



Bystander Training as Leadership Training: Notes on the Origins, Philosophy, and Pedagogy of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Model

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Jackson Katz¹

Abstract

This article outlines the origins, philosophy, and pedagogy of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, which has played a significant role in the gender violence prevention field since its inception in 1993. MVP was one of the first large-scale programs to target men for prevention efforts, as well as the first to operate systematically in sports culture and the U.S. military. MVP also introduced the “bystander” approach to the field. MVP employs a social justice, gender-focused approach to prevention. Key features of this approach are described and contrasted with individualistic, events-based strategies that have proliferated on college campuses and elsewhere in recent years.

Keywords

bystander, leadership, MVP, gender violence, prevention, engaging men, rape culture, social norms, gender transformative, pedagogy, gender inclusive

Great progress has been made in the field of gender violence prevention education over the past decade, owing to a “perfect storm” of developments. This includes increased pressure on college administrators from the Obama Administration in the form of the Dear Colleague letter from the U.S. Department of Education’s (DOE) Office for Civil Rights in 2011 and the Title IX investigations launched by the DOE against hundreds of institutions for their mishandling of sexual assault cases and other

¹MVP Strategies, Amherst, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jackson Katz, Founder & President, MVP Strategies, 32 Gray St., Amherst, MA 01002, USA.

Email: Jackson@mvpstrat.com

alleged violations (note: the Trump Administration rescinded the Dear Colleague letter on Sept. 22, 2017); an acceleration of student-led activism, including lawsuits filed by survivors against colleges and universities that resulted in embarrassing publicity for many schools; release of the award-winning documentary films “Invisible War” and “The Hunting Ground”; and a seemingly insatiable appetite in old and new media for news stories and exposes about individual cases and institutional malfeasance on the part of college administrations, military leadership, sports organizations, and others. And this was all before the #MeToo movement exploded into popular consciousness in October of 2017, drawing intense media coverage and sparking calls for institutions in the public and private sectors to increase efforts to prevent sexual harassment and assault.

One result of the increased political, legal, and journalistic attention to the ongoing persistence of high rates of sexual assault—especially on college campuses and in the military—has been a proliferation of prevention initiatives and programs. These efforts have ranged from system-wide reforms of institutional policies and procedures all the way to micro-interventions targeting specific populations. Each of these, in turn, has relied on certain assumptions about the root causes of the problem, theories of social change and strategies for prevention, as well as pedagogical approaches inside and outside formal learning environments. It is difficult if not impossible to say which if any of these efforts is most likely to result in significant reductions in the incidence of perpetration and victimization. It is perhaps more prudent to argue that it is only possible to affect a significant diminution of a phenomenon as pervasive and deeply rooted as gender violence with a combination of law enforcement measures, social change efforts, and targeted prevention initiatives. Even then, macro factors such as changing gender and sexual norms and demographic trends—not to mention the proliferating influence on both perpetration and prevention of social media and other emerging technologies of communication—render definitive conclusions premature at best. Nonetheless, educational initiatives have and will continue to play an important role in shifting the social norms that underlie abusive behaviors.

I write as the creator and co-founder of one such initiative, the multiracial, mixed-gender Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, which began at Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society in 1993, and has since expanded broadly to a range of institutional settings with diverse populations of students on college, high school, and middle school campuses; the sports culture; and the military. (Since 1997, I have led one such iteration of the MVP model under the organizational title “MVP Strategies.”) One of MVP’s signature contributions was its introduction of “bystander” philosophy and pedagogy to the field nearly a quarter-century ago; I first outlined the theory and practice of MVP in a special issue of the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1995 (Katz, 1995). Since then, some of the basic tenets of MVP philosophy and pedagogical practice have been incorporated into other gender violence prevention bystander initiatives that, nonetheless, take a different approach than MVP. And the MVP model itself, while retaining its core ideas, has grown and adapted to changing circumstances. This article does not aspire to offer a comprehensive analysis of the similarities and differences between MVP and other programs that focus on bystanders. It is instead an attempt to describe characteristic features of the bystander and

leadership approaches that are embodied in the MVP model and to describe some of the differences between what I am calling “social justice-oriented” approaches such as MVP and more “individualistic, events-based” approaches to prevention at a moment of great potential in the gender violence prevention movement in North America and beyond.

In recent years, the social-ecological model has emerged as one of the leading public health frameworks for understanding how to prevent violence. This model posits that to prevent violence, it is necessary to consider the interplay between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors and act across multiple levels at the same time. In the area of gender violence, this model provides texture and depth to the concept of “primary prevention,” a concept from an earlier framework that refers to approaches that take place before incidents have occurred and which help to prevent initial perpetration or victimization. Two of the most significant developments in the primary prevention of gender violence over the past 25 years have been the increasing engagement of men and the proliferation of the “bystander” approach, which in recent years has been more frequently—and in my view somewhat misleadingly—referred to as “bystander intervention.”

This article is intended to provide some insight into these developments through a detailed examination of MVP, which has played a prominent role in both the engagement of men and the increased popularity of the bystander approach. While MVP evolved into a mixed-gender model more than two decades ago, my aim is to situate the program in the growing (global) movement to engage men that emerged in the 1990s and continues to this day, as well as to sketch out the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of the bystander approach in both social justice and feminist-inspired anti-rape and anti-domestic violence education and activism. My intent is also to critique—from the vantage point of an educator with extensive experience as a workshop facilitator as well as in the role of program developer and administrator—trends in the field that I believe have the effect of dampening the transformative possibilities of prevention efforts and to identify strategies that hold promise in the years ahead.

In the first section of this article, I outline briefly the early history of MVP, with special attention to the philosophical and social justice roots of the bystander focus in the MVP model. I discuss the origins of bystander work as a crucial practical and pedagogical innovation in the effort to engage men, and I outline the core MVP idea of gender violence prevention as a leadership issue. In the second section, I discuss and critique the emergence in the early 2000s of new programs in the gender violence prevention field that applied the basic bystander concept that was popularized by MVP, but which in these new iterations began to move away from a social justice educational framework toward a depoliticized, decontextualized public safety model in which discussion of gender norms is deemphasized or omitted. Many of these programs have found receptive audiences in various educational institutions at least in part because they avoid grappling with difficult and sometimes contentious questions about gender and power that lie at the heart of the ongoing societal and global crisis of men’s violence against women. In the third section, I outline and discuss key pedagogical features of the MVP model, some of which were informed by central tenets of social justice educational theory, such as Freirean insights about education as a dialogic process.

