

# The Influence of Social Norms on Advancement Through Bystander Stages for Preventing Interpersonal Violence

Violence Against Women  
1–24

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## Abstract

This research evaluates the impact of social norms on the advancement through the bystander stages toward prosocial (active) intervention in interpersonal violence (IPV): emotional abuse, physical violence, controlling behavior, sexual violence, and stalking. The influence of social norms on bystander behavior across stages and types of violence varies. Accurate social norms perceptions are associated with routine intervention, although social norms misperceptions are not always a strong deterrent to intervention. Interpretation of a violent situation as problematic predicts increased willingness to intervene. Implications for the development of social norms antiviolence campaigns and strategies for reducing barriers to prosocial intervention are discussed.

## Keywords

bystander intervention, interpersonal violence prevention, social norms

## Introduction

Increasingly, primary prevention efforts around interpersonal and sexual violence are focusing on strategies to promote prosocial bystander behavior (i.e., taking positive action, independent of the behavior of others). Latané and Darley (1970) hypothesized

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that individuals must move through a series of five stages: (a) noticing the event, (b) interpreting the event as a problem, (c) feeling responsible for finding a solution, (d) having skills to intervene, and (e) intervening. However, social cues and perceptions of social norms (i.e., perceived peer attitudes and behaviors) are believed to inform whether someone chooses to take action to prevent violence, and varied social phenomena can derail a person's willingness to intervene at each of those stages (Berkowitz, 2010, 2011). Therefore, violence prevention strategies that focus on engaging bystanders need to understand and test in what ways an individual's perception of peers' norms may inform bystanders' actions when potentially violent and violent acts are observed.

This research attempts to clarify the relationship between social norms and advancement through the bystander stages toward prosocial intervention across five different types of interpersonal violence (IPV): emotional abuse, physical violence, controlling behavior, sexual violence, and stalking. This research ascertains college students' attitudes toward IPV, as well as their perceptions of the attitudes of their peers, which represent the perceived socially normative context around violence. Personal attitudes and perceptions are explored with the goal of obtaining information that can be used to guide the development of future social norms marketing campaigns (i.e., employing strategically targeted standard social marketing techniques to present healthy norms) designed to increase prosocial intervention by highlighting antiviolence norms (Berkowitz, 2003, 2010). ANOVAs and regression analyses are utilized to identify attitudinal and social norms factors that predict willingness to intervene in potential IPV situations. Survey data were collected from a midsized Northeastern residential college and comparisons were made across types of IPV, controlling for sex and year in school.

## Literature Review

Empirical research provides support for increased intervention following movement through Latané and Darley's (1970) five bystander stages. Monto, Newcomb, Rabow, and Hernandez (1994) determined that passing through each stage significantly increased the likelihood that a student would intervene to prevent a person from driving while intoxicated. For example, although 51% of students in general had reported trying to intervene in a driving while intoxicated situation in the last year, 65% of those who noticed the event intervened, 73% of those who thought the situation was serious intervened, and 82% of those who felt they had the skills to act intervened with a drunk driver, thus providing empirical support for the stages of the model. Though Monto and colleagues examined bystander behavior with respect to driving while intoxicated, this study assesses students' advancement through the bystander stages toward intervention to prevent IPV.

A number of social and psychological obstacles may interfere with an individual's willingness to intervene in a variety of situations. Darley and Latané's (1968) theory of *pluralistic ignorance* suggests that when an ambiguous event occurs, an individual bystander will be considerably influenced by the ways in which other

bystanders are reacting to the event. Therefore, when a bystander is faced with the calm reactions of other bystanders, he may infer that they do not define the event as an emergency and may begin to define it for himself as not emergent. This results, in turn, in an individual's lack of action even when they are bothered by the violence. A similar theory has to do with the risk of embarrassment if a situation turns out not to be an emergency. In these situations, *audience inhibition* predicts that the fear of embarrassment can dramatically reduce the likelihood that action will be taken (Fischer, Greitemeyer, Pollozek, & Frey, 2006). In situations when large groups of people are present, *diffusion of responsibility* dictates that individuals are less likely to help when there are more people around because each individual assumes that someone else will intervene (Darley & Latané, 1968). According to research conducted by Piliavin, Rodin, and Piliavin (1969), people are also less likely to help if they perceive a person to be responsible for her or his own misfortune.

Each of these bystander effect theories describes situations in which an individual's behavior is influenced by other people. Studies have demonstrated that students' actions are influenced by their perceptions of what their peers might do in a similar situation (Berkowitz, 2010; Brown & Messman-Moore, 2009; Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback, & Stark, 2003; Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). For this reason, it is necessary to understand the role of perceived peer attitudes and behaviors, and their influence on an individual's decision to intervene (or not) in a particular situation.

Perceptions of social norms on college campuses may affect the decision making of students around how they choose to respond to potentially violent situations. For example, although individuals tend to have strong values, they do not exclusively look to their internal value system to dictate how they will behave in a given situation (Paluck, 2009). Rather, individuals tend to behave in ways that are consistent with perceived norms. If a person's values are in sync with his or her perception of peers' attitudes and behaviors, the individual will feel more empowered to act in a way that is consistent with his or her inner values. If, however, the individual's values are not perceived to match up with peers, the individual will tend to act as he or she thinks his or her peers would (Fabiano et al., 2003; Paluck, 2009).

In this study, we focus on illuminating the gap between individuals' actual attitudes and behaviors (what people report believing and doing), and their *perceptions* of what other people think and are doing. As a result, it may be possible to demonstrate that prevailing social norms are actually more aligned with a person's inner values than they realize. Therefore, practitioners (or educators) may not need to change a person's attitudes to change his or her behavior, but rather clarify the extent to which peers think and act like the individual is *already* inclined to think and act. Based on the assumption that peers will support them for acting in a particular way, individuals can more confidently act in congruence with their inner values. In this case, students who believe their peers disapprove of violence and are willing to intervene to prevent violent acts are hypothesized to be more likely to intervene themselves when the misperception is corrected (Berkowitz, 2010; Fabiano et al., 2003).

