

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Bystander Intervention of Workplace Racial Discrimination

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Bystander Intervention of Workplace Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination, or “unfair, differential treatment on the basis of race” (Ong et al, 2009) is pervasive in American workplaces; in 2019 alone, nearly 24,000 race related discrimination charges were filed with the EEOC (EEOC, 2020). Racial discrimination has been shown to have a myriad of negative consequences for racial minorities, including lower performance ratings, difficulty accessing management roles, and lower acceptance as leaders (see Avery et al, 2018 for a review). One potential lever for addressing racial discrimination in organizations is bystander intervention. While scholars have shown that members of stigmatized groups may incur penalties for engaging in behaviors that might reduce discrimination by confronting perpetrators of racial discrimination (Hekman et al, 2017), there is emerging evidence that bystanders who confront racial discrimination can shift the beliefs of discrimination perpetrators (Czopp, Monteith, and Mark, 2006).

We argue that both situational and individual characteristics combined to influence bystander intervention during racial discrimination events in the workplace. On the situational level, we draw on classic bystander theory (Latane & Darley, 1968) and the Confronting Prejudice Responses model (Ashburn-Nardo et al, 2008) to argue that the overtness of racial discrimination will influence a bystander’s perception of racial discrimination, and thus the likelihood that they will intervene. At the individual level, we draw on the attribution to discrimination literature (see Major, et al, 2002 for review) to argue that a bystander’s racial background will also influence an individual’s likelihood of acting on perceived racial discrimination, and thus intervening during a racial discrimination event at work.

To test our research questions, we conduct two studies. In study 1, we ask participants about their experiences with workplace racial discrimination (N=159). For participants that have experienced workplace racial discrimination (N=115) or have observed workplace racial discrimination (N=14), we ask further questions about the discrimination event, actions taken, and participant in the event. We found bystander intervention to racial discrimination was more likely in situations that had blatant racial discrimination (32%) rather than subtle racial discrimination (15%), $X^2(1, N = 129) = 4.85, p = .028$. We are currently coding these responses to better understand what individual and situational factors lead to bystander intervention and what methods and strategies bystanders use to intervene.

Study 2 employs a two (race: Black vs White) by three (racial discrimination: blatant discrimination vs subtle discrimination vs control) between subjects design. Participants (N=363) are randomly assigned to a discrimination condition and are asked to evaluate a workplace racial discrimination event adapted from a #BlackInTheIvory tweet (Holguin, 2020). Across each condition, the participant imagines they are a bystander observing a coworker speaking to a Black potential colleague. The coworker tells the potential colleague to either “stop talking so Black”, “speak normally”, or “speak louder” in the blatant, subtle, and control conditions, respectively. After reading the scenario, each participant indicates the perceived racial discrimination of faced by the potential colleague and their likeliness to intervene, along with demographic and individual trait variables. In the study, we find members of both races were more likely to perceived discrimination and intervene in both the blatant ($M=5.99, SD=1.66$) $t(241) = 14.279, p < .001$ and subtle conditions ($M=5.12, SD=1.87$), $t(237) = 11.569, p < .001$ than the control condition ($M=3.41, SD=1.95$). We also find no racial difference in perceived discrimination across any of the conditions, but that Black participants ($M=5.50, SD=1.62$) are significantly more likely to intervene than White participants ($M=4.73, SD=2.03$), $t(118) = 2.284, p = .024$ in the subtle discrimination condition.

Overall, in this paper we hope to extend the allyship literature by exploring factors (race and discrimination blatantness) that influence a specific type of allyship behavior, bystander intervention, as well as examining how bystander intervention is expressed by individuals who engage in it.

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