Origins

In 1992, I was a graduate student in education when I approached the founder and then-director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society, Richard Lapchick, with a proposal to create a program to educate college male student-athletes about how they could play a positive role in changing some of the norms in male culture that supported sexist and heterosexist abuse. The Center, founded in 1984, was well-known for its advocacy and educational programs that addressed issues of racial justice within and through the vehicle of organized athletics. My goal was similarly to use sport as a vehicle to address the pervasive and persistent problem of men's violence against women. One of the enduring ideas of the Civil Rights Movement, and one of its most valuable gifts to subsequent generations of anti-racist Whites and anti-sexist men, was the idea that silence in the face of injustice was tantamount to consent (see King, 1963: 296). Men who remained silent in a culture where rape, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment are ubiquitous features of the social landscape were just as complicit as Whites who failed to take a stand against racism. This simple but powerful insight was reinforced not only through analogies with racism that were sprinkled throughout MVP trainings and printed materials; it was built into our programmatic DNA.

We secured funding for the creation of MVP with an initial 3-year grant from the DOE. The award went for the design and implementation of a model program for engaging college male student-athletes in the fight against all forms of gender violence, gay bashing, and other types of abuse. The idea was to educate and inspire (some) of these popular young men to leverage their standing in male peer culture to speak out about issues that historically had been considered "women's issues," such as rape, relationship abuse, and sexual harassment. The theory was that if young men with status on campus made it clear to their peers and younger boys that they would not accept or tolerate sexist or heterosexist beliefs and behaviors, it would open up space for other young men to do likewise, well beyond the insular sports culture. This foundational presumption of MVP predated an emerging body of research in public health education that demonstrated the power of "popular opinion leaders" to help shift social norms and accelerate behavior change, most notably on preventing the transmission of HIV (Kelly, 2004). The overarching goal of MVP was to contribute to a shift in male culture at all age levels with regard to the social acceptability of sexist attitudes and actions.

For at least the past generation, male sports culture in high school, college, and the professional leagues has too often been the site of sexual assault and domestic violence incidents. In recent years, a string of notorious attacks brought increased public scrutiny to this long-standing problem; perhaps, the most highly visible occurrence was in 2014, when Ray Rice, a star player for the National Football League (NFL) Baltimore Ravens, was suspended by the NFL after being caught on video punching his then-fiancé Janay Palmer in the face on a casino elevator. Other high-profile cases include a 2013 gang rape at Vanderbilt University committed by football recruits and the 2015 rape of a young woman at Stanford University by a member of the men's

swimming team. As the extensive media coverage of incidents such as these makes clear, sports culture provides an unparalleled platform from which to call attention to these and a range of other societal problems—and to catalyze efforts to change the social norms that often underlie them.

But it is important to note that MVP did not originate in sports culture because of the problem of male athletes assaulting women and children. Rather, the intent was to inspire leadership from successful male student-athletes, who, because they are seen as exemplars of traditional masculine success, have an enhanced level of credibility with their male peers and with younger men (Katz, 1995). If one of the long-term prevention goals of the anti-rape and domestic violence movements was not only to react in the moment to abusive acts but to undermine and discredit rape and battering-supportive attitudes, who better to catalyze this process than men who—more than most—helped to define the cultural mainstream?

Nonetheless, because of its roots in sports culture, and its continued use of sports terminology, MVP is sometimes mistakenly seen as a program designed exclusively for student-athletes. It is true that for the past 24 years, we have trained tens of thousands of student-athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators across the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic spectrum at hundreds of Division 1, 2, and 3 programs and with professional sports organizations and teams in the NFL, Canadian Football League (CFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), and National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR). But from the beginning, the strategic trajectory of MVP began in athletics, and then the military, with the intent of moving into broader student populations in college, high school, and middle school—a process that continues to this day.

The Bystander Approach

In the early days of MVP, when program staff were trying to determine how best to design the content and process of MVP workshops, several questions arose immediately: How could we diminish the defensiveness many men felt in discussions about gender violence? What was the most effective way to enlist more of them in the effort to challenge and change key features of “rape culture?” We were guided by the feminist idea that violence against women was not the result of isolated acts by pathological individuals but was a product of the normative definition of manhood that was itself a manifestation of systemic gender and sexual inequality (Messner, 2016). How could we help to change that normative definition by addressing sexist group dynamics in influential male peer cultures such as athletic teams and simultaneously encourage individuals to do more? On a practical level, my colleagues and I were looking to develop a pedagogical model that could provide necessary information, counteract victim-blaming, and refute common rape and battering myths, but in a way that would, in the words of *Futures Without Violence* founder Esta Soler, “invite, not indict,” men and engage them in critical conversations.

Around the same time, researchers were developing an innovative “bystander” approach to middle school bullying prevention that transcended the limitations of the customary focus on perpetrators and victims (Slaby, Wilson-Brewer, & DeVos, 1994). This approach itself was part of an educational lineage that went back several decades and included curricula that highlighted the role of people with privilege who took a stand and sometimes took risks to help vulnerable or oppressed people, such as the “righteous Gentiles” who sheltered and rescued Jews during the Holocaust, or Whites who were active in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s (see Strom, 1994). We quickly realized that we could import this bystander focus into the gender violence prevention field, which until that point had likewise been stuck—in theory and practice—in the traditional perpetrator–victim binary.

In many educational programs developed in the 1970s and 1980s, women were regarded primarily as victims, potential victims, or empowered survivors and men as perpetrators or potential perpetrators. Among the many limitations of this narrow approach was that most men did not see themselves as potential perpetrators and, as a result, shut down in a way that precluded honest participation or thoughtful dialogue. This was not *their* problem, or so they thought, but about the kind of men—*those men*—who needed to be helped, or held accountable, for bad behavior toward women. But the new designation of “bystander” shifted the terms of the debate. Now everyone had a role to play: friends, family members, teammates, classmates, colleagues, and coworkers of women who might be in abusive or vulnerable circumstances or of men who might be mistreating their girlfriends or acting out in other sexist ways. By this definition, virtually everyone in a given peer culture was a bystander who was in a position to do something, even people who were not present at the moment of a specific incident. What was each person doing to ensure that abusive behavior of any kind would not be tolerated within the peer culture itself? At MVP, we understood that this new angle offered a creative solution to one of the central challenges in gender violence prevention education: how to engage men without approaching them as potential rapists and batterers.