Other programs have been developed to address IPV within particular social contexts. For instance, “Bringing in the Bystander” (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2005; University of New Hampshire, 2013) uses a “community of responsibility model” that encourages safe, yet active, bystander intervention. In this approach, both peer-facilitated workshops that teach intervention skills and a social marketing poster campaign are utilized. The posters feature the types of IPV scenarios that students may encounter, as well as suggestions for intervention. Current college student feedback on the campaign was thoroughly incorporated into the design process. Similarly, “Green Dot” (Coker et al., 2011) focuses on activating bystanders, but utilizes both social and viral marketing to deliver numerous “dosages” of “Green Dot” messaging. These techniques are designed to spur cultural change around attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the tolerance of IPV and can be adjusted to suit particular student populations. Men Can Stop Rape (Men Can Stop Rape, 2011) represents a third approach to prevention but, unlike the prior two models, is specifically aimed at recruiting men as allies in cultural change around sexual violence. This program also uses social marketing as a way of challenging dominant masculinity norms, suggesting ways in which men can express their discomfort when women are mistreated or belittled and intervene to prevent sexual assault and rape.

Although the success of social marketing-based campaigns has been documented (Banyard et al., 2005; Coker et al., 2011; University of New Hampshire, 2013), it is important to differentiate a *social norms* approach from a *social marketing* approach. Social marketing in IPV prevention uses media (often posters) to convey healthy messages that will likely resonate with the specific group that the practitioners or educators would like to reach (e.g., men, or students on a particular campus). In contrast, the social norms strategy outlined in this article uses a data-driven approach that focuses specifically on *correcting misperceptions* of norms related to willingness to intervene. We contend that using survey data to document the social norms around IPV and intervention that exist within a particular group of students provides practitioners and educators with potentially advantageous pieces of information. In addition to being able to craft a social marketing campaign based on descriptive statistics derived from survey data, specific types of IPV can be identified as being “most” problematic in terms of the disconnection between what students think and what they perceive their peers think. Thus, scarce resources may be preserved through not having to address all kinds of IPV simultaneously. In addition, the data may be used to *firmly establish* the extent to which students in a specific context are already willing to intervene to prevent IPV. This specificity will arguably serve as a “wake up call” to students who see peers at their particular school as their primary reference group, thereby spurring behavioral change.

Despite the fact that a significant amount of social norms research has been conducted, primarily to deter alcohol abuse (see Borsari & Carey, 2001, for a review), this approach has only recently been paired with violence prevention, specifically the prevention of sexual violence (Berkowitz, 2010; Brown & Messman-Moore, 2009; Fabiano et al., 2003). Building off of prior research, this study was designed to expand existing knowledge beyond preventing just sexual violence, to preventing multiple

**Table 1.** Operationalization of the Five Domains of IPV.

|        | Emotional abuse                            | Physical violence  | Controlling behavior  | Stalking   | Sexual violence   |
|--------|--|--|---|--|---|
| Item 1 | Insult or use threats against a partner    | Hit, kick, bite, restrain, or use a weapon against a partner | Tell my partner not to talk to someone of the opposite sex      | Follow someone even if it makes him or her afraid                    | Do not stop sexual activity if asked, even when aroused       |
| Item 2 | Blame my partner when I do bad things      |  | Tell my partner to give me a detailed account of his or her day | Repeatedly text, even if it makes someone afraid                     | Do not get consent before sexual activity                     |
| Item 3 |  |  |   | Monitor someone's Facebook page, even if you use someone else's page | Do not stop the first time my date says no to sexual activity |
| Source | Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan (2005) | Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan (2005)                   | Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan (2005)                      | WomensLaw.org (n.d.)   | Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback, and Stark (2003)     |

Note. Sexual violence items were reverse coded after data collection to be in line with the other domains. IPV = interpersonal violence.

forms of IPV, and to better understand the interconnections between social norms theory, IPV, and bystander intervention behavior. Bridging these critical concepts offers practitioners the opportunity to create innovative primary prevention strategies that attempt to increase prosocial bystander intervention to reduce the incidence rate of IPV by correcting misperceptions that inhibit positive action.

We include five domains of IPV in this study and the operationalization of each can be found in Table 1. The first four attitudinal domains of IPV include consent related to sexual violence<sup>1</sup> (Fabiano et al., 2003), emotional abuse, physical violence, and controlling behavior (Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008; Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan, 2005). In the absence of preexisting validated measures, items pertaining to the fifth domain, stalking behaviors, were developed by the researchers and drew on recent legislative language that describes stalking as repeated and fear-provoking behavior (WomensLaw.org, n.d.: N.J.S.A. 2C:12-10). Measures related to stalking in an electronic media environment were included as they were deemed relevant to college-age students' experiences.

This study utilizes data collected via an incentivized online survey to compare the actual prevalence of attitudes and behaviors among students (as defined by respondents' self-reports) with respondents' perceptions of their peers' attitudes regarding various types of IPV and intended patterns of intervention. These data establish the social norms climate for the college population and are designed to measure the first

three of Latané and Darley's (1970) five bystander stages: (a) noticing the event, (b) interpreting the event as a problem, and (c) feeling responsible for finding a solution. At any stage, individual bystanders may choose not to advance to the next stage, potentially due to their perceptions of the normative context in which they are operating. By testing the impact of perceived social norms on advancement through the bystander stages and identifying motivating factors for intervention, recommendations can be developed for the design of social norms-based anti-IPV campaigns and other types of prevention initiatives that target bystanders.

Therefore, in accordance with the bystander stages theory and social norms theory outlined above, we propose and test the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Those respondents who are more likely to notice scenarios that represent, or could lead to, acts of IPV will also be more likely to interpret such events as being problematic.

**Hypothesis 2:** A greater propensity to define an IPV scenario as problematic will result in a greater propensity to feel responsible for finding a solution (i.e., to intend to perform prosocial intervention or intervention that is not conditional on the actions of others).

**Hypothesis 3:** Movement across the first three bystander stages should happen consistently across the five domains of IPV that we have defined above.

**Hypothesis 4:** Greater social norms misperceptions around interpreting an event as problematic will result in a lower propensity to feel responsible for finding a solution.

