Bystander Theories, Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) and the Prevention of Gender based Violence

An investigation into bystander theories and their relevance to the MVP model.

MVP Scotland

mentors in violence prevention

In March 1964, 28 year old bar manager Kitty Genovese was brutally attacked and murdered outside her home in Queens, New York supposedly in the view of thirty eight witnesses, whom it was claimed at the time done nothing to help, remaining passive bystanders. Decades on we know this not to be the case; witnesses were smaller in number, witnessed only parts of the incident and some did in fact take action, however, what is clear is that the murder of Kitty Genovese prompted questions as to why individuals might do nothing to help those clearly in need.

The ensuing psychological research into what has become known as 'the bystander effect' has influenced many intervention programmes that aim to address harmful behaviours by encouraging bystanders to intervene. It is one of the core components of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) programme and one which is increasingly recognised as good practice for violence reduction programmes and in particular those addressing gender based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment.

This paper is for those working to support the MVP programme, with the aim of expanding on the basics of bystander theory, making links to related theories and research, and giving greater insight into why individuals act, or not, when faced with harmful behaviours, and what the implications may be for the MVP programme. It will also discuss more recent evaluations of bystander intervention programmes in other parts of the world.

Following the murder of Kitty Genovese, two social psychologists by the name of Darnly and Latane undertook a series of experiments exploring the conditions under

which individuals act when faced with seemingly emergency situations (Darley, J. M. & Latané, B. 1968) [1].

One experiments involved placing college student subjects in a room where they were aware of others but could not see them. One of the individuals had what sounded like a seizure and the response of the subject was monitored. What they found was, that response, to act and get help, and how long it took the subject to do that, appeared to be strongly influenced by the number of others present at the time. The researchers termed this the *'diffusion of responsibility'* which states paradoxically that the greater the number of people present in an emergency situation, the less likely any one individual is to take action. Darnley and Latané found that it was not that the subjects were unsympathetic to the plight of others or weren't attune to their distress, but rather were more heavily influenced by the behaviour of those around them. They appeared to feel less responsible for taking action if there were others present and the greater the numbers present, the less responsible they felt.

Further study of bystander behaviour identified 4 stages that must be present for bystanders to become active (Berkowitz 2009) [2]:

Notice the behaviour

↓

Interpret it as a problem

↓

Feel responsible for taking action

↓

Have the skills to act
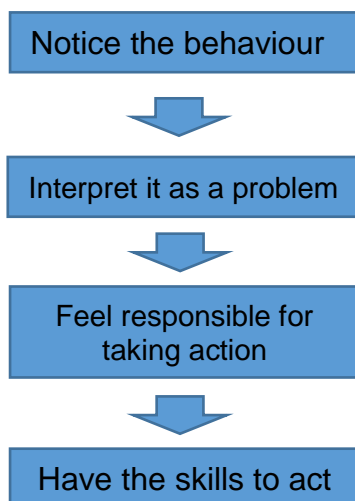
Noticing the behaviour and see it as a problem requires sufficient knowledge about issues and behaviours regardless of the type of violence. Knowledge is required that will allow individuals to recognise risk factors, the impact on victims, the range of violent behaviours and so on. While this knowledge is a necessary condition for bystander intervention, it is not in itself sufficient and the other stages must be present. Feeling responsible enough to take action as a bystander has also been shown to be a necessary condition (Baynard and Moynihan, 2011) [3]. Factors that can contribute to this include building empathy with victims and addressing personal attitudes towards behaviours. Lastly having the skills and confidence to act are crucial for any intervention to happen at all.

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Through exploring gender expectations, empathy, types of violence and issues in the scenarios coupled with facts and figures, the MVP programme aims to ensure young people, and indeed staff, work through these stages and increase the likelihood of them becoming active bystanders when faced with harmful behaviour of others.