From the inception of MVP, the short- and long-term goal of what we labeled the “bystander approach” was not only to stop incidents at the point of attack. It was also to expose, challenge, and eventually change gendered social norms that contributed to abuse on a continuum of behaviors, especially but not exclusively within male peer cultures. We focused on individual responsibility to intervene but defined this responsibility within the context of a need for more systemic social change. The pedagogical strategy we settled on was to conduct highly interactive workshops in which we would discuss why and how young men (and eventually, women) could confront or interrupt abusive behavior before, during, or after the fact and thus contribute to a climate in which sexist abuse was seen as uncool and unacceptable and, with men in particular, as a transgression against—rather than an enactment of—the social norms of masculinity. We also wanted to open dialogue not only about some of the root causes of men’s violence against women but also of men’s violence against each other and themselves—what the writer and White Ribbon Campaign co-founder Michael Kaufman described as the “triad of men’s violence” (Kaufman, 1987).

In the second year of MVP, we expanded the target audience for the trainings to include college female student-athletes and other women and girls, which presented a conundrum regarding our conception of the role of bystanders. Following the social justice logic described above, how could women have the same responsibilities as men to prevent men's violence against women? Would not that be akin to arguing that people of color have as much responsibility as Whites to interrupt White racism? We resolved the conundrum in a number of different ways, none of which required us to adopt a posture of gender neutrality.

First, in our printed materials, we made it clear that men's violence against women was much more of a men's than a women's problem, though there were many things women could do to respond to and prevent this violence. The second way we resolved the differential responsibilities of men and women was to adopt a single-gender workshop model. In addition to the benefits it provided for men, this model provided an opportunity for women to discuss—in a “safe” educational space—the ways in which social norms in female and mixed-gender peer cultures affected women's willingness to challenge sexist attitudes and behaviors. In that setting, women could discuss with each other especially sensitive topics, such as how their prior experiences as targets or victims of men's violence might affect their emotional availability—or willingness—to become empowered bystanders in situations involving their peers. Or how women themselves sometimes express and validate the kinds of victim-blaming attitudes that can impede effective bystander action. In addition, the scenarios MVP addressed included both physical and nonphysical forms of abusive behavior that were committed by people of all genders—including women. Perhaps most importantly, the focus on women as bystanders allowed women to see that they could do more than simply avoid or reduce their own risk of victimization or potential for perpetration; they could develop skills to become empowered anti-violence agents.

Prevention Training as Leadership Training

From its inception, the creators of MVP described it as a gender violence prevention *leadership* program, rather than a *bystander* program. The distinction is instructive, because the focus on bystanders, while important, was only one component of the MVP model. The leadership designation was also politically strategic, because we knew from numerous formal and informal conversations with athletic administrators in the early 1990s that many college athletic departments were leery of gender violence programming because it might raise red flags of concern about specific problems or incidents within their programs. To this day, athletic administrators as well as student-athletes fear and sometimes resent taking disproportionate blame for a much broader campus and societal problem. But describing MVP as a leadership program—then and now—afforded us the opportunity to frame the work aspirationally and positively, rather than punitively.

Starting with the first workshops we conducted in the early 1990s, MVP trainers heard regularly from men who expressed discomfort with some of the more blatantly sexist features of the peer cultures they inhabited. These anecdotal experiences, within

sessions or in the hallway afterward, were later substantiated in social norms research, which indicated that many men were uncomfortable with other men's attitudes and behaviors but rarely expressed this publicly (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). What became clear to MVP staff as we refined our pedagogical methods was that men needed to learn bystander intervention skills, but even more so what they needed simply was permission from other men to do what they knew was right. This was consistent with findings by Fabiano et al. (2003) that men's perception of other men's willingness to intervene to prevent a sexual assault was the strongest predictor of men's own willingness to intervene, accounting for 42% of the variance in men's self-reported willingness to do so. What this suggests is that effective bystander programs do not change men's beliefs about gender violence as much as they provide them with a structured opportunity to gain permission from other men to act. Marc Rich, founder of the social justice-informed gender violence prevention theater troupe interACT, explains that his program provides men with an opportunity to rehearse intervention strategies in an environment where they receive peer support for their efforts. Hence, they get immediate, positive reinforcement for challenging traditional hypermasculine roles (M. Rich, personal communication, November 13, 2016).

There are many reasons why men rarely challenge each other's sexist attitudes and behaviors, but much of it comes down to their reticence to challenge elements of what Michael Kimmel described as a "guy code," which includes a sense of entitlement, an imperative to remain silent about one's feelings and others' actions, and a sense of responsibility to other men to protect each other from being accountable for misbehavior. Men who challenge other men's sexist attitudes or behaviors—especially in hegemonic spaces like sports culture, fraternities, and the military—are apt to face criticism and possibly ridicule amid doubts about their fortitude and masculine credentials and thus lose standing with their male peers. In fact, MVP trainers report that anxiety about rejection from the group is repeatedly touted by men in those subcultures as the main reason for their reluctance to intervene, even among those who find their peers' behavior problematic (D. Fort, personal communication, February 22, 2010).

Leadership training and the bystander approach are closely aligned conceptually as well as practically. In fact, in the MVP model, bystander training is actually a kind of entry-level leadership training, because when bystanders assess a situation, consider their options, and take action, they are executing a basic leadership protocol. MVP trainers highlight this point with a simple exercise at the beginning of many sessions. Before even mentioning the topic of gender violence, they ask participants to provide their definition of leadership. What qualities do good leaders possess? They write the answers on a flip chart and use those definitions throughout the workshop to reinforce the idea that "empowered bystanders" who interrupt abusive behaviors are better described as "leaders." This exercise is especially effective with sports teams and military units whose members are already invested in the idea of becoming better leaders.

