Effects of Group Status and Implicit Theories of Personality on Bystander Responses to Antigay Bullying

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ABSTRACT. Students perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or otherwise nonconforming (LGBTQ+) are at risk for bullying and other forms of victimization. Bystanders who witness bullying may respond as prosocial advocates, such as by confronting the perpetrator, which may promote both individual safety and a more inclusive campus climate. The present study assessed the effects of group status and bystander’s beliefs about the human capacity for change on college students' responses to antigay bullying. Participants (N = 199) at a small Northeastern college in the United States were randomly assigned to react to an antigay bullying scenario in which they were either alone or with 3 friends after they were surveyed on their beliefs about human malleability. Results showed a significant Group Status x Beliefs interaction (p = .004, Cohen’s d = 0.48). In the lone bystander condition, compared to those who reported the belief that humans are essentially unchangeable, those who reported greater belief in the human capacity for change reported significantly greater intent to confront (p = .004, Cohen’s d = 0.61) and less intent to withdraw from the perpetrator (p = .04, Cohen’s d = 0.33). In contrast, bystanders in groups reported similarly low intent to confront regardless of their reported beliefs about the human capacity for change. Bystander educational programs may explicitly address beliefs about human malleability as well as the classic bystander effect to promote more frequent intervention.

Keywords: bystander, bullying, gay, confrontation, entity beliefs, incremental beliefs

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or otherwise nonconforming (LGBTQ+) commonly experience mistreatment. Bullying and harassment against gender and sexual minorities has been identified as a serious problem in high schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Poteat & Vecho, 2016) and on college campuses (Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). Bullying is often verbal with 71% of high school students reporting being verbally harassed due to their sexual orientation in the past year (Kosciw et al., 2016). Such experiences can lead to significant negative consequences. Many students who are bullied because of their gender identity or sexual orientation report feelings of depression, lowered self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2016), and poorer academic and social engagement (Kulick, Wernick, Woodford, & Renn, 2017; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). Bullied students feel less safe and less accepted at school. In fact, being bullied because of one’s sexual orientation is linked to less positive perceptions of the campus climate (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Tetreault et al., 2013). The prevalence and harmful effects of anti LGBTQ+ bullying suggests the need for research on effective
prevention efforts.

Some campus-based prevention efforts may involve bystanders, or witnesses to situations involving actual or potential harm to others. In response to witnessing anti-LGBTQ+ bullying or harassment, bystanders who prosocially intervene to interrupt the situation may promote safety in the immediate environment and may promote more egalitarian norms generally. That is, prosocial bystander intervention in response to antigay bullying and harassment represents advocacy by signaling to everyone present that intolerance and mistreatment are unacceptable and will not be tolerated. In their classic work on understanding prosocial bystander behavior, Latané and Darley (1970) described bystander intervention in terms of a five-step decision making model that requires that a responsive bystander: (a) notice the event; (b) interpret the event as an emergency that requires assistance; (c) accept responsibility for intervening; (d) know how to intervene or provide help; and (e) implement intervention decisions.

More recent research focused on bystander responses to bullying and harassment confirmed that these steps are related to the decision to behaviorally intervene in a prosocial way (Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014).

Confrontation is one specific type of intervention that can address anti-LGBTQ+ bullying. Verbal confrontation involves interrupting the situation by talking to the perpetrator and expressing disagreement with how others are being treated. For example, Martinez, Hebl, Smith, and Sabat (2017, p. 2) defined confrontation as “verbally expressing one’s dissatisfaction with a perpetrator’s negative behaviors, attitudes, or assumptions.” Bystander confrontation redirects the attention of the perpetrator, which benefits the target of bullying. Confrontation may also benefit bystanders. Compared to those who respond passively, bystanders who confront expressions of anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice tend to feel more powerful and satisfied with their behavior, which gives them further cause to confront in the future (Dickter, 2012; Tetreault et al., 2013). Confrontation can also help educate others about acceptable versus unacceptable forms of public behavior. Direct confrontation of expressions of prejudice, including sexism (Mallett & Wagner, 2011), racism (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006), and heterosexism (Evans & Broido, 2002; Hyers, 2010), may reduce repeated expressions of prejudice, thereby contributing to a more inclusive environment for diverse students.

