

PENN STATE: THE MOTHER OF ALL TEACHABLE MOMENTS FOR THE BYSTANDER APPROACH

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For those of us who have been advocating a bystander-focused approach to the prevention of sexual violence, the scandal rocking State College, Pennsylvania, might be the mother of all teachable moments. If what is being alleged is true, then all the necessary elements are present:

- Incidents of sexual abuse witnessed by people in a position to intervene who did not;
- Pressures on people (men) in various peer cultures to remain silent
- The failure of institutional leaders to act, resulting in disastrous consequences; and
- All of this taking place in one of the bastions of male power and privilege - the Penn State University football program, presided over for 46 years by one of the iconic patriarchs in American sports culture.

The "bystander approach" at its best has direct relevance to all of these elements.

Understanding the dynamics of bystander behavior -- in this case especially in male sports culture -- helps to explain what allegedly happened at Penn State. But perhaps even more importantly, the bystander approach offers concrete ideas about how to reform institutional practices in order to prevent future tragedies.

First, it is necessary to provide some brief background about the bystander approach, and clarify what I mean by the term. In media discussions about Penn State, some experts have made reference to the social psychological literature about the "bystander effect," the societal phenomenon where people are reluctant to get involved in potentially dangerous situations on the streets and elsewhere. Unfortunately, this use of the term "bystander" is easily confused with the bystander approach to prevention.

The key difference, for the purpose of this discussion, is that "bystander" in the prevention field refers to anyone who plays some role in an act of harassment, abuse or violence -- but is neither the perpetrator nor the victim. They are someone who is present and thus potentially in position to discourage, prevent, or interrupt an incident. They are a member of a peer culture who has

relationships with others who might be perpetrators or victims, or perhaps vulnerable to becoming one. A bystander could also be a teacher, coach, military commander or campus administrator who is in a position to respond assertively to incidents once they've occurred -- or to initiate prevention programs before something bad happens.

It is important to note that when sexual assault prevention educators talk about bystanders, they typically mean people who know each other, such as friends, classmates, colleagues, or members of sports teams. The dynamics of bystander behavior - and the impediments to action - are very different when people know the perpetrator or victim, versus when they are strangers.

THE MVP PROGRAM

My colleagues and I co-founded the first bystander program in the gender violence prevention field in 1993, at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society. We called it the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program.

The initial idea behind MVP was to train college male student-athletes to use their status 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. If young men with status and a kind of "manhood credibility" on college and high school campuses would break their silence and make 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 young men beyond the insular sports culture similarly to raise their voices. MVP was based on the elementary premise in social justice education that members of dominant groups -- men, whites, heterosexuals - play an important role in efforts to challenge sexism, racism and homophobia.

In the second year, we developed a complementary model for working with female student-athletes, coaches, and administrators; since the mid-1990s MVP has been a mixed-gender program. It should be noted, however, that whether we're working with student-athletes, the general student population, coaches, teachers, or other professionals, the MVP model includes space for both single and mixed-gender sessions. It is also worth noting that in recent years a number of other bystander initiatives have been developed, each with their own philosophies and emphases. What follows focuses on the MVP model: what we have been doing -- and some of what we have learned -- in our work in college athletics for nearly two decades. Because the

Penn State case underscores so emphatically the necessity of examining -- and transforming -- social norms within male-dominated institutions, for the purpose of this article I have chosen to highlight our work in the sub-culture of college male athletics.

For at least the past generation, male sports culture has too often been the site of gender violence scandals. But MVP did not originate in organized athletics because of the problems in that sub-culture. The impetus was more proactive and positive, and had to do with the potential leadership of successful male (and later, female) student-athletes and coaches 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. If one of the long-term goals of the anti-rape movement is to transform rape-supportive attitudes in mainstream U.S. culture, who better to catalyze this transformation than men who -- more than most -- help to define the mainstream?

To put it another way, sexual violence prevention initiatives that fail to engage men in the sports culture and other areas of cultural hegemony are often ignored by mainstream populations, and can easily be marginalized. Why stay on the margins and not go right for the center? As the Penn State debacle makes clear, sports culture provides an unparalleled platform from which to call attention to a range of societal problems --- and to catalyze efforts to change the social norms that often underlie them.

Nonetheless, because the MVP program originated in sports culture, and continues to use sports terminology in some of its curricular materials, it is sometimes mistakenly seen as a program designed exclusively for athletics. For the past 18 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, CFL, NBA, WNBA, MLB, and NASCAR. But from the beginning, the strategic vision of MVP was to begin in athletics and then move into broader student and professional populations in colleges, high schools, middle schools and other institutions like the U.S. military - a process that continues to this day.

In the early days of MVP, we were looking to develop a pedagogical model that could provide critical information and refute common rape myths, but do so in a way that would, in the words of Futures Without Violence founder Esta Soler, "invite, not indict" men, and engage them in

critical dialogue. We quickly realized that the "bystander" category offered a way to transcend the limitations of the perpetrator-victim binary, which up until that point had held sway in conventional gender violence prevention theory and practice. 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 is that most men did not see themselves as potential perpetrators -- and as a result shut down in a way that precluded honest participation or critical dialogue. This is not about me, their thinking went, but about the kind of men - those men -- who need to be helped, or held accountable, for bad behavior toward women. But when men - and women - are positioned as friends, family members, teammates, classmates, colleagues and co-workers of women who are or might one day be abused, or men who are abusive or perhaps going down that path, then "bystander" represents a virtually universal category - and men can't as easily tune it out. At MVP, we understood that this 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.

The short and long-term solution wasn't to "fix" individual men; it was to change social norms, especially but not exclusively within male peer cultures. The strategy we settled on was to encourage people to speak out in the face of abusive behavior before, during or after the fact, and thus contribute to a climate where 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 address the relation between men's violence against women and men's violence against ... men. This was prompted by empathy with men as victims, but it was also strategic. Appeals to men's altruism are more likely to be successful when bolstered by appeals to self-interest. Men's self-interest in preventing gender violence includes men's concern for the women in their lives: their mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, girlfriends and friends.

But in MVP, we also talk about the abuse, harassment and violence that men experience - usually (but not always) at the hands of other men. The same cultural and socialization processes that produce men who are violent toward women also help to produce men who verbally, physically and sexually assault each other -- and sexually abuse boys. From the

beginning, MVP has used real-life scenarios that address the role of the bystander in instances of male-on-male bullying, gay-bashing and other forms of abuse that are common in men's lives. The alleged 2002 assault of a 10-year-old boy in a locker room shower by former Penn State coach Jerry Sandusky that was witnessed by then-graduate assistant Mike McQueary sounds like a scenario that could have come right out of our program's main teaching tool, the MVP Playbook.

END OF PART 1.

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