Being an active bystander requires someone to possess the qualities of a leader precisely because it is not easy for men—or women—to intervene and challenge abusive behaviors or the belief systems that foster the conditions within which they occur.

In trainings with athletic teams and Greek officers, we use the term “anti-high five moments” to describe those times when someone has to say or do something to interrupt or confront his or her teammates’ or fellow fraternity/sorority members’ inappropriate or abusive behavior. Rather than getting a high-five like one would after scoring a touchdown or sinking a game-winning basket, in some instances bystanders who speak up are likely to get cold stares or even stronger negative reactions. In some instances, they have to be willing to pay a price in their interpersonal relationships and/or standing in the group for doing the right thing. For example, a male college student who tells one of his hallmates that he is uncomfortable with the way the hallmate constantly shares misogynous porn videos with other residents runs the risk of fostering resentment from that person or other members of the group, which could increase tensions in the living area and possibly threats to friendships.

Status hierarchies in groups can present their own set of challenges. What if a bystander has less social capital than the perpetrator? Consider the case of a first-year student-athlete who is uncomfortable with the way a talented senior repeatedly demeans and objectifies women. Should he say something? Or a fraternity pledge notices that a charismatic upperclassman in the house regularly belittles his girlfriend in front of others. What cost–benefit analysis does the younger man need to consider before taking action? What about a shy high school student who finds out that some of his more popular classmates are planning to send a message via social media that rates girls’ attractiveness on a scale of 1-10? Should he risk social repercussions by acting to stop the offensive plot? In the workplace, is it fair to expect relatively junior employees or military members to challenge sexual harassment by their bosses or superior officers, when to do so would mean facing a realistic fear of being fired or losing out on a promotion? The disincentives for bystander action are plentiful; many men are reluctant to interrupt and intervene against men’s mistreatment of women precisely because it often entails taking real interpersonal and material risks. The entire pedagogical structure of MVP is designed to bring to the surface and discuss just these sorts of subtextual forces.

It is important to note that MVP defines a “bystander” more broadly than whether someone is present at the time of an incident; it includes members of peer cultures who share a sense of responsibility for others within immediate and extended communities. This includes responsibility for how victims/survivors are treated after they have been assaulted or after they report the assault. In many instances, the pressure on bystanders is even greater once an incident has occurred. In a powerful college athletic program, fraternity, or military organization, a young man who seems to side with the victim of an alleged assault by one of his peers—especially someone who is well-respected or critical to the group’s image or success—is likely to be regarded as disloyal to the group itself. In groups that prize blind loyalty over other ethical considerations, acting on principle comes with a cost. It is easy to judge individuals under such pressure from a safe distance, but depending on the popularity of the alleged perpetrator(s) and the nature of the allegations, a young man who breaks the informal code of silence runs the risk of committing social suicide.

Preliminary data from a report on an MVP leadership initiative at a large, racially and ethnically diverse public university on the west coast suggest that providing student leaders (e.g., athletic captains, Greek officers, and resident assistants) with training that highlights their unique role in fostering a climate in which students are encouraged to interrupt and challenge gender violence can significantly reorient their understanding of their role as leaders. As a result of the training, student participants (men and women) indicated they had thought more about how they could use their leadership skills to reduce the incidence of gender violence, gave greater importance to being up-to-date about best practices in sexual assault prevention, exhibited a greater desire to incorporate the prevention of gender violence in their formal and informal leadership roles, and showed positive changes in their understanding of the role of gender violence prevention education in doing what leaders do (Eriksen, 2015).

The Turn Toward “Bystander Intervention” in the Broader Field

MVP expanded throughout the 1990s, moving deliberately from an exclusive focus on college athletics to general populations of students and student leaders not only in colleges but increasingly in high schools, and occasionally middle schools, throughout the Boston area and in select municipalities around the country. One of the most notable features of the high school model was embodied in the word “mentor”: in a typical implementation of the program, MVP staff and MVP-trained in-school personnel would train high school juniors and seniors (who applied to be members of the program) to facilitate prevention workshops with incoming ninth-grade students during advisory period throughout the entire school year. In Sioux City, Iowa, where MVP has been up and running in multiple public high schools for the past 17 years, data from one school in the years 2000-2008 showed an 83% decrease in reported incidents of physical aggression (Fleming & Heisterkamp, 2011).

In 1997, MVP was adopted by the U.S. Marine Corps and soon became the first system-wide gender violence prevention program in the Department of Defense, eventually migrating, in one form or another, to all of the uniformed services. In 1999, MVP conducted the first official gender violence prevention training in professional sports, with the New England Patriots football club.

But once the idea of focusing on bystanders as a key prevention strategy gained traction, a subtle but significant shift in the field began to occur. A number of campus-based gender violence prevention programs emerged in the early 2000s that described their preferred method as “bystander intervention,” rather than the “bystander approach.” Unlike MVP, whose ideological as well as pedagogical roots were planted firmly in social justice and feminist educational theory and practice, these new initiatives emphasized an individualistic, events-based method that was grounded in the depoliticized language and principles of social psychology. Ultimately, their chief goal aligned with that of MVP—to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence. But their pedagogical strategy differed dramatically. The emergent “bystander intervention” programs set out

to identify a new, degendered category of individuals—“bystanders”—and help them develop the skills of “self-efficacy” necessary to intervene effectively in situations of potential harm. In some cases, explicit discussion of gender norms was not only deemphasized but actively discouraged (Kingcade, 2016). The decision to downplay questions of gender in gender violence prevention programming was, presumably, part of an effort to make this programming more palatable to men. Prevention theorist and educator Marc Rich (2010: 521), when reviewing the literature on prevention, noted

many instances in which educators try to appease men in order to reduce defensiveness and reduce conflict. While I understand the impulse, viewed from a sociopolitical perspective conflict can be embraced as a crucial element of transformation. In reality, women will stop being raped when men stop committing these crimes, and this point should be acknowledged during prevention programs.

