



Reflections on Jackson Katz and the MVP Program

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Abstract

This article offers reflections on the article “Bystander Training as Leadership Training: Notes on the Origins, Philosophy and Pedagogy of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Model” by Jackson Katz in this issue of *Violence Against Women*. The authors rely on their unique perspectives in varying roles at the University of California (UC) Berkeley, as well as on relevant social science and social justice research. The article explores five themes of violence prevention and anti-oppression work: leadership, social justice, gender identity, issues of identity and status, and diffusion of innovation. Through these five themes, the authors acknowledge Mentors for Violence Prevention’s (MVP) successes while critically analyzing opportunities for a more comprehensive approach to violence prevention.

Keywords

violence prevention, bystander intervention, campus violence, sexual violence, social justice, anti-oppression, violence against women

Jackson Katz is a pioneer in preventing violence against women. At times when most were focused on emergency intervention and coordination with criminal justice systems, Katz was developing the Mentors for Violence Prevention (MVP) program as an upstream effort to prevent violence before it occurred. Katz deserves major recognition for the impact of MVP and many similar prevention programs it has spawned. We reflect on his historical review of MVP in this issue of *Violence Against Women*, commenting from our unique perspectives within an institution of higher education, the University of California (UC) Berkeley. The first and second authors work within a

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We organize our reflections around five major themes: (a) leadership, (b) social justice, (c) gender and identity, (d) issues of identity and status, and (e) diffusion of innovation, and conclude with a call for a comprehensive and multitiered framework of violence prevention.

Leadership

Katz reframes bystander intervention as a form of leadership training "because when bystanders assess a situation, consider their options, and take action, they are executing a basic leadership protocol" (Katz, 2017, p. XX). As Katz states, this is an attractive solution to overcoming resistance to offering violence prevention programming.

While we support this reframing, we have concerns on two fronts. First, Katz chastises other bystander intervention programs for removing a focus on gender-based violence. Has MVP's leadership-training emphasis created the very mechanism that has enabled the depoliticized violence prevention to proliferate? By avoiding violence and oppression as the leading framework, Katz may have laid the groundwork for others to opt out of the more difficult focus on these issues he laments later in the article.

Second, providing leadership training to mostly men, athletes and others, raises the possibility of reinforcing dominant-masculinity stereotypes of strong men protecting vulnerable women. Katz also states that most MVP programs are led by men for men and by women for women. However, in batterer intervention programs, there is extensive experience with women coleading groups with men or other women. Each of these program leadership configurations offers unique experiences for the men in batterer programs. In fact, women leaders sometimes generate more revealing in-group experiences than when program leadership and membership is men-only. Again, we fear this assumption of who should lead MVP programs for men may contribute to subtle messaging about leadership being lodged only among men. We doubt this is Katz's purpose, but the concerns emerged among us nonetheless.

Social Justice

Katz frequently refers to social justice as a major differentiating characteristic of MVP, yet he does not offer a clear definition of how he defines this widely used and varying term. It would be helpful for Katz to clarify exactly how he defines social justice and, more importantly, how it is applied within MVP programming. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) define social justice as both a process and a goal with a "vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure" (p. 1). In our perspective, it is critical to practice and strive toward social justice within violence prevention efforts. The deconstruction of oppression, the intersection of identities, and community empowerment and liberation are concepts key to antiviolence. We applaud Katz's position that prevention efforts must not be sanitized

to avoid key concerns of oppression, gender, and identity. Prevention of violence is itself political. The process of understanding privilege and unlearning violence, power, and control necessitates consciousness-raising and aims to activate social change.

With respect to sexual and interpersonal violence, sexism and oppression operate to make invisible the role of gender identity in the perpetration of violence. Thus, prevention approaches that are gender neutral and do not aim to counteract oppressive forces will be less likely to affect the necessary cultural and systemic changes. However, it is important to acknowledge that although gender is an important anchor in antiviolence work, there are many other aspects of identity that must also be infused in violence prevention efforts.

Katz mentions a concept called “organic intersectionality,” which “understands various manifestations of violence as institutionally connected, rather than manifestations of discrete phenomena.” We need to think about intersectionality beyond intersecting types of violence. In fact, looking at the term’s origins in feminist theory, we understand intersectionality as a broad concept incorporating all aspects of someone’s identity, experience, and positionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Effective violence prevention necessitates a full integration of intersectionality and anti-oppression. As long as any form of oppression exists (e.g., racism, classism, ableism), perpetrators will continue to utilize such oppression to perpetrate and disguise sexual and interpersonal violence (Crenshaw, 1991).

Katz acknowledges the importance of incorporating intersectionality but also says that “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.” Intersectionality and sexual violence are indeed complex topics which require experienced, intentional, and nuanced facilitation. Although we cannot expect high school and college students to utilize academic jargon in describing the role of identity in their lives and in cultures of violence, educators can assist participants in unearthing oppression using participants’ lived experiences. We should depend on Freirian pedagogy, which Katz references, to facilitate more complex, yet accessible, conversations about identity, oppression, and prevention.