Latané and Darnley's research identified diffusion of responsibility as a factor influencing why some people remain passive bystanders. Subsequent studies have indicated that there are a range of factors that may inhibit interventions and act as barriers such as the nature of the situation, the perceived similarities with the victim and the perceived opinion of helpers formed by other bystanders. Any successful intervention programme will aim to challenge and overcome these.

One significant factor seems to be the interpersonal influences impacting on individuals behaviour. *Social norms theory* addresses these peer influences and the power of normative beliefs. During MVP training we discuss *'pluralistic ignorance'*, that the actions of individuals are influenced by the incorrect notion that others beliefs, values or attitudes differ from your own. So, if when witnessing harmful behaviours for example, we are surrounded by others doing nothing, we are also likely to do nothing, despite our discomfort or rejection of the behaviour. We assume others are okay with it and that we are the minority, that they are not like us. Anyone who has read the Hans Christian Anderson tale, The Emperor's New Clothes, will be familiar with the concept, written about well ahead of its time! Related to this is the misperception resulting in *'false consensus'*, a cognitive bias where the minority

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believe their views, beliefs, attitudes etc.. are representative of the majority, that others think as they do. Both pluralistic ignorance and false consensus are allowed to perpetuate because of individuals need to conform to the rules and norms they perceive to exist in their social groups. The former impacts the behaviour of bystanders and the latter the behaviour of perpetrators. If these false norms can be challenged and the misperception corrected then in theory actual norms should emerge and influence behaviour for the better.

Studies have found that men with negative gender role attitudes, alongside the belief that their peers find violence against women acceptable are more likely to be perpetrators of said violence (Schwartz et al, 2001) [4]. Conversely those men who believed that their peers found such violence unacceptable were less likely to become perpetrators, even if they held those negative gender attitudes (McNaughton Reyes et al, 2015) [5]. Therefore the belief that peers found it unacceptable acted as a protective factor.

The MVP model allows us to challenge potential norms about the acceptability of violence thus acting to protect those with negative attitudes from acting on them i.e. breaking down the false consensus. At the same time it allows potential active bystanders to see that others are also uncomfortable with harmful behaviours and share their attitudes and values about the unacceptability of violence.

Bystanders programmes therefore can be effective on two levels: firstly to increase the chances of individuals identifying and intervening when they witness harmful behaviours. Secondly to decrease the likelihood of individuals perpetrating harmful behaviour by challenging attitudes, values and social norms and improving peer relationships.

Intervention made

Weakening of norms supporting violence

Decrease in violent incidents
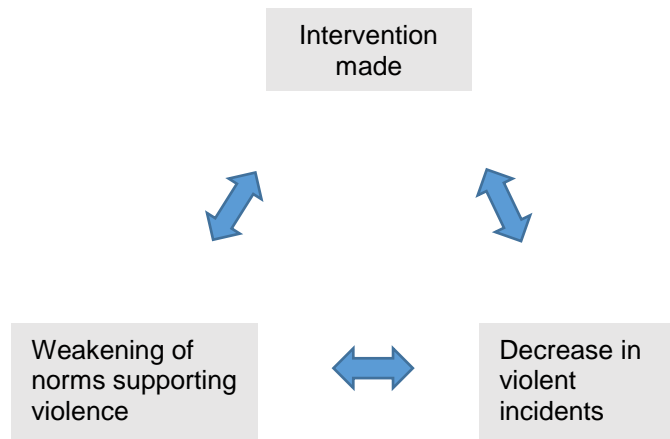
Programmes focusing on social norms have been shown to positively impact on behaviour change in areas such as drinking behaviour and other health related fields. The research in terms of sexual violence prevention and bystander interventions is more limited but there is evidence that a willingness to intervene is more influenced by peer norms than by an individual's own attitudes on sexual violence (Brown & Messman-Moore, 2010) [6] therefore intervening to change social norms should have a positive influence on behaviour.

Research also indicates a complex interaction of cognitive processes may be at play and contributing to bystanders being active or passive. Exploring some of these might help us to understand how we can encourage the former. If we assume the majority

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of individuals oppose violence and bullying behaviour then we believe that most people find it morally wrong.