It is plausible that the turn toward gender neutrality was also responsive to structural limitations in the field of campus-based prevention education. Despite a surge in recent years of the number of men in the field, most professional prevention educators continue to be women, even as pressure to provide educational programming for men has increased. Thus, using gender-neutral language that focused on possible “interventions,” women educators could impart information and provide useful suggestions without encountering the resistance they might face from men if they raised difficult but critical issues in discussions about sexual assault, such as the relation between the kind of casual misogyny that is normative in parts of male culture, and the persistence of victim-blaming. It is more than a little ironic that the bystander approach developed by MVP in the early 1990s as a gender-specific way for men to challenge other men’s sexist attitudes and behaviors was now being interpreted in such a way as to engage men (and women) without even mentioning gender.

Notably, the shift away from a deliberate engagement with underlying gender norms and toward specific techniques of and impediments to “intervention” was taking place in a budgetary environment in which government funders increasingly required programs to demonstrate an “evidence-base” to secure and maintain funding. This requirement put pressure on programs to produce quantitative evaluations with randomized controls, which gave them even greater incentive to achieve results that could be measured on pre- and posttest surveys, such as “willingness to intervene” in incidents of abuse. Whether intended deliberately or not, these sorts of funding requirements, as well as pressures to comply with other state mandates, had the effect of helping to push prevention work away from a more social justice-oriented model and toward a politically neutered “medicalized/marketized public health model” (Markowitz & Tice, 2002; Messner, 2016).

Social Justice Versus Individualistic, Events-Based Models

As the field expands and calls for innovative prevention models intensifies, educators and researchers are seeking to identify and implement the most effective forms of

programming and pedagogy. However, there is still a great deal of uncertainty not only about what works but also about how to measure what works. Part of this uncertainty pertains to the effectiveness of different types of pedagogy. According to one prominent researcher, there is a growing consensus that particular features of pedagogy are more likely to generate substantial and sustained change: the use of quality teaching materials; interactive and participatory classroom processes; attention to cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains; skills development; and sufficient duration and intensity (Flood, 2015). However, evidence regarding the effectiveness of various types of pedagogy is either “absent, mixed, or dependent on the purpose or character of the prevention effort. Should single-sex (gender) or mixed-sex classes be used? Should education be provided by teachers, community educators, or peer educators? Does the sex of the educator matter?” (Flood, 2015: 218). In addition, how much/little training is necessary to provide these trainings? Facilitating dialogue about systematic oppressions such as sexism, heterosexism, and racism requires a skill set that is significantly different (and often requires more training) than facilitating gender-neutral curricula that focus primarily on skills development.

My aim here is to provide some background and context for these sorts of questions by comparing and contrasting the social justice-oriented approach with individualistic, events-based (and typically gender-neutral) approaches. (It should be noted that the latter category refers to a type of programmatic philosophy or curricular practice and not to any specific program.) I will do this by examining some key features of MVP pedagogical practice over more than two decades and contrasting that with events-based approaches. Unfortunately, in the gender violence prevention literature, as well as in journalistic commentary, scant attention is paid not only to different pedagogical approaches but also to the heterogeneity of the “bystander” category itself. Many analyses and critiques of this now broadly popular prevention technique fail even to mention, much less discuss, its roots in social justice and feminist educational theory (e.g., Swan, 2015). One widely read article (more than 2.7 million “likes”) on a popular website characteristically—and falsely—juxtaposed “bystander intervention” with other educational strategies that address underlying aspects of “rape culture,” as if there is an inherent contradiction between the two (Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

The basic difference between the social justice and events-based “bystander intervention” approaches can be summarized as follows: In social justice-oriented approaches to the role of the bystander, individuals—especially when they are members of dominant or privileged groups—are encouraged to interrupt the enactment of abuses that are often micro manifestations of macro systems of power and control. For example, a key goal in working with men to prevent sexual assault is to help them think about how their attitudes and behaviors toward women—and other men—actively or passively might contribute to the perpetuation of rape-supportive beliefs. This is not accomplished by brow-beating them about the evils of the patriarchy but by engaging them in robust discussions that encourage them to think about whether or how their actions, as individuals or as members of a group, promote respect for women’s core humanity and bodily integrity or do not. This is analogous to anti-racist work with Whites, which in recent years has included discussions not only about responding

to and preventing racist incidents but about how the unconscious bias of well-meaning individuals often contributes to institutional racism. In addition, men and Whites—even if they are well-meaning or “never tell sexist/racist jokes”—still benefit from male dominance and White privilege and thus have the social and moral responsibility to intervene. In this sense, intervention is both a leadership quality and a sociopolitical imperative.

In contrast to the more gender-explicit pedagogy of a social justice-oriented approach, in many of the individualistic, events-based “bystander intervention” programs, the starting point is the bystander himself or herself and their cognitive or affective process in the face of harmful or otherwise injurious behavior. The idea is less to encourage people to think critically about their role in perpetuating or subverting rape or battering-supportive attitudes than it is to give them concrete suggestions about how to intervene in situations of potential harm. One obvious advantage of this approach is that no one—especially men—is ever made to feel uncomfortable. The downside, of course, is that prevention education loses an important part of the spirit of social change that can transform individuals and communities and becomes more like training for bouncers in a nightclub, who are taught to see situations developing and intervene at the point of attack. Men (and women) can leave these skill-based sessions without ever considering how the choices they make in their daily lives either undermine or perpetuate larger systems of inequality.

MVP Pedagogy

MVP philosophy and pedagogy consist of a number of key features, all of which are guided by the belief that meaningful gender violence prevention education entails providing students with more than *information* that refutes rape myths, or *options* for intervention, however important each of those might be. If the ultimate goal is to change the social acceptance of sexist abuse, especially in male peer cultures, educators need to provide a supportive context for people to *experience* a new way of thinking—and talking—about subjects they do not often discuss thoughtfully. Notably, MVP has always featured multiracial, multi-ethnic staff and training teams, working in racially and ethnically diverse environments on college campuses, high schools, the military, and in communities. MVP pedagogy is flexible enough to incorporate cultural competence and sensitivity into all of its training and learning modules. In other words, MVP trainers—men and women, as well as the student mentors who are trained to facilitate MVP workshops with younger students in their schools—do not posit “one size fits all” solutions to the problems of gender violence prevention.

