

Lessons from Steubenville: An Interview with Jackson Katz: Part II

March 20, 2013 by Jeremy Earp

JE: When it comes to high-profile cases of sexual violence – or violence generally – there often seems to be less talk about the way the culture shapes attitudes than there is about the responsibility of parents in all of this. What’s your take on that?

JK: One of the chapters in my first book *The Macho Paradox* is called “It Takes a Village to Rape a Woman.” The premise is that while parents play an incredibly important role, there’s a larger culture out there that’s helping to socialize our sons and daughters. It’s naive to think of “the family” as a unit that is somehow isolated from the rest of society; families are deeply embedded in social systems and cultural norms as well. Those of us who are parents have ourselves been profoundly influenced by those norms. So our parenting is shaped not only by how we were parented, but also by our peer-culture experiences, the media we’ve consumed, the cultural practices and social norms we’ve been socialized into, including those having to do with gender. The gender and sexual norms in our culture are way bigger than any individual parent or set of parents can hope to impart. The idea that somehow criminally misogynous behavior by young men can be laid exclusively at the feet of their parents is flat out simplistic and wrong. It’s like saying racism is something learned in the family, as opposed to saying it’s a much larger system of inequality and exploitation, rooted in long-term historical and institutional practices and ideologies, whose pernicious influence and impact is felt in many aspects of our individual as well as collective lives, including experiences in our families. It’s the same with sexism.

JE: In your view, what are some of the most dangerous cultural messages parents are contending with?

JK: The main ones in this case are the devaluation of anything that’s feminine and the depersonalization and dehumanization of women, especially in a sexual context. The message is that women and girls are not full human beings entitled to full dignity and an absolute right to their bodily autonomy. In patriarchal cultures, many boys and men are taught these sexist ideas from a very early age. Look at the role of pornography. Porn culture plays an immensely influential role in shaping the sexual psyches of millions and millions of boys and men. What porn culture constructs as a normative heterosexual experience in most cases is the complete objectification of the girl or woman: the man – or men – are doing something *to* her; they are ejaculating into or onto an *object* rather than having a sexual relationship with another human being. In much of the mainstream porn that’s marketed to men and boys, men call women degrading names as they’re having sex with them, order them around, and sometimes are incredibly callous and cruel to them. This is normative behavior in contemporary heterosexual “gonzo” porn. That’s an example of a widespread cultural message that transcends parenting. And because of the availability of porn on the Internet, it’s virtually impossible for parents of heterosexual boys to prevent their sons from being immersed in that world if that’s the road the child is going down. We need to remember that the vast majority of what passes for sex “education” in this society has been coming from wealthy media corporations in the form of pornography – not from schools or parents.

JE: But the cultural forces that parents – and even teachers – contend with go beyond pornography, right?

JK: It's not just pornography itself; it's the pervasive objectification of women across the culture. Whether it's in advertising during football games, or any other form of mainstream media – especially media targeted at young men – there's a widespread and casual dismissal of women's humanity and an objectification of women's bodies at the core of a lot of the media that boys and men consume, and that girls and women consume as well. So a larger cultural analysis of rape and its prevalence has to incorporate some insight about the role of media in shaping social norms. It needs to pay attention to how media reinforce ideas about women as objects rather than as autonomous subjects. It also needs to account for how the devaluation of what the culture defines as feminine is not just a devaluing of women – but also of core elements of boys and men's identities and emotional lives as well. Feminists have been saying for decades that when everything defined as feminine is seen as “less than” or contemptible or somehow inferior, it not only hurts women, but also narrows the range and depth of men's humanity. We've come to expect boys and men to shy away from those aspects of themselves they've been told are “feminine” – qualities like empathy, compassion, or even concern with personal appearance. All of these things register in the culture – and especially male culture – as unmanly and “girlie.” And I think this has exacted a huge toll on men's lives.

JE: You mentioned earlier that there were very likely a lot of young men who witnessed the assault on this young woman in Steubenville, knew it was wrong, and yet remained silent. Is one explanation for their silence this larger fear of the feminine you're talking about – in this case, the fear of being seen as overly sensitive and empathetic if they dared to speak up and defend her?

JK: I think that's right. Being “one of the guys” means going along with certain behaviors – even when they're clearly sexist and abusive – because if you don't go along with the behaviors, your manhood will be questioned. You risk being seen as feminine, as soft. And these pressures only intensify when the abuse is being carried out and led by popular guys. If being masculine means being aggressive, misogynist, and sexually exploitative towards girls and women, and you don't stay in line and go along with those things – well, according to our gender binary system, you must not be very masculine. Or you must be acting like a girl.

In the case of gang rape scenarios like Steubenville, if qualities like compassion and concern for the vulnerable are seen as “unmasculine,” or you're seen as “taking the side of the girl” against your boys, a lot of young men – and older men – are going to freeze and fail to act. There's a lot of pressure on men to fall in line and be “one of the guys,” to resist breaking with the dominant ethos of the group – even if they might find some of the things they encounter uncomfortable or worse.