Normally our own ethical and moral standards result in us making judgements about behaviours or conduct and encourage us to act accordingly – moral agency. Our moral standards guide our own behaviour, encouraging good and deterring bad. We gain self-satisfaction and self-worth acting according to our moral standards. However there are processes that can prevent this self-sanctioning, while at the same time allowing us to maintain our internal moral standards. This is known as *moral disengagement*.

An obvious example would be Nazi Germany and the question as to why so many ordinary people engaged in such abhorrent behaviours, behaviours they would in all likelihood have found morally unacceptable, particularly before the war. It might also help explore why bystanders might choose to do nothing when faced with behaviours they find morally wrong alongside the premise that helping others in need is 'the right thing to do'. Studies have found moral disengagement to be negatively related to prosocial behaviours (Bandura et al 1996, 2001) [7] and that students with high moral disengagement had more negative attitudes regarding their role as an active bystander (Almedia, Correia and Marinho, 2010) [8]. So we could surmise that considering the processes of moral disengagement may help us to encourage active bystanders. Although this paper focusses on bystander theories and behaviours, the MVP programme also aims to prevent violence and bullying by directly challenging attitudes and values that can lead to perpetrator behaviour. Exploring moral disengagement processes is useful to this end also.

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There are a number of cognitive processes that may allow individuals to 'morally disengage' one of which we have already discussed, the diffusion of responsibility (Bandura 1999, 2002) [9]. Some are especially relevant to MVP. '*Euphemistic labelling*' is when acceptable behaviours are described in a way that allows individuals to disengage from their moral standards. To use a military analogy, civilian deaths are described as 'collateral damage' and missile attacks as 'surgical strikes'. This use of sanitising language allows individuals to morally disengage from a harmful behaviour.

It is therefore important within MVP that harmful behaviours are named as such and we must continue to challenge 'banter' and other behaviours that some seek to minimise through language.

Disregarding or distorting consequences is another way to morally disengage by minimising the harm an action can have or avoiding the consequences altogether. Self-censure or moral codes will not be ignited if the harm inflicted by behaviour can be minimised or ignored.

In MVP we spend time looking at the consequences and impacts of behaviours and actions to help avoid this happening.

Lastly '*victim blaming*' or '*dehumanisation*' allows behaviours to become acceptable as the victim is somehow thought to have encouraged or deserved the harm or in fact is stripped of their human qualities altogether.

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MVP challenges both of these by discussing attitudes towards victims and examining media messages such as those around the objectification of women, as powerfully illustrated by Jean Kilbourne in 'Killing Us Softly'. (Bandura 1999, 2002). The MVP model explores gender stereotypes and encourages participants to examine where those messages come from and how they might impact on individuals attitudes and behaviour. All the scenarios stress that the blame for harmful behaviour and abuse lies solely with the perpetrator. For example the scenario 'Party' looking at consent explicitly explores attitudes toward rape and sexual assault allowing facts and figures to be discussed and challenging myths and stereotypes which can lead to victim blaming.

Moral disengagement in itself may not be enough to explain bystander behaviour. Research suggested that self-efficacy may be particularly relevant. Self-efficacy is the belief one has about their innate ability to achieve goals. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy will approach tasks with a high belief that they can succeed and will be more likely to sustain efforts in the face of challenges. Studies into bullying behaviour and bystander interventions have shown that self-efficacy is positively associated with bystander behaviour (Barchia & Bussey, 2011) [10]. This was replicated by Thornberg & Jungert who found that amongst adolescents, high levels of self-efficacy seemed to motivate and engage bystanders while low levels inhibited them from intervening, regardless of their level of moral disengagement. So even if individuals are morally engaged if they have low levels of self-efficacy they are less likely to be active bystanders, 'even if adolescents see the wrongness of bullying, they may remain as

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passive bystanders because they do not believe they are capable of intervening effectively' (Thornberg, R & Jungert, T, 2013) [11].

