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# The Social Justice Roots of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Model and Its Application in a High School Setting

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## Abstract

The social justice roots and theory of the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) model is presented, followed by an empirical study examining the influence of MVP in high school settings. Findings reveal students exposed to the MVP model are more likely to see forms of violence as being wrong and are more likely to take actions to intervene than students not exposed to the program. Findings support the premises on which MVP is founded.

## Keywords

adolescents, bystander, gender violence, MVP

Although the problem of gender-based violence is well documented, and prevention programs are now widespread, historically the evaluation of violence prevention programs has generally been lacking. There are many reasons for this, including limited resources for evaluation, difficulties of implementing evaluation designs for prevention programs, challenges associated with implementing evaluation designs in the field in general, and challenges more specifically in high school populations. Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) is an example of one of the first bystander-focused programs in the domestic violence and sexual assault fields. Since its inception in 1993, the MVP program has been widely implemented in the United States and internationally in sports organizations, on

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college campuses, on military bases, and in high schools and middle schools across the country. To date, MVP has been evaluated in high school and college settings (Cissner, 2009; Ward, 2001) but mainly for internal program development or formative evaluation purposes. The current article advances these evaluation initiatives by presenting findings of an outcome evaluation in a high school setting.

As the MVP curriculum has served as a key part of the foundation of bystander-focused prevention efforts (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; Katz, 1995), we begin with a brief history of the bystander approach to gender violence prevention education, with specific reference to its roots in both social justice and feminist-inspired antirape and anti-domestic violence activism. After sketching out some of the key ideas that influenced the development of the bystander approach, we highlight some preliminary findings of a recent study that examined the implementation of MVP in a high school in a Midwest community.

MVP began as a pilot project in college athletics and has since expanded broadly to a range of institutional settings with diverse student populations on college, high school, and middle school campuses, the sports culture, and the military. Some of the basic tenets of MVP philosophy and pedagogical practice have been incorporated into other bystander initiatives (Banyard, Eckstein, & Moynihan, 2010; Banyard, Moynihan, & Crossman, 2009). Still other initiatives focus on the bystander but take a somewhat different approach than MVP. This article does not aspire to offer a comparative analysis of these different approaches, all of which have particular emphases and evolutionary trajectories. Rather, it attempts to describe characteristic features of the bystander approach as embodied in the MVP model and to use the history and a present application of MVP as a framework to examine some of the theory and practice of a social justice-oriented bystander focus.

## **History**

The MVP program was created at Northeastern University's Center for the Study of Sport in Society in 1993 with initial funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). The original proposal was for a pilot program that would increase the participation of college men in the prevention of sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence by engaging high-status male (and later, female) student-athletes in this effort.

When MVP staff set out to design the pedagogical approach that would be most effective with the target population in a workshop setting, 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. Inspiration for this new focus on the bystander was drawn from Slaby, Wilson-Brewer, and DeVos (1994), whose work on the prevention of violence in middle schools foregrounded the role of bystanders in contributing to either the perpetration of violence or to its prevention. In the early 1990s, in many rape-prevention programs, women were regarded primarily as victims, potential victims, or empowered survivors and men as perpetrators or potential perpetrators (for a review of rape-prevention programs, see Schewe, 2004; Ullman, 2004). Among the many limitations of this narrow approach was that college men—whether

student-athletes or others—typically did not see themselves as potential perpetrators and as a result shut down in a way that precluded honest participation or critical dialogue. However, when men—and women—were positioned as friends, family members, teammates, classmates, colleagues, and coworkers of women who are or might one day be abused or of men who are abusive or are perhaps going down that path, the “bystander” represented a virtually universal category and one men could not as easily tune out. Staff at Northeastern University who were working to develop MVP understood that this fresh perspective 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.