JE: There's this brutal paradox in male culture that says if you stand up for someone who's in a vulnerable position – in this case an intoxicated and outnumbered young woman, in other cases maybe it's a kid being bullied – then somehow you're overly sensitive and therefore weak. The sheer courage it takes for a kid to stand up to his peers when they're doing something wrong is

somehow flipped into cowardice. This is more or less the perfect way for a culture to perpetuate abuse.

JK: That's right. The fact is that it takes a lot more strength for a guy – especially for a guy operating within the hypermasculine environment of something like football culture – to challenge his friends and his teammates when they're acting out in sexist or abusive ways than it does to keep quiet and conform. And yet the guy who has the guts to stand up in the face of these pressures – and to be his own man – gets called “soft,” a “pussy,” a “wimp,” or worse. It's Orwellian.

JE: This is precisely the underlying principle of the bystander approach you created for the Center for the Society of Sport in Society at Northeastern University 20 years ago, isn't it? Isn't it the central premise of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) approach that men are, in some sense, looking for cultural permission to say what a lot of them are already thinking but feel too boxed in by traditional gender roles to say?

JK: Yes, these are exactly the kinds of dynamics we've been talking about in MVP for two decades. When we developed MVP back in 1993, our work was focused initially on the college male sports culture. MVP quickly expanded into a mixed-gender program, and we now work with female student-athletes, coaches, and administrators, in addition to women and girls in the general student population. But the original idea was how do you start talking about these dynamics in all sorts of racially and ethnically diverse male peer cultures in a way that begins to change the social norms in that group, or at the very least bring the more positive social norms to the surface. We know that a lot of guys are uncomfortable with abusive behavior by their peers, including sexist and misogynist and gay-bashing behavior, but they rarely speak up. So part of the idea with MVP was to encourage men to break the unspoken code of silence within these peer cultures – to empower them to stand up and say, “Okay, wait a second. I don't like this. I don't like what you're saying, and I don't appreciate this kind of behavior. I think it's weak, I think it's stupid, I think it's bad.” In that way, what we're really doing is trying to redefine how the culture defines strength in men – so that guys who speak up like this aren't seen as “going soft” or being a “wuss,” but as strong and having integrity.

I should say that from the beginning, my goal was to see programs like this implemented in every high school, every middle school, every college, and every high school athletic program, in the United States. And while we've made some progress — the bystander approach, whether it's explicitly MVP or a variation of MVP, is being employed by all four major services in the U.S. military at this point – the sad fact is that the vast majority of high schools and high school athletic programs have no sexual and relationship abuse prevention programs at all. The same goes for colleges and universities. There are schools that have comprehensive programming in place, and some that have the beginnings of systematic programming, but they're still the exception. Too many don't have these kinds of programs at all.

JE: Why is that? What's the main source of resistance there? Is it institutional?

JK: Yes. Let's be clear: the obstacles haven't been pedagogical or curricular; the major obstacle has been a lack of leadership in secondary education, higher education, and the sports culture in

general. The school boards, superintendents, principals, athletic directors, and coaches at the high school level, as well as the administrators, athletic directors, and coaches at the college and university level, with some exceptions, have largely failed to step up and take this stuff on. It's on the shoulders of the powerful men and women who run these institutions to say this is a priority and that we need to be addressing these issues.

When I heard about Steubenville, the first question that crossed my mind was, "Did they have a gender violence prevention program in Steubenville for student-athletes or other students?" And of course the answer was no. If they had had a program like MVP, a bystander program, would all the kids in that room have behaved the same way and done nothing? Or would some of them have spoken up and said it was wrong? I mean, we've been using a scenario in MVP trainings for twenty years that looks an awful lot like the Steubenville case. We ask young men: what would you do if you were at a party and a friend or teammate of yours was trying to have sex with an obviously drunk young woman. We've used this scenario in trainings thousands of times. In an interactive dialogue, we play the whole thing out with them: what is their responsibility to her? What is their responsibility to him? What's your responsibility to yourself, and the kind of person you are or want to be? We discuss many possible options for what to do. If they had been doing bystander training at Steubenville High, would that have made a difference in this case? Obviously we can't be sure. But I do think it's far less likely that every one of them would have done nothing in that situation.

JE: So is one element of your approach not only to encourage young men to empathize with young women outside the hypermasculine box of their own peer group, but also to understand how these attitudes and behaviors are destructive to their male friends?

JK: Yes. One of the things the MVP model is designed to do is to get guys to think about their responsibility not just to the innocent girls and women that get preyed upon in these situations, but also their responsibility to their friends, their teammates, who are committing these acts. My first concern in the Steubenville case was – and is – about the young woman who was raped, but the two boys who were convicted of this crime are also facing truly significant consequences. To be sure, they are the consequences of their own actions. But they too have been badly hurt by those actions. Their lives are essentially ruined. They might be registered sex offenders for the rest of their lives. They'll forever be marked by acts they committed when they were 16 and 17 years old. And where were their friends? Where were the guys around them who said, "I got your back, man. You're my boy, you're my friend, you're my teammate. You shouldn't be doing this to her. She's a person, just like your sister or your mom is a person. Just like you're a person. This is dead wrong. And it's beneath you."