## Data Collection

To select participants, a random sample, stratified by sex and class year, was drawn from the college's general student population. The sampling frame consisted of 2,000 students, 500 students from each class year, evenly divided between males and females. Therefore, each population segment consisted of 250 individuals (e.g., first-year females). As males represented somewhat less than half the school's student body, they were disproportionately sampled. To be eligible, students had to be 18 years of age as of January 1, 2010, and enrolled in courses during the fall 2009 semester. The survey instrument was administered in an online format via Qualtrics. Student email addresses were obtained from the college's institutional research office, and a computer program was utilized to generate a random sample of student emails within each population segment specified above. Before being directed to the survey, subjects were provided with a detailed consent form and required to check a box at the end of the form to acknowledge that they read and comprehended the description of the study and understood that their responses would be completely anonymous. Responses were not linked to the original student emails, thus protecting the anonymity of the subjects.

To boost the participation rate among students, reminder emails were sent via Qualtrics at both 3 and 7 days after the initial invitation to the survey was sent. At the

7th-day reminder, students could decline to receive additional email reminders. If they did not decline, a third reminder was sent 10 days after initial contact. Incentives to participate were also offered. These were mentioned in the consent form that accompanied the online survey, specifying that recipients would be randomly selected. The grand prize was a Nintendo Wii (given to 1 student) and 10 additional students were selected to receive Visa gift cards in the amount of US\$20. Out of the 2,000 eligible students in the sampling frame, 449 completed all or most of the survey (including demographic questions), resulting in a 22.5% response rate for those with usable data.

Seven hundred forty-eight total respondents attempted or completed the survey. One hundred thirty-one respondents opened the survey but did not answer any questions. Of the remaining 617, another 137 did not complete enough of the survey for their answers to be utilized. The response rate in this sample exceeded that found by Sax, Gilmartin, and Bryant (2003), who systematically compared college students' incentivized, web-based survey response rates with those of other forms of survey administration (e.g., pen and paper). In their sample, only 17.1% of college students who received an incentivized, web-based survey completed the questionnaire.

The survey data were collected close to the beginning of the spring semester (February), so as not to interfere with spring break or final exams. Therefore, we suspect that the most likely reason for the attrition of students from the survey was that the questionnaire was relatively long, taking approximately 23 min to complete (on average), and students were not apprised of the estimated length in the invitation email. However, other reasons for the relatively low response rate, such as general "survey fatigue" or a lack of interest in the topic, cannot be ruled out.

An intentional decision was made to put demographic questions at the end of the survey to reduce the perceived risk of calling negative attention to any subgroup of students. As a result, those who did not provide this demographic information because they withdrew early were not able to be utilized in the inferential analyses. However, no statistically significant differences were detected between those who did provide demographic data and those who did not. Specifically, the students who did not provide demographic characteristics gave attitudinal and behavioral responses that were within the range of the responses provided by students who reported class year and sex. Thus, respondents who did not report demographics were likely comprised of a mixture of both sexes and all four class year subgroups, and were not anomalous. Table 2 includes a comparison of sample demographic characteristics with those in the undergraduate population at the midsized Northeastern residential college where the survey was implemented. Survey respondents were more likely to be Caucasian, and slightly more likely to be female and juniors or seniors relative to the general population.

## Measures

The questions included in the survey, and the analyses presented here, focus on the first three bystander stages.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Survey Sample and College Population.

|                        | College population<br>(Fall 2009) | Social norms sample<br>(Spring 2010) |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
|                        | %                                 | %                                    |
| Gender                 |                                   |                                      |
| Male                   | 41.4                              | 37.6                                 |
| Female                 | 58.6                              | 62.4                                 |
| Race/ethnicity         |                                   |                                      |
| Caucasian              | 65.1                              | 76.1                                 |
| Latino/Latina          | 9.0                               | 6.3                                  |
| African American       | 6.6                               | 3.9                                  |
| Asian                  | 6.4                               | 8.9                                  |
| Other                  | 0.9                               | 1.5                                  |
| Not reported           | 12.1                              | 7.6                                  |
| Year in college        |                                   |                                      |
| First years/sophomores | 50.1                              | 47.9                                 |
| Juniors/seniors        | 49.9                              | 52.1                                 |
| N                      | 6,237                             | 449                                  |

### Stage 1

To measure “noticing the event,” respondents were asked whether they had experienced IPV and also how often they believed that their peers had experienced violence. Six response categories reflected respondents’ perceived frequency of occurrence, ranging from “never” to “always.” These proxy measures set a rather conservative standard, as they assume that someone who has *experienced* violence, or knows someone who has experienced violence, has *noticed* violence. However, they do not perfectly reflect whether an individual would notice a particular incident that could lead to IPV in their everyday life.

### Stage 2

Interpretation of an event as a problem was operationalized by asking the respondents how bothered they would be (and how bothered they perceived their peers would be) if a friend experienced an act of IPV. Responses ranged from “not at all bothered” to “extremely bothered” (five categories).

### Stage 3

In the “feeling responsible for a solution” stage, respondents were provided with five vignettes (one per type of IPV) that described a friend experiencing violence. Respondents were asked to select from a list of nine possible interventions and rank the three ways in which they would *most likely respond* to the situation in question.

They could choose to do nothing, to respond in a conditional way (only if others initiated action), or to directly intervene themselves (defined here as a *prosocial* response).

Table 3 provides representative survey questions for each of the first three stages of intervention (using emotional abuse as an example). In the analyses, all items for the above three stages were asked with respect to a particular type of IPV. As a result, the number of observations with full information will vary across each type.

Utilizing the Stage 1 and Stage 2 survey questions, we constructed measures of respondents' social norms (mis)perceptions. In Stage 1, social norms (mis)perceptions were constructed by creating four groups. Each group was defined by a combination of the respondents' own experience of IPV (distilled into a dichotomy, has experienced IPV or has not) and their perceptions of whether others had experienced IPV (also dichotomized). Table 4 indicates the labeling strategy for the four groups.

The approach utilized to construct social norms (mis)perceptions in Stage 2 subtracted the respondent's rating of *peer* IPV frequency from their rating of their own IPV frequency. The absolute value of this score was utilized to represent the student's "distance" from others' perceived levels of bother. For instance, a respondent may be "not at all" bothered by violence (a score of 1), but could perceive that peers are "very much" bothered (a score of 4). This respondent's social Stage 2 social norms misperception score would be a "−3" ( $1 - 4 = [-3]$ ).