Despite the benefits of confrontation, not all those who witness problematic behaviors confront others or get involved as advocates. In their classic monograph on bystander behavior, Latané and Darley (1970) argued that situational effects on bystander behavior overpower individual differences in bystander attitudes. One specific situational factor that may affect bystander confrontation is the bystander effect, or the inhibiting effects of the presence of others on intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970). Bystanders who witness bullying while with others might be less likely to confront a perpetrator than those who witness bullying while alone. The bystander effect has been found to be so powerful that even merely thinking of being with others decreases the likelihood of prosocial action (Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, & Darley, 2002). Furthermore, the bystander effect has been observed in research on how college students respond to witnessing different types of problem situations. For example, compared to those who are alone, college students who are in a group show greater reluctance to intervene in response to witnessing a theft (Howard & Crano, 1974) or a potential sexual assault (Katz, 2015). Given the prevalence of antigay bullying on college campuses, research is needed to examine whether and under what conditions the bystander effect inhibits advocacy for students who are bullied because they are perceived to be gay. To add to the literature on the bystander effect and college students’ prosocial bystander behavior, we specifically investigated the effect of group status on intent to confront bullying in which a male peer taunts another male peer and expresses an antigay slur.

Beyond the bystander effect, bystanders also may show individual differences in interpreting bullying that affect the likelihood of confronting those who mistreat others (e.g., Oh & Hazler, 2009; Poteat & Vecho, 2016). Research by Carol Dweck and colleagues (e.g., Dweck, 2008) has suggested that each individual has a mindset or personal theory about the human condition and the human capacity for change. Implicit theories of personality reflect beliefs about people as malleable and capable of growth (i.e., incremental beliefs) versus fixed and unchangeable (i.e., entity beliefs; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). That is, people who believe that personal characteristics and behaviors may change over time are considered to be incremental theorists, whereas people who believe that personal characteristics and behaviors remain constant are considered to be entity theorists. The type of
implicit theory individuals hold affects responses to peer conflict (e.g., Chen, DeWall, Poon, & Chen, 2012; Yeager et al., 2014), with greater constructive responding among those with more incremental (as compared to more entity) theories of personality.

Multiple studies have supported the prediction that bystanders who believe that humans have the capacity to change (i.e., incremental theorists) are more likely to confront others than bystanders who believe that humans are less capable of meaningful change (i.e., entity theorists). For example, Kammrath and Dweck (2006, Study 1) found that, after a romantic relationship transgression, college students with a more incremental view of relationships were more likely to verbally confront their romantic partner than were college students with a more entity view. Similarly, in a study of racial/ethnic minority group members’ responses to expressions of racial prejudice, although all individuals rated the statement as highly offensive, Rattan and Dweck (2010) found that individuals with incremental views of personality were more likely to confront the prejudicial speaker than those with entity views. Other research has suggested that, compared to entity theorists, incremental theorists exert more effort in empathizing with a racial out-group member’s personal story (Schumann, Zaki, & Dweck, 2014, Study 5) and exhibit a greater attempt to learn from and take the perspective of a racial out-group member (Neel & Shapiro, 2012). These findings suggest that incremental theorists are more likely than entity theorists to enact prosocial behaviors while managing conflict and during intergroup interactions. To date, however, no studies have examined implicit theories of personality as related to bystander responses to witnessing antigay bullying.