MVP’s grounding in and the recognition of the role of privileged/dominant group membership is critical to culture change. Katz and many educators have utilized this approach to ensure violence is seen as a community and public health problem, not simply a “women’s issue.” For example, Katz’s discussion of the bystander approach centers on the assumption that the privileged/dominant group (i.e., men) should be responsible for deconstructing the system that promotes violence. Further integrating social justice education and prevention will also advance Katz’s strategy. For instance, prevention conversations must also highlight cisgender men’s own liberation from toxic masculinity and how it is inextricably linked to and dependent on the liberation of women and transgender people.

Gender and Identity

Grounding violence prevention in social justice also necessitates our field to grapple with our history of transphobia and transgender exclusion. In an effort to meet the

needs of cisgender women, our field has both intentionally and unconsciously erased violence against transgender people and perpetuated gender binaries. While we agree with Katz that violence prevention must explore the role of gender, we are concerned by any approach that utilizes the gender binary to attain progress. Katz, like many educators, is faced with a systemic challenge that is not easy to address. Katz's repeated exclusion of transgender and gender nonconforming participants in his writing and the strong adherence to a gender binary approach (e.g., women's and men's groups) is antithetical to social justice. Katz does not address how the MVP program discussion would apply to, and include, transgender and gender nonconforming participants. We call for our field to continue exploring gender expansive perspectives and approaches and to always be trans-inclusive while holding privileged/dominant group members accountable.

We agree with Katz and other social justice educators, that successful approaches must require cismen (or any dominant group) to explore their role in oppression. Cismen must explore the impact on all minoritized genders (e.g., ciswomen, transwomen, transmen, gender nonconfirming people). Furthermore, it is critical for all men to explore the intersectionality of their identities as it relates to and contributes to toxic masculinities. Men and masculine people must be liberated people from all norms (whether grounded in gender, race, class, ability, etc.) that contribute to violence and harm.

Katz's reference to, and use of, the social norms approach to engage men is critically important. The social norms theory is a valuable primary prevention tool, which can be effectively applied to violence prevention (Berkowitz, 2003). As Katz describes, misperceived norms are a significant barrier to bystander intervention, especially among cismen. As such, prevention educators should invest time to understand how to apply the social norms approach to assist communities in shifting to healthy and proactive attitudes and behaviors.

Issues of Identity and Status as Related to Bystander Approach/Intervention

As Katz indicates, bystander approaches often discuss the risks (social and otherwise) of intervening and the related cost-benefit analysis. More discussion is required about the role of social identity (race, gender, etc.) in the cost-benefit process. In particular, it is important to explore perceptions of being disloyal to one's own identity group. That is, exploring perspectives of disloyalty to both social group identity (e.g., race, religion) and community of choice (e.g., sports team, fraternity).

Moreover, as Katz states, bystander approaches actively aim to capitalize on the status of leaders ("public opinion leaders") to lead and change norms. There is great value to this approach, and we encourage its application. However, bystander approaches and prevention efforts, more broadly, must simultaneously aim to dismantle the systems of power that create such status groups. These power structures and signals of status, if left unchecked, are often exploited by perpetrators.

Although several bystander programs and research studies explore the risks and analysis that is involved in considering to intervene, we would like to see more discussion regarding the role of status in the success or effectiveness of the intervention. That is, a junior faculty member may consider the risks involved in taking action given their lower professional status. But what happens when a junior faculty member chooses to intervene and their intervention fails, is dismissed, or even punished?

Bystander approaches must prepare the community for the impact of a failed intervention and how to support both the “intervener” and the “target” of harassment and violence. The meaning making and resolution within a community after a failed intervention will have significant ramifications for the likelihood of future social change.

Diffusion of Innovation

Katz spends quite a bit of time focused on how many more recent bystander interventions have been stripped of their social justice and gender lenses. Unfortunately, diffusion of innovation from charismatic founders, such as Katz, to programs spread across the world has a messy history (Rogers & Singer Olaguera, 2003). In some ways, this may be unavoidable as both funders and program staff may not fully grasp the importance of signature pedagogies within model programs. While Katz laments this outcome, it seems sadly unavoidable and can be seen in other violence prevention efforts, such as the evolution of shelters for battered women and programs for batterers into social services without the founders’ focus on social action or macro change. Katz is right to call our attention to this concern but does not offer much in the way of systematically transferring knowledge from innovative founders to replication sites.

