

PART 2 IN A 3-PART SERIES: PENN STATE SEXUAL ABUSE CASE

The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) presents this three-part series on bystander intervention as a continuation of our support of and focus on this approach to sexual violence prevention. Join the NSVRC throughout December for a conversation with Jackson Katz, Ph.D., as he shares lessons from the PSU sexual abuse case. Read about more resources on [engaging bystanders in sexual violence prevention](#).

Penn State & the bystander approach: Laying bare the dynamics in male peer culture

By Jackson Katz, Ph.D.
December 8, 2011

To many people, one of the most astounding things about the Penn State scandal is that in at least two separate incidents, adult men allegedly witnessed another adult man sexually assaulting boys and yet did not intervene -- according to the Grand Jury report on one of the incidents -- or immediately report it to the police. How could they not have taken stronger action? How could athletic administrators and other university officials not have acted more forcefully and responsibly?

Much commentary about Penn State -- and to a certain extent, Syracuse University -- has included speculation that the silence of various individuals might have been due to their placing a greater priority on maintaining the good name and reputation of the university and its athletic program over the safety of children. Whether or not this theory of misplaced priorities holds true, it clearly merits further investigation by outside authorities -- and deep introspection on the part of Penn State partisans -- in the weeks and months ahead.

But the bystander passivity that has come under critical scrutiny in the Happy Valley is sadly very common in male peer culture - especially in cases of gender and sexual violence involving "one of the guys." To many people this seems perplexing. How could people not act, especially when the alleged abuse involves children? Many callers to sports talk radio programs in recent weeks have asserted that if they had observed or been told about what went down at Penn State, they would have taken immediate, forceful action. Maybe so, but talk is cheap. It is easy from a distance to judge others' failure to act. But as someone who has led hundreds of interactive discussions with men on the topic of engaging bystanders in the prevention of sexual and domestic violence, I know it is more complicated than that.

In reality there is often a price men must be willing to pay for doing the right thing. For example, when it comes to men's mistreatment of women, men who speak out and confront or interrupt each other's abusive behavior run the risk of fostering resentment from other men, increasing tensions in their daily interpersonal relationships, or in some cases, even suffering violent reprisals. Or they have to contend with their peers questioning their "manhood," even their heterosexuality. The stress and anxiety this kind of disapproval produces can be as disturbing for a 45-year-old man as it is for a 15-year-old boy.

In a powerful college athletic program, fraternity or military organization a man who "drops a dime" on another man -- especially someone who is well-respected or critical to the group's image or success -- might be seen as being disloyal to the group itself. In groups that prize blind loyalty over other ethical considerations, acting on principle thus comes with a cost. Depending on the popularity of the alleged perpetrator, a man who breaks the informal code of silence runs the risk of committing social suicide.

Sometimes there are practical -- including financial -- considerations. This is particularly true if the active bystander has less social capital -- or institutional power -- than the perpetrator. Consider the case of a first-year student-athlete who is uncomfortable with the way a senior co-captain talks about women. Should he say something? Or a scholarship student-athlete who finds out that his coach is abusing his wife, but the same coach controls the student-athlete's playing time, or maybe even the status of his scholarship. Should the student-athlete confront the coach? Is it fair to expect low-level university employees or military members to challenge their bosses or superior officers when they face a realistic fear of being fired or losing out on a promotion? The answer might be "yes" to all these hypothetical situations, but let's not pretend these are easy decisions for anyone to make.

In fact, a big part of the reason for the reluctance of men in general -- and men in sports culture in specific -- to speak out about men's violence against women is that it often takes a good deal of courage for a man to do so. In the Penn State case, as Daniel Mendelsohn pointed out in *The New York Times*, squeamishness about homosexuality also seems to have played an

important role in both Mike McQueary's reaction to the rape he witnessed, and the kinds of euphemisms university officials initially used to describe the incident (e.g. "horsing around" in the showers.)

As the multiple failures to protect children at Penn State demonstrate, it is important for people to learn and practice techniques they can use to intervene effectively in potential sexual assaults and a variety of other social situations. But more than skill-building is required. People -- in this case especially, men -- need permission from each other to act, and reassurance that those who do intervene and interrupt abusive behavior will be respected, not rejected, for actually "stepping up to the plate." Men, as well as women, need the opportunity to talk about the dynamics of their relationships with their peers, and with those in authority. What are the pros and cons of this course of action, or that one? If I see something that makes me uncomfortable, what should I do? To whom can I turn for ideas or support? What have others done in similar circumstances?

The answers to these sorts of questions are not likely to be found in a PowerPoint presentation, or a briefing about applicable state law or university rules. To be sure, it is important for everyone to know their obligations under the law. The Penn State case has made clear that university regulations on sexual abuse reporting -- and state laws themselves -- need to be scrutinized and strengthened. But the key to the success of the bystander approach in sexual assault prevention education has as much to do with the process as the content.

The power of critical dialogue focused on the role of the bystander is that the dialogue itself is the vehicle for a shift in group norms around the acceptance and perpetuation of rape and battering-supportive attitudes and behaviors.

In the *Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) Playbook*, as in the Penn State case, all of the bystander scenarios depict situations where the bystander knows the perpetrator (or potential perpetrator) and/or the victim (or potential victim). The interactive discussion highlights the nature of the bystander's relationship with both parties, as well as the larger peer culture in which they are all imbedded.

Understanding the specific dynamics of a given peer culture is crucial to understanding what factors can catalyze or impede responsible action. For example, one of the key differences in facilitating bystander education sessions with cohesive groups like teams, and with groups composed of people who don't 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). Jeff O'Brien, long-time director of MVP-National, explains:

"Individuals can conceivably go back to their peer groups and no one would ever know they participated in a [gender violence] training. With athletic teams or in the military, you have

common goals and organizational values that 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 that they 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."

In MVP sessions with athletic teams, we refer to "teammates" more often than "bystanders," although operationally the two words are closely related. Outside of 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 have shared goals, but oftentimes friendships, and a special kind of camaraderie. In MVP we customize our language and try, whenever possible, to adapt the bystander concept to various institutional cultures.

In dialogues with athletes, we raise a number of questions specific to the kinds of relationships people have on teams and in the broader athletic subculture:

- Would you be more likely to intervene in this (potential acquaintance rape) scenario if your teammate was involved, rather than someone you knew casually? Why or why not? What if the guy was a close friend, but not a teammate? Would there be any difference in your response?
- We also ask questions about the bystander's enlightened self-interest. For example, if a teammate is charged with a sexual assault or is arrested for a domestic violence incident, how does that affect the team's reputation and self-image? Isn't it in your self-interest as a member of the team to prevent these things from happening, if at all possible?
- In sessions with coaches and athletic administrators, we ask questions like: What responsibility do you have to the student-athletes to model behavior in your personal behavior, and in your peer relationships, that you expect the student-athletes to emulate?

To learn more, visit www.facebook.com/mvpngnational and www.jacksonkatz.com

*Jackson Katz, Ph.D., is an educator, author, filmmaker, and cultural theorist who is internationally recognized for his groundbreaking work in the field of gender violence prevention education and critical media literacy. He is the author of the book, *The Macho Paradox: Why Some Men Hurt Women and How All Men Can Help*, and creator of the film, *Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity*. He has lectured on hundreds of college and high school campuses and has conducted hundreds of professional trainings, seminars, and workshops in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Australia and Japan. He is co-founder of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, the leading gender violence prevention initiative in college and professional athletics.*

END OF PART 2: PART 3 COMING NEXT WEEK

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