Based on the available literature, compared to those with more entity views of personality, bystanders with more incremental views may be expected to show more prosocial bystander responses. Because incremental beliefs reflect optimism about the human capacity for growth, this prediction also matches with past research showing that dispositional optimism was associated with greater confrontation of anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice (Weber & Dickter, 2015). Importantly, however, it is possible that incremental beliefs are associated with less prosocial bystander responses specifically in the case of antigay bullying. In past research, people who perceived that sexual orientation is changeable also tended to show greater prejudice and blame towards those who are LGBTQ+ (Hoyt, Morgenroth, & Burnette, 2018). Because incremental theorists may believe that sexual orientation can be changed, incremental theorists may also be more blaming than entity theorists towards a target of antigay bullying, and thus less willing to advocate for the targeted individual. For this reason, research is needed to investigate the role of implicit theories of personality specifically as it affects bystander responses to antigay bullying.

Beyond confrontation, another potential outcome of holding a more incremental view of personality is a sustained openness to interacting with others with different points of view. Incremental theorists may believe that future interactions represent opportunities for change and growth in each person. In contrast, entity theorists may perceive future interactions as aversive and unlikely to lead to change or growth. This reasoning is supported by past research in which White individuals who were taught that prejudice is malleable were less anxious and friendlier during interactions with a Black person than White individuals who held more fixed/entity beliefs about prejudice (Carr, Dweck, & Pauker, 2012, Study 5). Similarly, in studying college students’ responses to expressions of prejudice, Rattan and Dweck (2010) found that women and racial/ethnic minorities with greater incremental views of personality also showed greater willingness to engage in future interactions with a prejudicial speaker. The current study sought to extend this past research by investigating implicit theories of personality as related to bystanders’ openness to future interactions with a peer who enacts antigay bullying.

Hypotheses
The current study examined the effects of group status and implicit theories of personality on bystander responses to antigay bullying. Based on the classic bystander effect (Latané & Darley, 1970), compared to lone bystanders, bystanders with friends were expected to report less intent to confront the perpetrator (Hypothesis 1). Extending past research on targets’ responses to a racially prejudicial speaker (Rattan & Dweck, 2010), in response to antigay bullying, bystanders with more incremental beliefs reflecting the human capacity for change were expected to show greater intent to confront the perpetrator (Hypothesis 2a) and less intent to avoid potential future interactions with the perpetrator (Hypothesis 2b). Finally, potential interactive effects of group status and implicit
theories of personality were explored. More specifically, participants’ implicit theories were expected to affect responses to antigay bullying more strongly in some types of situations than others. For lone bystanders, intent to confront was expected to be higher among more incremental theorists than more entity theorists (Hypothesis 3a). However, for bystanders in groups, responses to antigay bullying were not expected to vary based on implicit theories of personality because the bystander effect (Garcia et al., 2002) generally inhibits prosocial responding (Hypothesis 3b).

**Method**

**Participants**

Data were collected from 199 (74.9% female) undergraduates at a small public college in the Northeastern United States. The average age was 18.96 years old (SD = 1.09, 17 to 23). All class years were represented, including first year students (48.7%), sophomores (31.2%), juniors (16.1%), and seniors (4%). Participants self-identified as White (78.9%), Asian (10.1%), Hispanic (7%), Black (2%), Native American (0.5%), or other (1.5%). With regard to sexual orientation, participants self-identified as heterosexual (86.9%), bisexual (7.5%), gay or lesbian (2%), queer (1%), or other (2.5%).

**Manipulation**

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two scenarios that varied only in terms of whether the participant was alone or in a group with three same-gender friends. Scenarios were developed in collaboration with LGBTQ+ students on campus about their experiences to ensure the situations were realistic. Portions of the scenario included only in the group condition are underlined. The nonunderlined text was presented in the alone condition.

It is a typical weeknight in your residence hall. You’re walking back to your room with three friends of the same gender after getting dinner (and indigestion) from the dining hall. When you go in your building, you hear loud voices coming from a nearby lounge. The door is open. You walk past the door to get to your room. As you and your friends go by, you see two guys in the lounge. You’ve never seen either of these two guys before. One is wearing a blue baseball hat and moving toward the other guy, who is wearing a gray T-shirt. The guy with the hat says, “I saw you looking at me like that, Sam.” Sam takes a step back and says in a low voice, “C’mon, Bill, relax. You know—” but he’s cut off as Bill says, “I knew it. I knew you were a fag.” Sam’s face reddens. He puts his hands up in what looks like surrender, but Bill keeps on taunting him. You look around. There’s still nobody in sight besides you and your friends. Sam notices you, and the two of you make eye contact.