Comprehensive Prevention Approach

In all communities, and particularly on college campuses, the most impactful violence prevention efforts complement and reinforce one another (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; Dills, Fowler, & Payne, 2016). The reasons for this are evident upon exploration of a social-ecological framework. Katz describes the value this model has brought to violence prevention work, and he is right to highlight this framework as a critical tool to bring depth to our understanding of how to affect change and prevent violence. The framework has far from fulfilled its purpose, and it is imperative that we continue to examine the social-ecology from a firm grounding in social justice. From this vantage point, we can acknowledge the harm related to sexual and interpersonal violence that is taking place at every level: individuals are perpetrating assault, peers are failing to intervene and prevent harm, community norms perpetuating cultures of violence are rampant, and our systems have neglected to hold people accountable. These and other injustices are experienced differently depending on various aspects of someone’s identity and the communities of which they are a part.

Beyond understanding the injustices occurring at every level of the social ecology, we can use it to enhance our prevention approach. Bystander intervention can have an impact on several levels of the social ecology. For the bystander approach to be

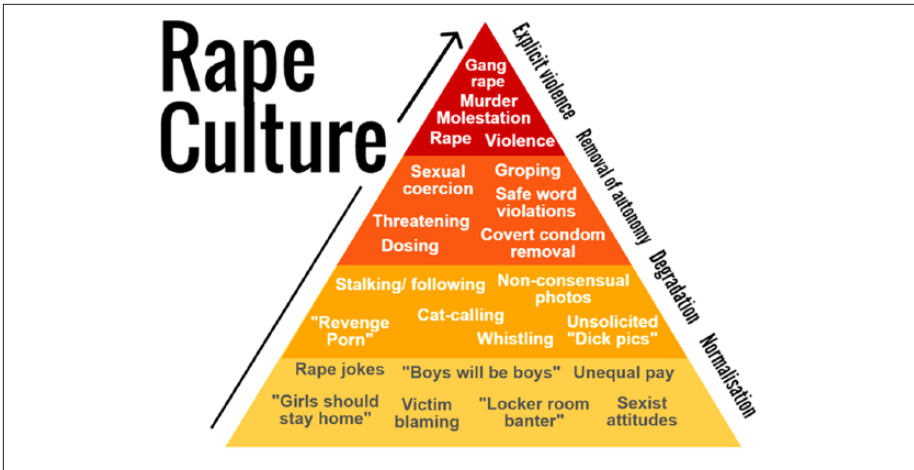


Figure 1. Pyramid of violence.

effective, prevention initiatives and activities must exist at all levels, deliver consistent messages, and reinforce all other prevention activities. At colleges and universities, we can, and should, engage students, faculty, and academics in conversation about when and how to intervene in a potentially unsafe situation. However, as Katz points out, research has shown that a significant barrier for people (especially cismen) to intervening is a misperceived norm: Men believe that other men are more accepting of harmful language and behavior, and that other men are unwilling to intervene in the face of it (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Therefore, it is important to focus on social norms change to support the primary prevention of violence.

Social norms guide our interactions with one another and the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by intact communities. Thus, a campus community may have certain general norms, and the intact subcommunities¹ will have discrete norms specific to in-group status. A violence prevention strategy grounded in social norms change first identifies the norms in a particular community and then determines which norms may be healthy or unhealthy and which norms may be accurately perceived or misperceived. From there, it is possible to challenge unhealthy and misperceived norms, while supporting healthy, prosocial norms. In terms of the social-ecological framework, social norms interventions must occur in tandem with efforts to educate all community members of the bystander approach and strategies. Through this layering of approaches and theoretical applications, prevention can occur at each level of the social ecology.

Another violence prevention model is the widely referenced concept often known as the *pyramid of violence* (see Figure 1), which provides a deeper level of context for the social-ecological framework (11th Principle: Consent, n.d.). The pyramid of violence draws from public health and social norms concepts to explain the ways

that attitudes and beliefs based in oppression lead to the normalization of violence and harm. In fact, Mentors in Violence Prevention was one of the earliest groups to develop and use a version of this pyramid. For the pyramid to serve a role in prevention, it should be aligned with a prevention plan involving primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention strategies, such as universal education and social norms change, can be used to address the bottom of the pyramid. Over time and with proactive measures, primary prevention will cause the bottom of the pyramid to crumble; without the support of normalized violence and harm, behaviors and attitudes at the top will lessen in frequency, as will our acceptance of them.

Whether a campus' prevention efforts are grounded in a social-ecological framework, norms change, the pyramid of violence, or some combination thereof, the take-away message is this: A comprehensive prevention approach is the mostly likely avenue to culture change and a meaningful reduction in violence. As Casey and Lindhorst (2009) and Dills, Fowler, and Payne (2016) have demonstrated, it is vital for students to receive multiple, reinforcing messages. As such, violence prevention educators should collaborate with anti-oppression and identity-focused educators. In collaboration, all can play an important and unique role in deconstruction, oppression, harmful norms, and changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

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Note

1. *Subcommunities* here refers to communities of identity, place, and/or interest. Examples could include a sports team; a floor in a residence hall; a group of students bonded by their race, religion, sexual orientation, or other identity; a student club; or a cohort of students in a particular major.

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