> **MVP sessions allow discussion of scenarios and options for interventions. Alongside exploring the consequences of actions they aim to empower young people with a range of interventions and awareness of how they might be carried out and what the outcomes might be. Our aim is that this would increase self-efficacy and the belief that their actions can be effective and make a difference. Older peers and staff successfully modelling effective interventions should increase the self-efficacy of younger pupils.**

Investigating the cognitive processes around behaviours and actions gives us some insight as to how we might try to intervene, encouraging one set of behaviours and discouraging others.

Predicting behaviour is however complex, and various models have been developed to try and understand the interaction and influences of various relevant factors. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, I, 1985) [12] is one which links attitudes and beliefs, social norms and perceived behavioural control in order to try and explain and influence individual behaviours. It is widely used in marketing and advertising to influence our retails habits.

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Theory of planned behaviour
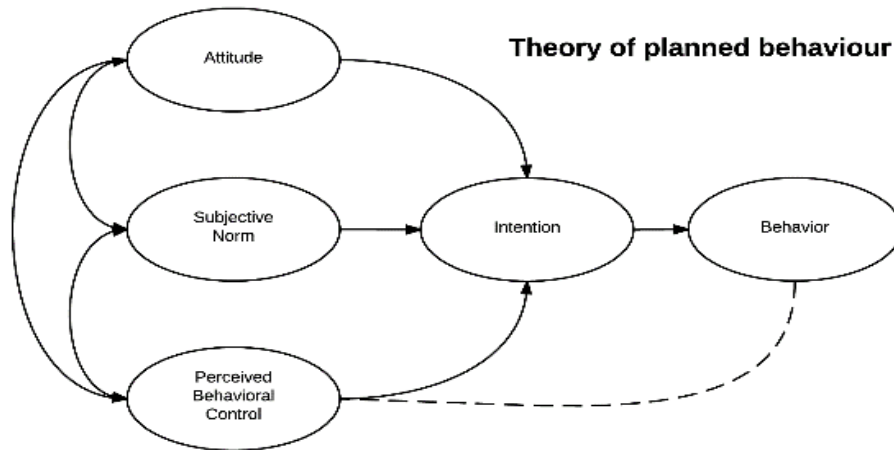
The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as relates to bystander theory ascertains that for any individual considering acting they will:

- Have a belief about that behaviour and an attitude towards it; is it good or bad, will it positively or negatively impact on them?

- Be influenced by the social norms around the behaviour as well as their perceptions of the social norms i.e. what others think about the behaviour.

- Affected by how much they perceive to be constrained in their actions.

These three components will influence one another and ultimately whether an individual intends to act and in turn whether they actually act. This links to Darnley and Latané's stages of bystander intervention and we can theorise that in order to be effective, bystander programmes must address each of these stages to influence behaviour change.

MVP aims to influence all of these stages in order to improve rates of intention to act and ultimately eventual behaviour change. Activities and discussions aim to explore individuals attitudes and values and encourage self-reflection. Social norms are explored and actual norms become clear. Information, education and exploring options increases self-efficacy and confidence in being able to take action and influence situations.

In the sphere of gender based violence and sexual harassment it is also worth looking at criminology theory and how this might influence effective bystander programmes for violence prevention such as MVP. Routine Active Theory developed by Cohen & Felson (1979) [13] suggests 3 elements are required for commissioning of a crime:

1. A victim or target
2. A motivated offender
3. The absence of capable guardianship

In past decades programmes aiming to keep women safe and protected from sexual violence addresses the first i.e. the availability of the victim, and initiatives and interventions focused on women changing their behaviour to minimise or remove their availability as victims. For example, have a safe plan for getting home, carrying a rape alarm, covering your drink so it can't be drugged and so on. Moves towards equality and addressing the true underlying reasons for GBV has observed a backlash from women's organisations quite rightly pointing out that the focus should be on

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addressing perpetrator behaviour and societal constructs and social norms that support GBV.

