in the male hierarchy of criminal justice and the official masculinity (see Messerschmidt and Tomsen 2016) of police and security officers. In their view, well-intentioned acts are fraught with risk and unknown outcomes, including from these groups. Furthermore, any caricature of prospective anti-violence participants as inhibited merely by virtue of being gender conformist (Carlson 2008), or which discounts the lessons of their own precarious experiences of intervention, risks alienating the goodwill that most young men hold towards broad efforts to counter violence.

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¹ An early version of the material and argument in this paper was prepared for the Stockholm Criminology Symposium, June 2021.

² Original ethics approval for this study was H9687 (2016) Western Sydney University, Violence and disengagement from violence in young men's lives.

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