**Design**

This was a 2 (group status; alone or group) x 2 (implicit theories of personality; incremental or entity) between-subjects design. Group status was manipulated whereas implicit theories were not. Intent to confront and withdrawal from future interactions with the perpetrator were the dependent variables.

**Measures**

Implicit theories about human nature as either open to change (incremental theorists) or unchanging (entity theorists) were assessed with a 3-item measure from Chiu, Hong, and Dweck (1997): “The kind of person someone is is something basic about them and it can’t be changed very much”; “People can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can’t really be changed”; “Everyone is a certain kind of person, and there is not much that they can do to really change that.” Participants rated each item on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = very strongly agree, 6 = very strongly disagree). Responses were averaged so that higher scores reflected greater endorsement of an incremental theory. The overall sample average suggested that, on average, participants did not have extreme views about the degree to which people can grow and change (M = 3.37, SD = 1.26, range 1 to 6). In the present sample, the estimate of internal consistency was good (Cronbach’s α = .87). Following past research (e.g., Rattan & Dweck, 2010) those who scored above the midpoint of the scale were classified as incremental theorists and those who scored below the midpoint were classified as entity theorists.

Intent to confront antigay bullying was measured with two items adapted from past research on bystander behavior responses to interpersonal violence (Katz & Nguyen, 2016). Prior to items
being presented, the following statement was made: “In the situation, Bill is the “angry guy” accusing Sam; Sam is the “target” of these accusations.” Items used to assess direct but nonhostile verbal responses to interrupt the situation were “Try to talk to the angry guy (Bill),” and “Confront the angry guy (Bill) politely.” Responses to each item were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) and averaged so that higher scores indicated greater intent to confront. In the current sample, the estimate of internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s α = .78).

Withdrawal from the perpetrator in future possible interactions was measured with three items from Rattan and Dweck (2010): “How likely are you to avoid socializing with Bill?”, “How likely are you to develop a relationship with Bill?” (reverse-scored), and “How likely are you to collaborate with Bill on a project if you had the chance?” (reverse-scored). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). Scores were averaged so that higher scores reflected less willingness to interact with the perpetrator in the future. In the current sample, the estimate of internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach’s α = .76).

**Procedure**

Undergraduate students were recruited through a voluntary human participants pool for an anonymous study titled “An Anonymous Study of Responses to and Perceptions of Peer Conflict.” We did not determine the sample size in advance. Rather, data collection ceased at the end of an academic year. Data collection sessions were held on campus in classrooms where participants were seated in alternating rows to ensure privacy. After providing informed consent, participants completed a measure of implicit theories of personality and then read about a verbal bullying situation in which one man accuses another man of being a “fag.” About half of the participants were randomly assigned to a situation in which they read about being alone as a witness to this incident, and the other half were randomly assigned to a situation in which they read about witnessing this incident with three friends. Participants were asked to respond to measures of willingness to confront the perpetrator and willingness to interact with the perpetrator. Participants were also asked to respond to measures of aggressive responding and other nonconstructive behaviors, but these responses were not analyzed in the absence of a priori hypotheses. After completing these measures, participants submitted study materials face down into a slotted box for privacy and were fully debriefed. Participants earned course credit for their time; no session lasted longer than one hour. All study procedures were approved by the campus institutional review board.