Effective bystander intervention programmes can positively influence both the motivation of offenders and maximise guardianship. The motivation of offenders can be influenced by a number of things such as sanctions, knowledge of the law, knowledge of actual social norms, increased empathy for others and more positive attitudes towards and relationships with others.

The MVP programme aims to address each of these, thus minimising the motivation of potential perpetrators to carry out harmful behaviours.

Guardianship is not just about the presence of individuals who can act to prevent harm or support victims but also about the structural deterrents within an organisation that support the prevention of violence and harmful behaviours. These include; comprehensive and effective anti-violence policies, a culture of gender equality and believing victims and appropriate and clear sanctions for perpetrator's.

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MVP encourages guardianship at all levels. Local authorities are asked to consider the policies and practices they have in place for violence prevention and promoting positive relationships at the readiness stage of involvement with the programme. Schools are encouraged to operate MVP alongside visible and clear anti bullying, positive relationship and children's rights programmes and restorative practices, all of which should maximise guardianship alongside a culture where gender equality is openly promoted and discrimination challenged.

The notion of guardianship at an individual level is linked to bystander interventions and the role we can all play to positively impact on potential perpetrator behaviour. The MVP programme and others like it focus largely on bystanders as peers, fellow pupils or students and their role in challenging and influencing norms and behaviours. However the wider school community has a huge role to play particularly the teachers and staff who interact with pupils on a daily basis. Studies have shown that in schools where teachers and other staff model active bystander roles and intervene in harmful behaviours and bullying then students themselves are more likely to intervene when witnesses the same behaviours, Twemlow et al (2004) [14]. They also found the converse to be true. The subsequent programme the researchers developed employed this whole school approach and alongside workshops and discussions there was a very visible campaign using posters etc… as well as support and training for staff to recognise and intervene in bullying behaviours. Evaluations showed an increase in willingness to intervene and a decrease in self and peer reported bullying behaviour.

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The importance of school staff for the success of gender based violence prevention is strongly advocated in the United Nations Global Guidance on School Related Gender Based Violence, 2018. It cites raising awareness among staff about gender dynamics in the classroom and improving their understanding of gender norms and expectations as fundamental to improving the learning and teaching of young people on these issues. They recommend staff also have space to explore their own experiences of gendered lives and their beliefs and values as a good starting point. Promoting respectful relationships in the classroom and having the skills to respond appropriately to those experiencing, witnessing or carrying out violence are some of the recommendations around challenging GBV.

MVP training for staff is structured to allow staff the time and space to reflect on their own attitudes, value and experiences of gender stereotypes and expectations. They are encouraged through discussion and session delivery to explore their own attitudes and values. The training is structure in the same way as school delivery to enable social norms to be challenged and knowledge and skills acquired.

Researchers have suggested a number of other key considerations for success and maximum impact when developing bystander intervention programmes such as MVP.

The role of men in the prevention of gender based violence is crucial since they have the potential to have the greatest impact on setting healthy social norms for men who are potential perpetrators, it is however one of the greatest challenges in many prevention programmes including MVP. There is a danger that men view the efforts

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of such programmes as blaming of men, leading to defensiveness and resistance. Baynard, Plante and Moynihan 2004 [15], found that increased defensiveness led to increased resistance thus inhibiting receptiveness to prevention messages. There is a danger that if not structured carefully, well-meaning prevention programmes could have the effect of solidifying existing negative attitudes and even to a 'backlash' leading to an increase in violence against women.

How information is presented is crucial to avoiding this. Paul and Gray, 2011 [16] found that information about peer norms for example should take care to address 'injunctive norms' i.e. the actual social approval levels of behaviours and not merely focus on descriptive norms i.e. rates of violence . Focussing on the later may lead some to believe perceive high rates reflective the norm. This could increase the likelihood of perpetrator behaviour and decrease the likelihood of bystander interventions.