These are the kinds of things we talk about with young men in MVP, yet it's been a struggle, to say the least, to get this kind of programming into high schools, into colleges, into athletic programs. Every student should have access to quality gender violence prevention education. It says something about the priorities of our society that this isn't yet the case.

JE: But isn't the reluctance of men in leadership positions to take on these issues in high schools and college sports programs symptomatic of the very problem MVP seeks to redress?

JK: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I think what we have here is a failure of leadership. The first thing I would look at in Steubenville is what is the role of the school principal, the high school football coach, the athletic director? What have they done to address sexism and sexual assault and relationship abuse? And if they've done nothing, I'd say that as leaders they're failing the boys and girls of Steubenville. We need to remember that adult men are in many ways themselves policed into silence around these issues – in the same ways that adolescent boys are. So while we need to figure out ways to encourage boys and young men to speak up and break their silence and show strength and leadership, that's also true for adult men. It's not fair to put the burden of leadership on the shoulders of 16- and 17-year-old boys. It should be on the shoulders of adult men as well.

Here's one suggestion: When athletic directors are interviewing candidates for coaching positions on the football team, they should be asking, straight-up, what their thoughts are about how to encourage boys and young men to respect girls and women. They should make it clear this is considered part of what they're looking for in hiring a coach. If you take a systemic analysis of the role of various institutions, of various cultural practices, of the various roles of individuals in those institutions in helping to shape the social norms in those institutions, then you have to expand the focus and assignment of responsibility and accountability further than simply a group of kids at a party.

JE: You mentioned the video that was shot in Steubenville the night of the rape, and how it went viral. The thing that was maybe most shocking about this video was how un-shocked most of the kids in the video seemed about the girls' well-being and the gang rape that had happened just moments before.

JK: Yes. I think a lot of people were really, really put off by the cavalier way this guy talked about the rape of this girl. Some people I know couldn't watch it. They could only watch 30 seconds of it. I think in many ways this video was a testament to the fact that this case was about more than just this single instance of violence – atrocious as the incident itself was. It revealed that this was also about the widespread cultural attitudes that support this kind of behavior. It pointed to a problem that runs deeper than just two pathological individuals acting out their power games and their abusive mentality. And I think that's what made the video so unsettling.

JE: So when you think about culture, specifically the relationship between traditional ideals of manhood and gender violence, would you say you're more concerned with the way these ideals work to silence the vast majority of boys and men who never commit this kind of violence or with how these ideals lead a minority of boys and men to commit these acts?

JK: I'm concerned about both. The first thing to say is that I don't think culture creates scripts that boys and men simply imitate. I think it's about how the culture creates scripts that are then normalized. And I don't think there's any question that a big part of the way boys and men learn what it means to be a "normal" man is through their exposure to media. If it's normal and cool for guys to do a certain thing, and that's enshrined in the media they're consuming, then why wouldn't they think that's cool? That's the air they're breathing. But I do think that in spite of the sexism and misogyny they see in media, most men and young men have the capacity to achieve a higher state of moral reasoning and decide what's right and wrong. So the question, for

me, is always about why they don't say anything. That's the heart of what we do with the MVP model. We try to figure out why the guys wouldn't say something, identify the pressures they experience, and then explore what can be done to change things and break the culture of men's silence around these issues.

JE: So the bottom line, for you, seems to be that while Steubenville raised important questions about football culture and jock culture, we have to be careful not to lose sight of how the stories we tell ourselves as a culture about manhood perpetuate men's violence, and men's silence in the face of violence, in American society as a whole.

JK: Yes. We have incidents in the sports culture, and we talk about what's going on in sports. But we see similar patterns in many different male-dominated institutions and masculine subcultures. Look at the military. There were approximately 26,000 sexual assaults last year in the U.S. military. This has prompted a long-overdue conversation about what's going on there. We have incidents that happen within gun culture, and we talk about what's going on with guns. We have incidents that happen in neither sports culture, the military culture, nor gun culture, and we start talking about the variables that are specific to that subculture. Well, the one thing that connects all the men and boys operating within these subcultures is that they're men and boys, and that they make sense of their lives in gendered ways that transcend whatever specific subculture they happen to be a part of. You can go from one case to the next: sexual violence, gun violence. This violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men, young men, and boys, and yet when a big story breaks, we come up with all of these variables to try to make sense of it and ignore the single most important connection – the gender of the perpetrators. There's just no question about it: if we're serious about understanding and confronting violence, the larger conversation we need to be having as a society is about manhood.

This interview (Parts I and II) is located at www.mvpstrat.com.