In explanation of the use of the absolute value, we theorized that misperceptions in *either* direction could potentially inhibit movement from Stage 2 and Stage 3. Therefore, it is the *size* of the misperception, not necessarily its direction, that matters. For instance, those who feel that they are *more* bothered by IPV than those around them might suffer from audience inhibition; they may perceive that there is a problem but worry about embarrassment if they intervene and those around them do not take the potential IPV situation as seriously as they do. Those who perceive that they are *less* bothered than those around them could suffer from diffusion of responsibility; they may believe that more bothered individuals will be the ones to actually intervene, thereby relieving them of the responsibility to do so.

Based on measures of Stage 3, an index of intended prosocial intervention was created using the respondent's top three selections regarding how he or she would most likely intervene in a given IPV scenario. A separate index was created for each domain of violence based on a vignette that described that type of IPV. The first choice was given a weight of "3," the second choice was weighted "2," and the third choice "1." If the respondent's choices were considered prosocial, that selection was assigned its weight. Conditional or nonintervention choices were assigned no value. For example, if a respondent chose three prosocial responses, he or she could have a maximum score of "6" ( $3 + 2 + 1$ ). If the respondent selected a conditional response followed by two prosocial responses, he or she would be assigned a "3" ( $0 + 2 + 1$ ). Respondents could have a score from "0" (no prosocial choices) to "6" (all prosocial choices).

Finally, the two demographic characteristics used to stratify the random samples were also measured and utilized: respondent sex (male or female) and year in school (first year through senior). The latter was dichotomized for analysis, combining first years with sophomores, and juniors with seniors.

**Table 3.** Representative Items for Bystander Stages 1 Through 3 (Emotional Abuse).

| Stage   | Item  | Response categories  |
|---|---|--|
| Stage 1: Noticing the event                         | In the last 12 months, has your current or prior dating partner emotionally abused you (i.e., by insulting you, making threats to hurt you, blaming you when she or he did bad things?)   | 0 = never<br>1 = seldom<br>2 = sometimes<br>3 = often<br>4 = very often<br>5 = always  |
|   | In your opinion, in the past 12 months, how often have [college] students in dating relationships experienced the following . . . Emotional abuse by their partner (i.e., insulting, threatening to harm, blaming them when their partner does bad things?) | 0 = never<br>1 = seldom<br>2 = sometimes<br>3 = often<br>4 = very often<br>5 = always  |
| Stage 2: Interpreting the event as a problem        | To what extent would it bother you if your [college] friends were emotionally abused by their partners (i.e., insulting, threatening to harm, blaming them when their partner does bad things?)   | 1 = not at all<br>2 = somewhat<br>3 = moderately<br>4 = very much<br>5 = extremely   |
|   | To what extent would most [college] students be bothered if their [college] friends experienced the following behaviors . . . Emotional abuse by their partners (i.e., insulting, threatening to harm, blaming them when their partner does bad things?)    | 1 = not at all<br>2 = somewhat<br>3 = moderately<br>4 = very much<br>5 = extremely   |
| Stage 3: Feeling responsible for finding a solution | If you observed the following behaviors, what would you be most likely to do?   | Do nothing. It's not a problem<br>Do nothing. It's not my relationship   |
|   | Please rank order the top three (3) things you would do.  | I wouldn't know what to do or say to intervene   |
|   | <i>Your friend is being emotionally abused by his or her partner (i.e., insulting him or her, threatening to hurt him or her, being blamed when his or her partner does bad things.)</i>  | I would intervene only if other people were trying to stop it<br>I would do something if I saw that no one else was<br>In private, talk to your friend or his or her partner<br>Refer your friend or his or her partner to a campus resource (i.e., for emotional, medical, or campus judicial assistance.)<br>Call the police |

**Table 4.** Four “Stage 1” Groups—Social Norms Perceptions of IPV.

|                       | Peers have not experienced<br>IPV | Peers have experienced<br>IPV |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Never experienced IPV | Group 0                           | Group 1                       |
| Experienced IPV       | Group 2                           | Group 3                       |

Note. IPV = interpersonal violence.

## Results

### *Social Norms Comparisons by Bystander Stage*

Table 5 summarizes responses regarding the first three stages of intervention: (a) noticing an event, (b) defining it as a problem, and (c) feeling responsible for finding a solution. In each stage, students’ own experiences, attitudes, and hypothetical behaviors were compared with what they perceived to be the case for other students at the college. Comparison in Stage 1 could illustrate the domains that are most relevant within a student population. For example, 38% of students reported experiencing emotional abuse in this sample. This domain might not otherwise have been deemed a priority for prevention efforts. Stage 2 and Stage 3 comparisons offer insight into misperceptions that could be corrected via a social norms campaign.

Students were most likely to report having experienced emotional abuse (38%) and controlling behavior (33%). Fewer had experienced sexual violence, stalking, or physical violence. However, in each domain, students were very likely to perceive that their fellow students had experienced violence across the five domains, ranging from “seldom” to “always.”

Students were most likely to report being bothered by physical violence (93%) but were almost equally likely to be bothered by sexual violence (91%). Controlling behavior was considered least bothersome although a clear majority of students did report being bothered by it (68%). In all instances, students perceived that their peers would be less bothered by these behaviors than they themselves had been. The degree of misperception was most evident in the stalking domain (12% difference). Students were most accurate in predicting that other students would similarly be bothered by incidents of physical violence (4% difference).

Relative to misperceptions regarding Stage 2, the misperceptions around intervention behaviors were far more pronounced, with students much more likely to report that they would choose to intervene in a prosocial way than to perceive that their peers would act similarly. This disconnection was most evident for the scenario involving emotional abuse (47% difference). Students’ expectations of their own intervention behaviors relative to their peers’ were most aligned in the case of physical violence, where prosocial responses by peers were expected (69%) but still resulted in a 21% discrepancy relative to students’ own anticipated intervention behaviors. Prosocial

**Table 5.** Descriptive Social Norms Comparisons—Percentages by Bystander Stage and Across IPV Domains.

|                      | Stage 1: Notices IPV                     |  | Stage 2: Defines IPV as a problem                    |   | Stage 3: Prosocial intervention choices             |   |
|----------------------|--|--|--|---|---|---|
|                      | % students who have ever experienced IPV | % students who perceive that others have experienced IPV | % students who are very or extremely bothered by IPV | % students who perceive that others are bothered by IPV | % students who would perform prosocial intervention | % students who perceive others would perform prosocial intervention |
| Emotional abuse      | 38                                       | 98   | 84   | 76  | 84  | 37  |
| Physical violence    | 10                                       | 88   | 93   | 89  | 90  | 69  |
| Controlling behavior | 33                                       | 97   | 67   | 62  | 63  | 37  |
| Stalking             | 11                                       | 95   | 78   | 66  | 74  | 51  |
| Sexual violence      | 14                                       | 94   | 91   | 82  | 82  | 55  |

Note. IPV = interpersonal violence.

interventions among peers were perceived to be less likely in the scenarios involving emotional abuse and controlling behavior (37% each) relative to the other three domains.