A bystander approach allows men to be positioned as bystanders as opposed to potential perpetrators. This creates a learning environment where men can more easily reflect on gender roles and issues of masculinity and femininity and how that shapes their attitudes and beliefs and behaviours. It positions men as allies in challenging gender based violence.

Studies have also examined the effectiveness of peer led versus professional facilitation in GBV prevention programmes. Support for both approaches can be found but it is clear that whatever approach is used:

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- Misperception can be strongly held and information looking to correct them must be presented in a reliable way.

- The source of the information must be reliable and credible otherwise the message is undermined.

- The level and amount of information must be carefully considered so as to have an impact.

- A wide variety of teaching methods should be used.

- Longer term programmes have long term impacts, single session interventions have been shown to be less effective.

- Be sociocultural relevant and use language and references that participants can identify with in their lives.

The peer education model of MVP addresses the reliability and credibility of the message source, given the importance of peer relationships in young people's lives. We must ensure that the information is well presented and given in the right amount to impact on behaviour, hence the importance of well-trained mentors, on message and who are fully representative of their peer group and delivering over a number of sessions and time scale. Giving facts about violence is part of increasing knowledge but this must not lead to an impression of it being the norm. We must always focus on presenting the levels of disapproval of violence and reducing pluralistic ignorance.

There are an number of intervention programmes now addressing gender based violence more commonly in the United States but also in Australia and more recently

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here in the UK. These will be briefly described with some links provided for further reading.

Bringing in the Bystander (US) was developed building on the work of Jackson Katz and the MVP programme and focuses on delivering multi-session groups based lessons with male and female facilitators. Evaluation have shown it to be effective in increasing students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours about effective bystander responses. *https://cultureofrespect.org/program/bringing-in-the-bystander/*

The Sexual Assault Prevention Programme for Secondary Schools (SAPPSS) (Australia) is a whole school approach to preventing sexual assault and promoting respectful behaviours. It involves a six session delivery to year 9 and 10 pupils, professional development for staff, review of school and procedures to support the programme and a peer educator programme for senior students. Delivery takes place in single groups at first then mixed and delivered initially by specially trained staff and later a peer educator component. Evaluations have commented on the importance of a commitment from senior school staff to the effectiveness of the programme. http://www.casahouse.com.au/index.php?page_id=172

The Intervention Initiative (UK) is an educational toolkit developed by University of the West of England and funded by Public Health England. It is a free resource for use by colleges and universities and consists of 8 one hour sessions to be delivered by experienced facilitators. The programme builds on theory and evidence in order to affect actual attitude and behavioural change over time. https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/research/interventioninitiative/

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The Mentors in Violence Prevention programme is based on sound theoretical approaches to challenging violence, gender based violence and bullying. The central bystander approach has been shown to be an effective method for engaging individuals in challenging attitudes and values and harmful behaviours. It allows false social norms to be challenged and healthy ones to emerge, encouraging both active bystanders and inhibiting potential perpetrators. The programme model considers the complex cognitive processes that inhibit helping behaviour, seeks to overcome these while at the same time equipping individuals with the skills and confidence to make effective interventions. There are however considerations to be made given current research on bystander intervention models and their effectiveness in terms of facilitating attitude and behavioural change:

- Are peer facilitators sufficient to ensure effective key messages are delivered?

- Are current delivery models of sufficient duration?

- Is the 'gender' component of the programme being adequately explored?

- Are materials sufficiently culturally relevant?

- Is a whole school approach being sufficiently encouraged including effective engagement of wider staff teams to model desired behaviours?

- Are men and boys being effectively engaged to allow for wider discussions on masculinity and gender equality leading to attitude and behaviour change and avoiding backlash?

It is crucial that we evaluate the programme, keep abreast of current research and adapt and change where necessary to ensure maximum impact in the prevention of violence, gender based violence and bullying.

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