**Results**

In the current study, 103 participants were assigned to the group bystander condition, whereas 96 were assigned to the lone bystander condition. One participant in the lone bystander condition did not complete the measure of intent to withdraw and thus was not included in the study analyses. There were no other missing data and no other data exclusions. Across conditions, the average level of intent to confront was moderately low (M = 3.81, SD = 1.82, 1 to 7), whereas the average level of withdrawal from interaction with the perpetrator was high (M = 5.96, SD = 1.04, 2.67 to 7). Intent to confront was negatively correlated with withdrawal from future interaction, r(196) = -.22, p = .002.

To test the study hypotheses, a 2 (group status; alone or group) x 2 (implicit theories; incremental or entity) Multivariate Analysis of Variance was conducted with intent to confront and withdraw as the dependent variables. Unexpectedly, there was no overall main effect of either group status, F(2, 193) = 0.19, p = .82, Pillai’s Trace = .002, Cohen’s d = 0.08, observed power = .08, or of implicit theories, F(2, 193) = 0.82, p = .44, Pillai’s Trace = .19, Cohen’s d = 0.18, observed power = .16. There was, however, a significant Group Status x Implicit

| TABLE 1  |
| --- |
| Effects of Group Status and Implicit Theories of Personality on Bystander Responses to Antigay Bullying |
| | Group Status | Implicit Theory | Group x Theory |
| | F(1, 194) | F(1, 194) | F(1, 194) |
| **Intent to Confront** | 0.22 | 1.24 | 8.50** |
| Entity theorist | 3.38 (1.57) | 4.01 (2.01) |  |
| Incremental theorist | 4.42 (1.67) | 3.55 (1.87) |  |
| **Intent to Withdraw** | 0.24 | 0.71 | 4.74* |
| Entity theorist | 6.14 (0.92) | 5.89 (1.07) |  |
| Incremental theorist | 5.69 (1.15) | 6.09 (0.98) |  |

Note: Means (and standard deviations) are reported. Cell sizes are as follows: lone bystander/entity theorist (n = 47), lone bystander/incremental theorist (n = 46), group bystander/entity theorist (n = 43), group bystander/incremental theorists (n = 40). **p < .05, *p < .01.
Theories interaction effect, $F(2, 193) = 5.58, p = .004$, Pillai’s Trace = .06, Cohen’s $d = 0.48$, observed power = .85.

Univariate follow up analyses are reported in Table 1. Compared to lone bystanders, bystanders in groups were expected to report less intent to confront (Hypothesis 1). Unexpectedly, because there was no overall difference in intent to confront as a function of group status, Hypothesis 1 was not supported (Cohen’s $d = 0.06$). We had also hypothesized that, in response to antigay bullying, those who held a more incremental view of human nature would be more likely to confront the perpetrator (Hypothesis 2a) and less likely to withdraw from future interactions with the perpetrator (Hypothesis 2b) than those who held a more entity view. Neither of these hypotheses were supported; there were no main effects of implicit theories on either intent to confront (Cohen’s $d = 0.16$) or intent to withdraw (Cohen’s $d = 0.13$). Instead, results showed a significant Group Status x Implicit Theory interaction for both intent to confront (Cohen’s $d = 0.42$) and intent to withdraw (Cohen’s $d = 0.31$), indicating that the effect of each of the independent variables depended on the other.

To explicate the significant Group Status x Implicit Theory interaction effect for intent to confront, independent-samples $t$ tests were conducted. These tests examined whether there were differences in intent to confront among lone bystanders versus among bystanders in groups. Among those assigned to the lone bystander condition, participants who held a more incremental view of human nature showed significantly greater intent to confront than participants who held a more entity view of human nature, $t(94) = 2.95, p = .004, d = 0.61$. This finding supported Hypothesis 3a. In contrast, among those assigned to the group bystander condition, intent to confront did not differ between participants with more incremental versus more entity views of human nature, $t(101) = -1.20, p = .24, d = 0.23$. This finding supported Hypothesis 3b. Given that intent to confront ranged from 1 to 7, with 4 as a neutral response, as shown in Table 1, the only participants who tended to report that they were more likely than not to confront antigay bullying were incremental theorists in the lone bystander group.