### Predicting Movement Through Bystander Stages

To test hypothesized movement from bystander Stage 1 (notice an event) to Stage 2 (interpret an event as a problem), we compared mean levels of “bother” across the four Stage 1 groups described above. However, due to the very low number of respondents that fell into Group 2 (individuals who had themselves experienced IPV but report that peers “never” experienced IPV), this group was excluded from analyses to obtain a more accurate *F* ratio.

The results of the ANOVAs revealed that our data fail to provide support for Hypothesis 1. Group 3 (those who both experienced IPV and acknowledged that peers have also experienced IPV) are the respondents who arguably have “noticed” violence most often. However, in every domain of IPV, this group reports the lowest mean level of bother. This difference is statistically lower than other groups in three domains: emotional abuse, physical violence, and controlling behavior. This variation calls into question Hypothesis 3, which predicted consistent results across all types of IPV. It is possible that for Group 3 violence is somewhat “normalized,” that is, “I experience IPV, and so do my peers; therefore, I am used to it and find it less problematic.”

The group with the next highest propensity to “notice” violence was Group 1 (individuals who had *not* experienced IPV themselves but reported that peers *did* experience IPV). Group 1 was not found to be significantly more likely to be bothered by the various types of IPV than were those who had neither experienced violence nor acknowledged that peers had as well (Group 0). It is interesting to note, though not

statistically significant, that students who are exclusively aware of their peers' experience with IPV (Group 1) are more inclined to be bothered than those who have both personal experience and notice others' experiences of IPV (Group 3). This suggests that awareness, particularly of others, can be influential. However, too much can have a dampening effect when connecting Stage 1 to Stage 2. Although these results are somewhat surprising, it should be noted that, in general, the levels of bother were quite high across all types of IPV regardless of group. The lowest level of bother was found for Group 3 regarding controlling behavior but even this mean indicated that respondents were "moderately" to "very much" bothered. Table 6 displays the results of the ANOVAs.

The ANOVAs were also disaggregated by sex and year in school. The results should be interpreted with caution due to the low number of respondents in some groups, but the means suggest that females were *always* more bothered than males across every Group and type of IPV and that juniors/seniors were *often* more bothered than first-year and sophomore students. Even when controlling for sex or class year, those in Group 3 continued to report lower levels of bother when compared with Groups 1 and 0 in most instances.

The regression models in Table 7 test and provide support for Hypothesis 2 that those who personally defined scenarios involving IPV as problematic would more likely take responsibility for solving the problem even when a variety of control variables were included in the models. Here, across every IPV domain, expressing a greater degree of bother was positively associated with a greater willingness to intervene prosocially, and in all domains except sexual violence, this positive relationship was statistically significant. For sexual and physical violence, perceiving that others were more bothered by violence was also positively and significantly predictive of prosocial intervention. The results are fairly consistent in terms of bother predicting prosocial intervention across types of IPV, thereby providing partial support for Hypothesis 3.

The regression results also shed light on Hypothesis 4. Misperceived social norms, in either direction, *positively* predicted prosocial intervention in physical and sexual violence scenarios, thereby failing to provide support for Hypothesis 4. In these two domains of IPV, misperception appeared to spur, rather than impede, intervention. This may be because these two forms of violence are more visible and severe, supporting the idea that bystander intervention varies based on the degree to which a community is tuned into a particular form of violence.

Given that students indicated that they were most bothered by physical and sexual violence (93% and 91% of students were very or extremely bothered, respectively), respondents' misperceptions were more often in the direction of being more bothered than their peers. The gravity assigned to these domains by respondents could have led them to interpret the scenario as demanding a personal response because others might not act. Stated another way, there may be a conditional effect related to social norms. Individuals who feel more bothered than peers may experience audience inhibition but are less likely to be deterred from intervention by this feeling in IPV situations that are deemed *unambiguously problematic*.

**Table 6.** ANOVAs Across Domains of IPV—Stage I → Stage 2.

|         | Emotional abuse         |                      | Physical violence      |                      | Controlling behavior    |                      | Sexual violence |         | Stalking   |         |
|---------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------|------------|---------|
|         | M (n)                   | F ratio              | M (n)                  | F ratio              | M (n)                   | F ratio              | M (n)           | F ratio | M (n)      | F ratio |
| Group 0 | 4.11 (9)                | 10.65 <sup>***</sup> | 4.79 (42)              | 11.30 <sup>***</sup> | 4.67 (9)                | 11.65 <sup>***</sup> | 4.68 (22)       | 1.70    | 4.27 (15)  | 0.71    |
| Group 1 | 4.35 (238)              |                      | 4.76 (308)             |                      | 4.04 (249)              |                      | 4.64 (296)      |         | 4.17 (327) |         |
| Group 3 | 3.92 (143) <sup>a</sup> |                      | 4.17 (35) <sup>b</sup> |                      | 3.59 (129) <sup>b</sup> |                      | 4.42 (48)       |         | 4.00 (38)  |         |

Note. IPV = interpersonal violence.

<sup>a</sup>Different from Group 1,  $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup>Different from Groups 0 and 1,  $p < .05$ .