MVP trainers are also encouraged to apply, whenever possible, the concept of organic intersectionality, which understands various manifestations of violence as institutionally connected, rather than manifestations of discrete phenomena (Messner, Greenberg & Peretz, 2015). For example, from the beginning, MVP addressed not only questions of sexual and domestic violence but also sexual harassment, gay bashing, stalking, and bullying—and the complex connections between and among these types of abuse. In practice, integrating ideas about organic intersectionality might also

mean creating space for discussions about the many relations between sexism and racism. Of course, the extent to which trainers can do this depends on the depth of their knowledge, experience, and self-confidence. For example, while professional MVP educators might be grounded in intersectional thinking, which is customarily built into the training-of-trainers, it is not realistic to expect high school or even college students who are trained in MVP to have mastered complexities and nuances that routinely present challenges to seasoned educators.

It is also important to note that (as previously mentioned) a critical aspect of MVP pedagogy is embodied in the term *mentors*. While professional MVP educators regularly conduct trainings of trainers with professionals as well as leadership trainings with groups of student leaders, military members, and athletes, in high school and college settings, the optimal workshop co-facilitators are slightly older students. These students, typically juniors and seniors, lead discussions with incoming ninth graders or first-year college students and have an older brother–sister relationship to the target population.

Focus on Gender

Since the inception of the program, MVP trainings have featured lively, interactive dialogues about gender and sexual norms and expectations. This focus is consistent with a global consensus that has emerged over the past 20 years about best practices for engaging men and boys in the prevention of gender violence, HIV, unintended pregnancy, and other health-related issues. One of the key features of successful programs is the degree to which they are “gender transformative” and include some type of intensive group educational process “that encourages men to participate in a very personal reflection on values about gender, and examines the cost to both sexes of harmful gender dynamics” (Levack, 2015).

In MVP, various exercises and curricular materials create opportunities for students to think about individual acts of men’s violence against women in the context of larger systems of gender inequality, in the same way that individual acts of racism are connected to racist institutional structures and ideologies. For example, we facilitate discussions about the objectification of women in media and ask deliberately provocative questions about whether/how this objectification might lead to harassment and abuse. We do not provide the answers; instead, we create space for dialogue that allows people to hear and express a range of viewpoints. We employ a range of classic exercises that highlight the power of gender norms to shape behaviors, such as the “Act Like a Man/Woman Box,” created in the late 1970s by the pioneering anti-sexist men’s organization, the Oakland Men’s Project. The interactive box exercise allows participants to identify the pressures they face to remain “inside” the box of narrowly defined gender norms—and the possible consequences if they do not.

In contrast, some “bystander intervention” programs have chosen to exclude or minimize discussions of gender norms, presumably out of concern that this might stoke controversy and provoke defensive reactions, especially from men. Of course, it is a wholly predictable and widely understood process in social justice education that some members of relatively privileged groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals)

can get defensive in discussions about abuses committed by members of their group, especially in the initial stages of the educational process. As Marc Rich recounts about the interACT program: “Each fall we bring in new male troupe members, and they inevitably get defensive, make inappropriate comments, subscribe to rape myths, etc. It is part of the process of . . . becoming an ally” (M. Rich, personal communication, December 8, 2016). Or as former First Lady Michelle Obama said, recalling her years of leading young people through sometimes painful conversations about race, “Real change comes from having enough comfort to be really honest and say something very uncomfortable” (Powell & Kantor, 2008).

Gender-neutral “bystander intervention” programs often prefer to focus on individual skill-building, that is, teaching people to intervene in situations of potential abuse. MVP trainings provide skill-building support but do so while being open and explicit about the role of gender norms in shaping attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. For example, some college men hesitate to challenge their peers’ misogynous attitudes and behaviors toward women because they fear that doing so would endanger their status within the group and have other negative repercussions, not because they do not know what to do. Would they be seen as soft? Politically correct? Disloyal? Not one of the guys? Some college women hesitate to act because they do not want to be seen as judgmental or “no fun” for always being concerned about issues of risk and safety. Training on “bystander intervention” that does not acknowledge the fundamentally gendered calculus that men and women bring to decisions about whether or not to intervene can be artificial and superficial. It is possible *simultaneously* to discuss gender norms and teach intervention skills; MVP has done it for many years right in the heart of male culture (and female).

In recent years, some prevention educators have adopted gender-neutral pedagogical strategies out of the belief that they are somehow more “inclusive,” especially of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) students. There is no doubt that this expansion of the scope of gender violence prevention education to include underserved gender and sexual minorities is a necessary development in any social justice-oriented approach to this work. But it does not follow that program content needs to be gender-neutral in order for it to be inclusive; gender neutrality is only one of many strategies for inclusion. For example, MVP has long practiced a “gender inclusive, not gender neutral” approach and sought to infuse materials, exercises, and discussions with acknowledgment of the fluidity of gender and sexual identity without diminishing the central imperative of addressing men’s violence against women.

One critical characteristic of the focus on gender within MVP is the preference for single-gender breakouts to complement mixed-gender sessions. As stated above, MVP began with college men exclusively and sought to engage them in critical dialogue about how they could challenge cultural misogyny and the gender norms that contributed to abusive behaviors. To do this, we needed to create an atmosphere in which men felt comfortable talking honestly about various aspects of “guy culture,” positive as well as negative. The idea was that we would try to create an atmosphere in which men felt comfortable sharing personal experiences and even anxieties about pressures on them to act a certain way, whether among other men or in mixed groups. We drew

initially on the work of Alan Berkowitz (1994), who had written about the advantages of all-male anti-rape workshops. According to Berkowitz, all-male workshops had a number of advantages that included their ability to allow men to speak openly without fear of judgment or criticism by women, make it less likely that men will be passive or quiet, and avoid the gender-based polarization that may reinforce men's rape-prone attitudes. The MVP emphasis on dialogue and discussion in single-gender groups—and how that dialogue can provide space for men to express viewpoints about issues related to masculinity, sex, and violence that are not ordinarily heard in locker rooms, fraternities, and other male groups—anticipated later insights derived from “social norms” theory and research, particularly as the social norms approach began to be applied to issues of gender and sexuality (Fabiano et al., 2003). If, as suggested by social norms research, many men are uncomfortable with the way some men talk about or treat women but think they are alone in their unease, one way to counteract this is to give them the opportunity to express their discomfort and articulate anti-sexist beliefs in an educational setting in a roomful of their peers. Because the MVP model positions—and sometimes exalts—the proactive bystander as a person who possesses the courage to speak up when others are intimidated into silence, many men say things in MVP sessions in front of their peers, and to their peers, that they have never before had the opportunity or license to express.