For practical purposes, MVP staff were seeking to develop a pedagogical model that would provide critical information and refute common rape myths but do so in a way that would “invite, not indict” men and engage them in critical dialogue (Soler, 2007, p. 7). A related objective was to address the relationship between men’s violence against women and a number of other types of violence. Appeals to men’s altruism, or their sense of responsibility as members of the dominant sex-class, were much more likely to be successful when bolstered by appeals to self-interest. Of course, this self-interest includes men’s concern for the women in their lives: their mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and friends. However, the MVP approach also made space for discussion 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, so from the beginning, MVP scenarios addressed the role of the bystander in instances of male-on-male bullying, gay-bashing, and other forms of abuse.

It seems necessary to clarify how we are using the term *bystander*. From the program’s inception, MVP educators have had to struggle with misperceptions about their use of the term, which means different things to different people. Unfortunately, the term “bystander” can be misleading because it implies someone who is, literally, standing by as some action takes place or as someone who is victimized themselves (an “innocent bystander”). As Alan Berkowitz (2009) states in the first line of his book, *Response Ability*, “A bystander is someone who witnesses a problem behavior and does not do anything about it.”

We employ a much more expansive definition. In our view, a bystander means essentially anyone who plays some role in an act of harassment, abuse, or violence but is neither the perpetrator nor the victim. They are a person who does not fit neatly into the perpetrator–victim binary but are nonetheless present and thus potentially in a position to discourage, prevent, or interrupt an incident of sexist abuse, gay-bashing, or same-sex bullying. Alternatively, they are someone who is not necessarily present for a specific incident but is a member of a peer culture and thus has relationships with others who might be perpetrators or victims or perhaps vulnerable to becoming one. In MVP, a bystander is defined more specifically as a friend, family member, classmate, teammate, coworker—anyone who has a social, family, school, or workplace relationship with a man, woman, boy, or girl who might be harassing, abusive, or violent, or experiencing harassment, abuse, or violence.

Part of the confusion and ambiguity related to the word “bystander” lies in the neutrality of the term. For example, people in the sexual assault prevention field sometimes say things such as, “don’t be a bystander,” when they actually mean “don’t be a *passive* bystander.” Although the designation of the term “bystander” suggests that someone is either physically present at the time of an incident *or* is a member of a given peer culture outside of any specific perpetrator–victim dyad, it does not imply what action they have taken or failed to take. That requires an adjective to modify the noun, which is why in MVP we speak of “empowered” or “proactive” bystanders versus the “passive” ones.

## Social Justice Roots and a Focus on Men

From its inception, MVP was intent on engaging men (and later, both sexes) in the prevention of all forms of men’s violence against women and heterosexuals in the prevention of gay-bashing and other abuses. The program developed a method of working with bystanders as a means to those ends that was not only a creative pedagogical tool. In the early 1990s, it was also tactically useful in getting MVP “in the door” to work with college and high school athletic programs whose members were in many cases defensive and resistant to working with sexual assault and domestic violence programs. The idea of male student-athletes as engaged bystanders and responsible teammates was much easier to sell than the view of them as potential rapists and abusers.

The prevention approach that was developed at MVP was never intended to be a substitute for sexual assault or relationship abuse education. The goal was always both more modest and more ambitious than that. It was more modest in the sense that the creators of MVP realized early on that gender violence-prevention educators often have limited time in educational sessions, especially with men on athletic teams, in fraternities, and in other groups. What could be realistically accomplished with them? As Rus Ervin Funk writes (2006), even if the goal was merely to inform (men) about sexual assault, this alone could include

The legal definitions of sexual assault; an advocate’s definition of sexual assault; how a person might respond to being sexually assaulted; the impact of a sexual assault on a loved one of a person who has been assaulted; how to best support a loved one who has been sexually assaulted. It is virtually impossible to achieve all these goals in one educational program. (p. 28)

Instead of being focused on informing people (men and women) of the As to Zs of gender violence, the (ambitious) intent of MVP was to apply key concepts of social justice education to the issue of men’s violence against women. While recognizing the need of any good prevention program to provide information about the dynamics of relationship abuse and sexual assault, the idea was to help shift cultural practices and gender ideologies that contributed to men’s mistreatment of women. The strategy that MVP staff 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 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. The goal was that students who went through MVP and integrated its concepts—especially male students who might otherwise resist the content and emphases of traditional gender violence curricula—would be in a much better position later to learn more about the dynamics and nuances of sexual and domestic violence and be more likely to act on that knowledge.