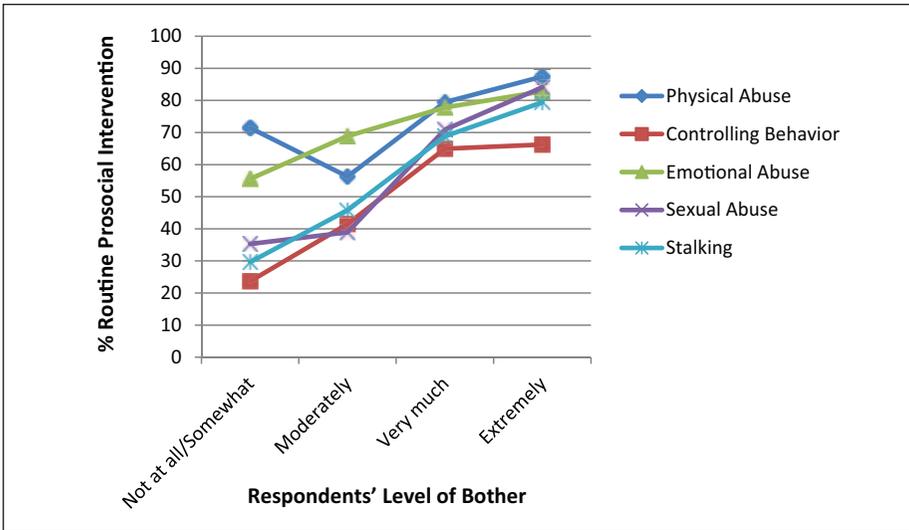
<sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ .

**Table 7.** OLS Regressions Predicting Prosocial Intervention.

|   | Interpret the event as a problem (degree of bother)? Intervene prosocially |             |                   |             |                      |             |          |             |                 |             |  |  |
|---|--|-------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------------|-------------|----------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|--|--|
|   | Emotional abuse  |             | Physical violence |             | Controlling behavior |             | Stalking |             | Sexual violence |             |  |  |
|   | t value  | Significant | t value           | Significant | t value              | Significant | t value  | Significant | t value         | Significant |  |  |
| Higher rating of personal bother                  | 1.74   | †           | 2.60              | **          | 5.65                 | ***         | 5.46     | ***         | 1.61            |             |  |  |
| Higher rating of peers' degree of bother          | 1.37   |             | 2.17              | *           | -0.14                |             | -0.30    |             | 1.93            | †           |  |  |
| Greater misperception of social norms (ab. value) | -0.78  |             | 3.14              | **          | -0.32                |             | -0.85    |             | 2.07            | *           |  |  |
| Female  | 0.07   |             | 2.90              | **          | 1.79                 | †           | 0.00     |             | 2.74            | **          |  |  |
| Higher year in school                             | -0.25  |             | -0.39             |             | -0.05                |             | -1.03    |             | 0.17            |             |  |  |
| n   |  | 394         |                   | 389         |                      | 387         |          | 377         |                 | 364         |  |  |

Note. OLS = ordinary least squares; ab. value = absolute value.

†p < .10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.



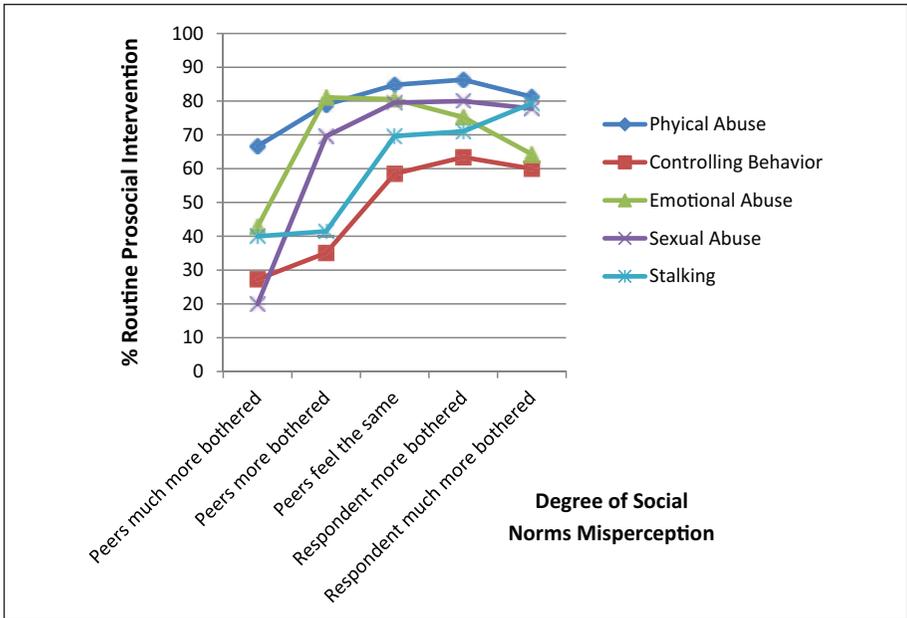
**Figure 1.** Respondents' level of bother and percentage of routine prosocial intervention across types of IPV.

Note. IPV = interpersonal violence.

For several of the types of IPV, being female was positively associated with higher rates of prosocial intervention (physical violence, controlling behavior, and sexual violence), but class year was unrelated across all types of violence. In addition to the regressions in Table 7, stepwise regressions that included predictors from Stages 1 and 2, and the demographic controls were run. The results largely confirm those from the ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions; level of bother positively and significantly predicts respondents' higher propensity to intervene prosocially. However, in stepwise regressions, emotional abuse is the domain in which greater bother is not significantly predictive of prosocial intervention (above it was sexual violence).

### *Thresholds of "Bother" and Social Norms Misperceptions*

Given the critical link between interpreting a potentially violent event as a problem (being "bothered") and intended prosocial intervention identified in the OLS and stepwise regressions, we decided to investigate *how bothered* an individual may need to be to regularly intervene. Is there a particular threshold of bother that will spur an individual to act on behalf of others? Figure 1 depicts the relationship between these two variables. There appeared to be a "jump" in intended intervention between respondents who were only moderately bothered and those who self-described as "very bothered." Very or extremely bothered individuals would routinely intend to intervene prosocially (measured as the percentage of respondents who scored a 5 or 6, the highest two scores, on the prosocial intervention measure). The direction of these results



**Figure 2.** Respondents' degree of social norms misperception and percentage of routine prosocial intervention across types of IPV.  
Note. IPV = interpersonal violence.

provides support for Hypothesis 2, and their consistency provides some support for Hypothesis 3.