If single-gender sexual assault prevention workshops provide the space for men to have frank and unvarnished discussions about sensitive topics, women-only sessions can give women the opportunity to express opinions and share their experiences of sexism in a supportive setting where they do not have to worry about minimizing or defensive reactions from men. Discussions in all-women groups also can lead not only to shifts in consciousness among the participants but can even catalyze a kind of bystander intervention in the dialogue itself. For example, Shannon Murdoch, a long-time MVP trainer and administrator, says that when she does an exercise that identifies types of abuse, “A woman will say ‘I’m not sure it’s abuse, but my boyfriend texts me every five minutes, asking me what I’m doing, where I am, who I’m with,’ and her teammates or friends will say ‘of course it is!’” Murdoch also reports that in MVP sessions, women will sometimes say things such as “If this ever happens to me, I want you to do option #4” (from an MVP playbook scenario), which explicitly gives the other women permission to intervene if the occasion should ever arise (S. Murdoch, personal communication, March 7, 2010).

While single-gender workshops have a number of striking pedagogical advantages, including the aforementioned, they also present an obvious challenge to educators on campus and in the community: Unless institutions are willing to invest in hiring men as well as women to staff prevention programs, they are not always a practical option at the present time.

Interactive Dialogue

The signature pedagogical characteristic of the MVP model is its encouragement of open, spirited, and sometimes contentious interactive dialogues. MVP presentations

and trainings incorporate a variety of educational modules: leadership exercises, media literacy discussions with video clips, and small-group work. But the heart of MVP sessions is highly interactive dialogues organized around a range of scenarios that position young men and women as bystanders in situations that cover a continuum of abuses, from seemingly innocuous sexist comments, to cyber-bullying and harassment, all the way to brutal gang rapes. Whether in high school, college, or military settings, participants are urged to reflect upon a number of relational concerns (e.g., will I jeopardize my friendship if I say something?) and ethical considerations (e.g., if no one else is stepping in, why should I?). They are then instructed to discuss and debate a range of options for intervention before, during, or after the fact.

What typically emerges in the course of the discussion is a focus not only on individual factors but also on peer culture dynamics, including those which function to keep people silent even when they know something is wrong. The idea is that bringing these dynamics to the surface allows for a more candid conversation about why people do or do not interrupt or intervene in situations of harassment or abuse involving friends, teammates, classmates, and others. It is clearly important for people to learn techniques they can use to intervene effectively in potential sexual assaults and a variety of other social situations. But the pedagogical methods employed to achieve this are also very important. Early on, MVP staff developed a workshop model that prioritized dialogue and group process over the rote imparting of information. Of course, it was important for students to receive information about such matters as the prevalence of sexual assault, warning signs of abuse in relationships, and the definitions of sexual consent. But by design, the program's pedagogical approach was less instructional and more experiential. We wanted to expose, debate, and ultimately transform one of the key pillars of rape culture: the silent or active complicity of men who regard themselves as "good guys" that would never commit an act of sexual or domestic violence but who nonetheless perpetuate these crimes by things they say or do not say, actions they take or refrain from taking. This pedagogical practice was not only rooted in the work of Freire and other critical pedagogues but also aligned with the research in prevention education that demonstrates the ineffectiveness of didactic models.

Schwartz and DeKeseredy's male peer-support model suggests that on college campuses (and elsewhere), men who abuse women and hold sexist beliefs that justify this abuse often choose to associate with other men who give them support for thinking this way (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Even so, within these subcultures, some men choose to ignore pressures to conform to masculine norms that include the mistreatment of women. One way to amplify their voices and simultaneously *withdraw* male support for sexist norms is simply to create space in an educational program for them to talk openly about these kinds of issues, as well as listen to the perspectives and opinions of others. And to have skilled facilitators in the room who can both manage the difficult discussions and provide insight about how differing definitions of "toxic" and "healthy" forms of masculinity reflect larger societal changes and tensions.

MVP was perhaps the first program in the field to utilize realistic bystander scenarios in trainings; versions of many of those originally created by MVP are now used by countless other programs. Standard scenarios included a menu of options for

intervention, because people needed to know they had numerous, nonviolent alternatives to consider beyond the fight, flight, or freeze instincts of our evolutionary inheritance. But the power of critical dialogue focused on the role of the bystander lies in *the dialogue itself* as the vehicle for a shift in both individual beliefs and group norms surrounding the acceptance and perpetuation of rape and battering-supportive attitudes and behaviors. For men in particular, sitting in a group of their peers talking candidly about pressures they face to conform to certain expectations about how to relate to women and each other can be a much more powerful experience than anything they might learn in an online training or in a more sterile discussion of “bystander intervention” options that self-consciously avoids mention of gender. Similarly, when men offer personal information about their experiences of growing up in a family with domestic violence, or share painful stories about women (or men) close to have them who have been raped, the emotional impact of those testimonies on the group is palpable. Sometimes, especially in trainings that last more than an hour or two, it can even be life-changing, which is something MVP trainers hear regularly from workshop participants in internal evaluations and personal conversations with men after trainings, including from more than a few who are outwardly stoic and physically imposing.

Working With Teams and Other Cohesive Groups

Journalistic discussions about bystander behavior often fail to draw distinctions between events in which the bystander knows the victim/perpetrator and those in which they do not. This is the source of some confusion about the bystander approach, which in the general public is often conflated with the *bystander effect*, a social-psychological concept popularized after the 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese in New York City, in which a man stabbed a young woman to death on the street and residents failed to act. But incidents involving strangers and those that occur within peer cultures provide very different risk-reward ratios for bystanders. To cite the most obvious difference, in stranger scenarios on the streets and elsewhere, bystanders often hesitate to intervene out of fear that they might subject themselves to possible violence. But when people know each other, the impediments to action are often less about physical fear and more about social anxiety. *Won't this be awkward? What if I'm overreacting? How will my standing in the group be affected by my actions?* These sorts of social anxieties can be even more intense in cohesive groups such as athletic teams, fraternities and sororities, and military units in which people not only know each other but often live, socialize, and work alongside each other on a daily basis. One of the chief differences between working with cohesive groups and those that are composed of people who do not know each other well is that few ties bind the latter group. Unlike teams, they have no shared experience to fall back on and no ongoing mechanism for accountability (to each other) which shapes their “takeaway” from gender violence prevention training. According to Jeff O'Brien, long-time MVP trainer and administrator,