This focus on men made it easy to apply the “silence-equals-consent” concept from social justice education, where, for example, it had long been applied to the responsibility of White people to speak out about racism (Kivel, 2002). Individual men might not want to be part of a cultural system in which men’s verbal, physical, and sexual mistreatment of women was so common as to seem almost normative; they might not even be conscious about the level of their complicity. This lack of critical self-awareness is, in part, a function of privilege. At the same time, individual beliefs and behaviors are products of the social norms in localized peer cultures and in the larger society (Andersen, 2011). Sociologists explain this in terms of a dialectic: Individuals are shaped by their participation in social systems, which in turn helps to shape those systems. A key mechanism in this dynamic is what Johnson (2006) calls “paths of least resistance.” When someone challenges a group norm, they quickly feel how much resistance people put up to discourage them from going any further. For example, a man may feel uncomfortable when he hears a friend tell a sexist joke, but he smiles and laughs, or remains silent, to avoid being ridiculed or ostracized.

Many young men choose the silent “path of least resistance” because by adolescence they have already learned to obey what William Pollack (1998) describes as the “boy code,” a “set of behaviors, rules of conduct, cultural shibboleths, and even a lexicon, that is inculcated into boys by our society from the very beginning of a boy’s life.” (p. xxv) This code includes proscriptions against anything perceived as weak or feminine; a corollary is that men rarely challenge other men’s sexism or take the side of women in the supposed “battle between the sexes.” The boy code was extended into late adolescence and young adulthood with Kimmel’s (2008) concept of the “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 (Berkowitz, 2011).

In the 2nd year of MVP, the target audience for the trainings was expanded to include both college and high school female student-athletes and other women and girls, which presented a conundrum regarding the original conception of the role of bystanders. Following the social justice logic described above, arguing that women have the same responsibilities as men to intervene in instances of men’s violence against women would be similar to arguing that people of color have as much responsibility as Whites to interrupt White racism. The conundrum was resolved in a number of different ways, none of which required the adoption of a posture of gender neutrality. For example, it was made clear in printed materials and trainings that men’s violence against women was much more a men’s than a women’s problem. At the same time, there were many things women could do to respond to and prevent men’s violence, even if they were not the target themselves. In addition, the scenarios that MVP addressed included nonphysical forms of sexist harassment

and abuse. As the role of the bystander extended into myriad ways that people in peer cultures can support as well as confront one another, there were many situations in which female bystanders could play a constructive role, without ignoring the deeply rooted gender inequality that underpinned and structured social reality. The focus on women as bystanders had the added benefit of helping women see that they could do more than simply avoid or reduce their own risk of victimization; they could develop skills to become empowered antiviolence agents.

The MVP emphasis on dialogue and discussion in single-sex groups—and particularly how that dialogue could provide space for men to express viewpoints about issues related to masculinity, sex, and violence that were not ordinarily heard in locker rooms, fraternities, and other male groups—anticipated some 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, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003).