Although not predicted on an a priori basis, the Analysis of Variance results also revealed a significant Group Status x Implicit Theory interaction for withdrawal from the perpetrator. As such, additional independent-samples $t$ tests were conducted to compare the mean withdrawal scores of incremental versus entity theorists among lone bystanders and among bystanders in groups. Among those assigned to the lone bystander condition, participants who held a more incremental view of human nature showed significantly less withdrawal from the perpetrator as compared to participants who held a more entity view, $t(93) = -2.09, p = .04, d = 0.33$. In contrast, among those assigned to the group bystander condition, there was no difference in withdrawal between those with more incremental versus more entity views, $t(101) = 0.96, p = .34, d = 0.06$. Although most participants reported high levels of withdrawal from future interactions with the perpetrator, incremental theorists in the lone bystander group reported the least withdrawal (i.e., the most openness to future interactions).

**Discussion**

The present study investigated bystander responses to antigay bullying as a function of the bystander effect as well as bystanders’ implicit theories about the human capacity for change. Results showed that both the type of situation (i.e., being alone) and bystander’s beliefs about human nature (i.e., people can change) jointly affected prosocial responding. More specifically, individual differences in beliefs about human nature affected the likelihood of prosocial responding, but only among lone bystanders. Among those in the lone bystander condition, bystanders with more incremental views of human nature reported significantly more intent to confront and less intent to withdraw compared to bystanders who endorsed more entity views.

These results extend past research on the bystander effect with college students (Howard & Crano, 1974; Katz, 2015) by demonstrating the role of individual differences in responses by lone bystanders. In the current study, not all lone bystanders reported that they were likely to confront a perpetrator of antigay bullying. Rather, lone bystanders who held the belief that people are capable of growth and change reported greater intent to confront than those who believe people are essentially fixed/set in their ways.

These significant effects of implicit theories of personality on lone bystander behavior are similar to those reported by Rattan and Dweck (2010). The authors found that when a peer expressed racially prejudicial comments to a student member of a racial/ethnic minority group, minority students with higher incremental beliefs were more likely to confront the prejudicial peer than minority...
students with higher entity beliefs (Study 1). The current findings directly extend this work by showing the effects of implicit theories about human nature on promoting confrontation and decreasing withdrawal across different perspectives (bystander vs. target) and different types of prejudice (antigay vs. racist). The current findings also extend past research more generally on the ways in which incremental views about human nature promote constructive responses to interpersonal conflict with a romantic partner (Kamrath & Dweck, 2006) and constructive behaviors during intergroup exchanges (Carr et al., 2012; Neel & Shapiro, 2012; Schumann et al., 2014). Lone bystanders with incremental beliefs showed the most prosocial responses to antigay bullying. This is an important finding given that the perception that sexual orientation is changeable—a belief that incremental theorists may be particularly likely to hold—has been associated with greater antigay prejudice (Hoyt et al., 2018). The current results suggest that incremental theorists who are alone when they witness antigay prejudice are likely to act as advocates for the target of prejudice despite potentially believing that sexual orientation is malleable.

Unexpectedly, participants’ implicit theories of personality did not predict responses across all antigay bullying situations. In the group bystander condition, beliefs about the capacity for humans to change were not related either to intent to confront or to withdrawal from the perpetrator. Null findings in the group condition appear to be consistent with the classic bystander effect in which prosocial responding is suppressed in groups, including when individuals who are thinking of others (e.g., Garcia et al., 2002). Given that prosocial bystander intervention requires that bystanders identify a situation as problematic and feel personally responsible to help, we speculate that group status may interfere with how problematic the antigay statements were perceived to be or how responsible each person felt to speak up. For example, participants in the group condition who were exposed to antigay bullying might have dismissed the comments as harmful to fewer people present, which decreased how problematic the comments seemed to be. Furthermore, group status may lead to a diffusion of responsibility to address the comments, inhibiting prosocial confrontational behavior. It is also possible that perceptions of group norms related to the specific friend group affected responses to antigay bullying. Past research has suggested that group norms shape how individuals perceive disparaging humor such that group norms favoring such humor are related to an acceptance of the negative characteristics presented in the disparaging jokes (Gutiérrez, Carretero-Dios, Willis, & Morales, 2018).