Individuals can conceivably go back to their peer groups and no one would ever know they participated in a training. With athletic teams or in the military, common goals and

organizational values change the dynamic in the room. With these groups you are always reinforcing the idea that they are responsible *to* each other—and *for* each other’s behavior. Just by having this conversation together, members of a team or military unit agree that they need to address these issues, and have responsibilities as leaders, teammates, fellow marines, etc. There is power in the shared experience of the discussion. I remember once a team told us, after we visited with them the year before, that they couldn’t always think of profound things to say or do but they could always say, “MVP!” in a teammate’s ear and he would know to stop what he was doing. The shared experience triggered the memory for them, both as a team and as individuals. (J. O’Brien, personal communication, March 16, 2010)

In sessions with athletic teams, MVP trainers use the word “teammates” rather than “bystanders,” although operationally the two concepts are closely related. Outside the athletic context, a bystander, in the best sense of the word, has a responsibility to others because of their shared humanity, not because they play a sport together. But a team is comprised of people who not only share goals but oftentimes friendships and a special kind of camaraderie. There is also very often a set of unspoken rules about how team members should act and sometimes put pressure on individuals to adhere to group norms or risk social repercussions. These norms can encourage and reward either pro-social or anti-social behavior. In a powerful example of the latter, a Boston University task force concluded in a remarkably frank report in 2012 that the men’s hockey team had a “culture of sexual entitlement” among some players, a mind-set college officials say contributed to two alleged sexual assaults on campus during the past season.

The leadership concepts and interactive pedagogy of MVP were designed in part to provide a countervailing force to precisely this sort of sexist or sexually exploitative environment. The way to prevent future sexual assault incidents was not merely to teach the student-athletes “bystander intervention” techniques. It was in part to create an opportunity for them, in a supportive environment, to talk about the pressures they face to conform to sometimes unhealthy and even abusive gender and sexual norms, as well as to their own and others’ expectations. As Daryl Fort says,

Elite student-athletes have many of the same issues about masculinity and relationships—and some of the same anxieties—as other guys. But many people see them as “alpha males” who have it all figured out. I’ve had many, many of these guys eager to talk about these pressures . . . facilitating that space is a big part of my job. (Katz, 2013)

Creating this sort of empathetic space with a group of men is not antithetical to the goals of anti-sexist education but, in fact, can be understood as laying the groundwork for some of them to speak out about abuse and become strong allies of women. As Fort says,

In a larger culture where sexist behavior and sexist media are considered edgy, marketable, and cool, it’s a process to get guys to look past what feels normal and harmless to see the potential harm. Even for guys who are willing to recognize a lot of what they see and hear

as abusive and disrespectful, it still takes courage to step into the social backlash they're likely to get from peers, teammates, and colleagues who are likely to tell them to lighten up for saying "Hey man, why you gotta call women bitches all the time?" (Katz, 2013)

Conclusion

Despite the ongoing efforts of advocates and prevention educators, the widespread problem of sexual assault and other forms of gender violence persists on campus and in the community. And now that the Obama Administration has been replaced by one that is far less committed—and in some respects openly opposed—to using the wide-ranging power of the federal government to address this issue, it seems likely that the expansion and funding of programmatic initiatives in the realm of prevention will have to turn increasingly to state and other more local sources of support.

At the same time, debates and struggles to define "best practices" in the field will continue. This article outlined some of the key philosophical and pedagogical ideas of MVP, one of the foundational social justice-oriented approaches to prevention work, and contrasted them with those of more individualistic, events-based approaches. It is the view of this author that the social justice approach, in which gender and sexual norms are addressed, discussed, and debated openly and honestly, holds the best hope for serious long-term reductions in the incidence of gender violence, on and off campus, and in the military. As stated in a previous section, this is consistent with an international consensus in "engaging men" that "gender transformative" programs are the most effective in catalyzing lasting change.

It is only fair to acknowledge, however, some of the structural and funding obstacles to the implementation of social justice-oriented programs such as MVP. For one thing, rigorous training is required to prepare trainers to address the sometimes complex intersections of gender, sexual orientation, race, and class and how these and other social inequalities both contribute to the problem of gender violence and present challenges in efforts to prevent it. Of course, not everyone who facilitates an MVP workshop needs to be a seasoned social justice educator; for many MVP student mentors, the most important qualification is a basic willingness to introduce their fellow students to a way of thinking about their responsibilities to others and to themselves.

Another big hurdle is the (still) relatively small number of men who are engaged in prevention efforts. As long as women comprise the vast majority of prevention educators, the pressure to make program content gender-neutral ("This is not about gender, anybody can be a victim, everybody has a role to play") will persist, because of the inherent difficulty of a woman or two women going into a football team, fraternity, or predominantly male military audience and facilitating a productive dialogue about challenging gender norms or touting "healthy masculinity." Recall that the MVP program was created in the early 1990s precisely because of the inadequacy of the old model of gender violence prevention education, which consisted largely of women teaching men (and women). The pressure to do gender-neutral programming will persist at least until government funders, college administrators, community programs, and military officials are willing to fund equal numbers of men and women as prevention educators.

Notwithstanding the persistence of these and other political/institutional challenges, there is room for optimism about the prospects for the next generation of gender violence prevention education. Educators and policy makers will still have to navigate many of the same hurdles those of us in the field have had to contend with for the past quarter century. But they will have at their disposal a wealth of programmatic experience and data, as well as theoretical frameworks, from which to draw in designing not only effective but also potentially transformative initiatives.

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Author Biography

Jackson Katz, PhD, is co-founder of Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP), early architect of the “bystander” approach, creator of the award-winning *Tough Guise* videos, and author of numerous articles as well as *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help* and *Man Enough? Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and the Politics of Presidential Masculinity*. He is founder and president of the mixed-gender, multiracial MVP Strategies, which provides gender violence prevention education and training in the educational, military, and corporate sectors. He lectures and trains widely in the United States and around the world.