Similarly, we were interested in whether a threshold exists for the degree of social norms misperceptions. In Hypothesis 4, we stated that misperceived social norms in either direction should lead to decreased willingness to take responsibility for finding a solution. However, the OLS regressions above revealed that this was not the case in this sample. Therefore, we revisited social norms, but this time coded the independent variable such that misperceptions could be in either direction (the variable is coded such that individuals who perceive that they are more bothered than peers are assigned higher values). The relationship between degree of misperception of others' bother and intended prosocial intervention is depicted in Figure 2. Interestingly, the relationship was somewhat curvilinear. Those who perceive that others were more bothered were much less likely to report an intention to intervene prosocially on a routine basis, which could be evidence of diffusion of responsibility. Among those whose social norms were *accurate* and those who were only somewhat more bothered than peers, rates of intended prosocial intervention across domains peaked. We observed a decrease in rates of intended intervention when individuals misperceived that they were *much more* bothered than peers. The decrease was very slight but could indicate limited evidence for audience inhibition.

## Discussion

This research sought to test the impact of perceived social norms on advancement through Latané and Darley's (1970) bystander stages in situations where a peer is experiencing IPV. IPV was separated into five separate domains to examine whether bystander behavior was consistent across all types. We also attempted to identify motivating factors for prosocial bystander intervention, with an eye toward developing recommendations for prevention initiatives that target bystanders, particularly through the correction of misperceived social norms. To this end, we derived four hypotheses from the bystander and social norms theoretical perspectives.

Our first hypothesis predicted that those more apt to "notice" various forms of IPV (Stage 1) would be more likely to move to Stage 2 and interpret IPV as problematic. Based on interpretation of the results derived from ANOVAs, we did not find support for the hypothesized connection. Those who had noticed violence most often, as defined by having personally experienced IPV and knowing peers who had as well, were actually *less inclined* on average to define IPV as problematic (or bothersome). As noted above, it is possible that for those who have numerous exposures to IPV, such incidents have simply become "normal," thereby reducing the likelihood of perceiving it as extremely bothersome.

One of the limitations of this study is the selection of the proxy measure for noticing an event (Stage 1). Although measuring "noticing an event" by asking students whether they themselves had experienced IPV and/or whether they perceived their college peers had experienced violence likely prevents respondents from claiming to have noticed IPV scenarios when they might not have, this decision may have too narrowly defined "notice." This operationalization may have also strayed from the theoretical intent to determine whether someone notices an event as it unfolds in real life. However, one of the challenges to bystander research is how best to measure "notice" via survey instrument (arguably the easiest and most cost-effective way to obtain student responses). In the context of a questionnaire, a measure of actual noticed IPV events would entail recollection of past instances and therefore may be subject to a substantial amount of measurement error. The reduction of this error in our research may have come at the cost of a less than ideal proxy measure.

It is also possible that the challenges faced in operationalizing Stage 1 are associated with the application of bystander theory to instances of IPV. It is conceivable that the stages of bystander behavior may not be as distinct or linear as described by Darley and Latané. Rather, it may not be that IPV is "noticed" *first*, and individuals view the situation as problematic (are bothered by it) *second*. It could be that individuals notice IPV because it is inherently bothersome, suggesting that the first two stages are not entirely distinct from each other. If this is the case, then we may need to reconceptualize how social norms potentially operate in the initial bystander stages or if they play a role at all.

The regression analyses describing the link between bystander Stages 2 and 3 may represent a truer test of Darley and Latané's theory. Here, interpreting the event as a problem (being bothered by IPV) predicts prosocial intervention (intent to respond to

a violent scenario in an active way, not conditional on the responses of others). In all domains, other than sexual violence, interpretation of IPV as problematic *does* appear to lead individuals to take responsibility for finding a solution, thereby providing support for Hypothesis 2. In the domains of physical and sexual violence, perceptions of others' bother alone are also positively predictive of a prosocial response. However, contrary to Hypothesis 4, *misperceived social norms* (the absolute value of the difference between one's degree of bother and one's perception of others' bother) positively, rather than negatively, predicts intervention. Given recent evidence that in situations that are perceived to be unambiguous emergencies social norms may not deter individuals to the same degree that they would in less clear cases (Fischer et al., 2006), this result makes some sense as physical and sexual violence may be interpreted as more emergent than some of the other forms of IPV included here.

This suggests that the relationship between the degree of social norms misperceptions and intended bystander intervention is *conditional* on how serious the type of IPV is considered to be within a given community. Therefore, in terms of formulating best practices for the creation of social norms campaigns, practitioners may want to identify and utilize resources to raise the profile of types of IPV that are not deemed as bothersome by community members (e.g., students on a particular campus). Furthermore, these analyses support the utilization of a social norms approach in prevention efforts around IPV overall.

Finally, the stepwise regressions (not displayed) included all possible predictors of whether someone will prosocially intervene. We found that, across domains, the most dominant pattern is that individuals who are most bothered by violence report the greatest willingness to intervene prosocially (the exception being emotional abuse). However, other predictors (such as social norms misperceptions, and personal/peer experiences of IPV) are otherwise highly variable across the different domains. So, Hypothesis 3 is not supported, but we gain valuable insight with respect to the fact that all types of IPV are not necessarily equal and that strategies may need to differ depending on the type of IPV one is trying to prevent.

Additional analyses of the relationship between bother and intended intervention (displayed in Figure 1) reveal that, regardless of domain, if a practitioner can increase a person's level of bother past a "moderate" level, that individual will be much more likely to routinely intervene. Although social norms misperceptions were not always significant in the stepwise regressions, it is worth noting that different types of misperceptions predict different behaviors. Those with *accurate* perceptions of peers' level of bother around IPV and those who misperceive that they are *more bothered* by violence than their peers were actually much more likely to regularly intervene in a prosocial way. However, the opposite is true for those who are less bothered relative to peers, again providing important support for primary prevention efforts that combine the promotion of active bystanders with social norms messaging.

This project was successful in generating core concepts for campaign messages and provides an approach to enhance bystander intervention program effectiveness. First, the social norms marketing campaign can incorporate data collected about pertinent IPV domains for a specified community (college campus), tailor messaging to affect the

degree of bother of the target audience, and clarify the social norms misperceptions to promote more prosocial interventions. By designing the survey instrument to identify critical social norms, the data may be used to construct materials, such as posters, that may correct students' misperceptions of social norms regarding IPV. Our analyses suggest that the correction of social norms misperceptions spurs prosocial intervention.