Our findings diverge from Rattan and Dweck (2010, Study 2) who found that participants’ implicit theories of personality affected responses to scenarios in which individuals were with a group of other new interns when a new coworker expressed racist comments. Differences in study methodologies might explain these different patterns of results. First, because we studied scenarios involving groups of friends and not new interns (i.e., strangers or acquaintances), the effects of incremental beliefs on constructive responses to prejudice may differ based on who the other bystanders are. It is possible that group norms established within friend groups, which may include a level of tolerance of prejudice, affect responses to expressions of prejudice. Second, the majority of the current sample identified as heterosexual, and so unlike most of the participants studied by Rattan and Dweck (2010), most participants in the current study were unlikely to feel as personally targeted by the comments; perhaps they also were less likely to feel that others would be targeted as well. Third, it is possible that bystanders in groups respond differently to antigay comments made to a specific individual versus racist or sexist comments made about people more generally. When in a group of friends, bystanders might perceive antigay bullying as kidding around or as representing a more benign type of interpersonal conflict involving a target individual rather than a social group (i.e., people who are LGBTQ+). A priority for future research is to assess different perceptions of antigay bullying situations that inhibit prosocial responding when others are physically present, psychologically present, or both. Another priority is to examine various types of prosocial responding that may occur in a group context, such as caring for a target of bullying.

Limitations of this study must be acknowledged. Participants were asked to imagine the antigay bullying situation instead of witnessing and acting in person. Future research with more naturalistic situations and behavioral assessments is needed. The homogeneity of the primarily White, heterosexual, female sample also might have limited the generalizability of these results. In past research, female bystanders and bystanders with more favorable LGBTQ+ attitudes were more likely to intervene in response to witnessing a range of LGBTQ+ discriminatory acts (Dessel, Goodman, &
Woodford, 2016). The effects of bystander gender on responses to different types of bullying related to sexual orientation and gender identity warrant study in future research with greater representation of men and women. Another limitation of the current study is the comparison of incremental versus entity theorists on the basis of a split on the continuous measure; although this is a commonly used method to classify people with different types of implicit beliefs (e.g., Rattan & Dweck, 2010), this method also may have limited our statistical power to detect a potential main effect of beliefs on responses to antigay bullying. Additional research is needed to examine whether and under what conditions implicit theories of personality affect responses to antigay bullying as well as other expressions of anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice.

Despite these limitations, the current findings may be used to inform bystander education programs on college campuses aimed at helping students promote safety and inclusion. The current results suggest that programs aimed at addressing prejudicial or harmful behavior may be more effective if they can educate students about the bystander effect. Educators may forecast for students the general tendency for prosocial responding to be suppressed within groups. Students may be encouraged to reflect upon whether this tendency matches with their personal values as well as how they can use their friendships to support their ability to act in ways consistent with their personal values. Perhaps even more importantly, bystander education programs should foster beliefs about the malleability of human nature and the usefulness of feedback in helping others act in more inclusive, less prejudicial ways. For example, Yeager et al. (2014; Studies 2 and 3) subjected high school students to a brief, one-time experimental intervention to promote incremental beliefs. Students read a brief summary of a neuroscience article and comments ostensibly written by upper-class students who wrote about how they used the information to deal with peer conflict. The overall message was that people who exclude or otherwise mistreat peers are not bad people but instead have complex motivations that may change. More generally, Dweck (2008) has outlined several successful interventions used to increase ideas about the malleability of human nature. Applying these interventions and adapting them to fit an antibullying scenario help interventionists reach both incremental and entity theorists. This wider reach may increase the likelihood that more students will confront perpetrators in dangerous situations and, in turn, may promote a more positive campus climate for all.

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