In addition, a social norms marketing campaign provides opportunities for limitless amounts of exposure to, or "doses" of, the prosocial bystander message. To bring about a change in an individual's behavior, specifically shifting from onlooker to prosocial (active) bystander, individuals need to be exposed to a relevant message between 7-9 times (Nation et al., 2003). As capacity may be limited by time and staffing constraints, the development and implementation of a social norms campaign based on the results of this survey may provide a unique opportunity to increase exposure to the desired message in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

For the purposes of designing a bystander intervention program, it may be helpful to know that there may be little distinction between noticing IPV (Stage 1) and viewing it as problematic (Stage 2). Based on our results, we assert that the audience will be intrinsically bothered by what they learn about IPV. Some members of the audience will need to become better acquainted with IPV so that they are sufficiently bothered or are able to recognize the degree to which their peers are more bothered than they are. This should prompt movement to Stage 3.

Practitioners considering the development of a social norms campaign may be motivated by campus trends or recent highly publicized events that have raised the visibility of one or more forms of IPV requiring attention. By breaking down IPV into specific domains (e.g., intimate partner violence was separated into physical violence, emotional abuse, and controlling behavior), as well as operationalizing all five IPV domains using one or more statements, practitioners have the opportunity to focus the social norms campaign message to achieve intended goals. Providing such a focus is not only efficacious but also a practical approach when faced with limited resources.

To give an example, emotional abuse was likely to be viewed as problematic by students in this sample but actually featured the highest rate misperception in terms of willingness to intervene. Eighty-four percent of students were willing to intervene prosocially but perceived that only 37% of their peers were similarly inclined (a 47% rate of misperception). To provide support for students who are willing to intervene in situations where emotional abuse may be occurring, social norms around this type of violence could be featured in a campaign.

As a second step, subsequent to the selection of a particular domain, a campaign might be informed by unique predictors of willingness to intervene. In this sample, being very or extremely bothered by violence was the most consistent predictor of intended prosocial intervention. Self-perception of a greater degree of bother than one's peers was also identified as an important factor. Therefore, campaign materials should attempt to *increase bother* around specific types of IPV. For example, in the data presented here, students are less bothered when they notice controlling behavior or stalking. Having already identified bother as a predictive factor, images can be designed and message content written to increase bother in the target audience past

what might be self-described as a “moderate” level. When selecting images for the campaign, practitioners should consider suggestions from recent research that “social self-identification,” or the use of images and scenarios with which college students can identify, is an effective tool in campaign design (Potter, Moynihan, & Stapleton, 2011). With this in mind, social norms campaign materials could depict college students in realistic situations featuring prosocial responses to stalking or controlling behavior. By utilizing descriptive text for the IPV domain, selecting relevant imagery and content designed to increase bother, a social norms campaign may more effectively increase rates of intended prosocial bystander intervention.

Targeting messages to particular groups on campus may also be helpful. Although class year was not a significant predictor of prosocial intervention in the ANOVAs or regression models, a campaign that highlights the high rates of bother among junior and senior students may demonstrate to incoming students that violence is unacceptable. Similarly, males in this sample were less likely to be bothered and less likely to be willing to intervene than were females. However, it has been shown that males are more likely to influence other males’ attitudes around violence than are females (Fabiano et al., 2003). Our data showed that a clear majority of males were prosocial in their responses, and publicizing these numbers could prompt other males to modify their intervention behavior.

In summary, this research offers a number of important findings that are relevant to the intersection of norms misperceptions and willingness to intervene in a prosocial manner. First, it supports previous research that underestimating others’ concern serves to inhibit bystander intervention. Second, there were some unique exceptions to the general findings, which suggest that there is a differential impact of misperceptions dependent on the type of violence, its visibility, and the extent to which it is taken seriously. For example, underestimating others’ concerns may actually serve as a spur to intervention when a person is already very concerned. Third, the relationship of both misperceptions and bystander behavior is specific to the type of violence. This must be taken into consideration in the development of bystander and/or social norms campaigns.

Although this research sheds important light on the connection between social norms and bystander intervention, and adds to our knowledge regarding intervention across various types of IPV, it is important to note some limitations. As stated above, the measurement of noticing an event (having experienced violence or perceiving violence occurs in peers’ relationships) may not be wholly adequate for testing the theory of bystander stages. In future studies, it may be advisable to ask students to estimate the frequency with which they have observed IPV situations that they interpret as problematic. Our decision to utilize the absolute value to represent social norms misperceptions may also be viewed as a measurement limitation. Second, the somewhat low response rate to the survey may mean that the sample utilized here is not perfectly representative of the population from which it was drawn although it is a reasonably good match to the institutional profile. Third, it is possible that those who felt strongly about issues related to violence were more likely to fully complete the survey (including the demographic questions), thereby biasing estimates of the prevalence of bother and intervention intentions upward, as only those with demographic information were utilized here.

Finally, additional research is needed in several areas. Because our study only assesses the first three bystander stages, the impact of social norms on students advancing through Stage 4 (having skills to intervene) and Stage 5 (actual intervention) still needs to be investigated. Our results suggest that the role of social norms in the bystander process is complex and varies across stages, not always in the hypothesized direction. Movement from Stage 4 to 5 may not be predicted by the accuracy or inaccuracy of perceived social norms. At this time, it remains unclear whether willingness to intervene (Stage 3) translates readily into actual intervention (Stage 5), so it is possible that the identification of predictive factors may be equally complicated for the latter stages, comparable to what we observed in the progression from Stages 1 through 3. Evaluation research around social norms campaigns that are paired with bystander intervention strategies, such as we propose above, is needed to determine whether such efforts effectively increase rates of intervention within a given community. We also recognize that programs need to consider that additional resources will likely be needed to launch a social norms campaign relative to a social marketing campaign, resources that are often in short supply. However, where feasible, evidence supports the use of social norms campaigns to bring about desired behavioral change (Berkowitz, 2010). In conclusion, we assert that data-driven social norms projects represent effective tools for practitioners attempting to pair social norms theory with programming to promote prosocial bystanders across various forms of IPV.

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### Note

1. Fabiano et al. (2003) utilize the term “sexual abuse” to label this concept.

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