## The Turn in Bystander Programs Toward Gender Neutrality

In recent years, there has been a turn in gender violence-prevention education toward degendered discussions about bystander intervention, for example, the Green Dot program at the University of Kentucky (Kenneavy, Aitoro, Mosolino, & List, 2010). Such programs do not foreground gender inequality; rather, they maintain gender-neutrality through the use of terms such as *power-based violence*. Perpetrators and victims can be either men or women, and everyone is potentially an empowered bystander. This sort of approach has proven attractive to some antiviolence educators whose goal is to engage women *and* men in greater numbers, in both the civilian world and the U.S. military. Gender neutrality helps to deflect criticism that rape and domestic violence-prevention education is characteristically, or inherently, antimale. It is much less controversial than social justice approaches that begin with the premise that structural and systemic inequalities are the context for, if not the root cause of, most interpersonal violence. Its proponents can also claim that their efforts are grounded in empirical data that deemphasize the role of gender in violence perpetration and highlights “mutual aggression” or “reciprocal violence,” particularly in cases of dating violence, although this research itself has been criticized for decontextualizing specific incidents of violence from broader systems of power relationships and “defying international consensus and substantial empirical data” (Reed, Raj, Miller, & Silverman, 2010, p. 349).

In social justice-oriented approaches to the role of the bystander, the starting point for discussions are questions of gender, race, and sexual orientation, especially the role of complicit silence on the part of members of dominant groups. Techniques for bystander intervention are taught as a way for individuals to interrupt the enactment of abuses that are often micro manifestations of macro systems of power and control. In gender-neutral approaches, by contrast, the starting point is the bystander him- or herself and their cognitive process in the face of some abusive or otherwise problematic behavior. Gender norms, and their relationship both to abuse and efforts to interrupt or prevent it, are a central area

of discussion in MVP. The bystander approach was originally adapted into gender violence-prevention education to counteract a specific characteristic of male peer culture—that is, the reluctance of men to interrupt each other’s sexist behaviors or challenge their sexist beliefs—that was rooted in a much larger sociocultural context, with deep historical roots. The pedagogy of MVP was specifically designed to stimulate critical thinking about otherwise uninterrogated gender norms and in the process to elevate certain prosocial characteristics (speaking out, intervening in instances of abuse) over silence and conformity.

The limitations of the gender-neutral approach can perhaps best be seen when comparing women’s and men’s reasons for intervening/not intervening in the case of a man mistreating a woman as well as in the nature of the hypothetical intervention itself. For example, a prototypical MVP scenario deals with the early stages of what might become a rape. The scenario involves an obviously drunk young woman at a party and a young man who is aggressively determined to get her to leave with him. In all-female discussions, women rarely say they would think twice about intervening in this situation due to concerns about their own safety. They do sometimes acknowledge their fear of social ramifications if they challenge a man’s prerogatives in the sexually charged atmosphere of a party or club, such as being seen as “no fun,” which could damage their popularity with other men (S. Spriggs, Associate Director, June 22, 2010, MVP-National, personal communication).

By contrast, in all-male discussions about the same scenario, high school boys, college men, and others frequently cite their fear of physical conflict as a disincentive to act. When young men insist they would nonetheless intervene perhaps the most frequent option they choose is one that most limits any risk to themselves: they would urge the drunk young woman’s friends to get her out of there. Many men want to avoid the possibility of a direct confrontation with their friend even when they know he might be trying to take sexual advantage of a drunk and vulnerable young woman. They might realistically be concerned that the guy could get belligerent and assault them. However, their reticence is also undoubtedly rooted in social anxiety; their fear is based on an unconscious awareness that if they come to the defense of a vulnerable woman, they might be seen as soft or sensitive and hence lose standing among their peers (Katz, 2006). In fact, MVP trainers report that anxiety about rejection from the group is repeatedly touted by men, especially in the sports and military cultures, as the main reason for their reluctance to intervene, even among those who find their peers’ behavior problematic (D. Fort, MVP Trainer, June 20, 2010, MVP-National, personal communication). In other words, an individual bystander’s decision-making process is profoundly influenced by the gendered social norms both in his or her peer culture and in those of the larger society, and those norms need to be scrutinized and changed if we hope to see more effective initiative on the part of individual bystanders.

## **MVP in a High School Setting**

Adolescence is a period in which dramatic developmental and interpersonal changes occur. It is a time during which relationships and associated gender roles are explored. Early adolescence is a period of gender intensification, when increased gender stereotyping of attitudes and behaviors and movement toward more traditional gender identity occurs



(Basow & Rubin, 1999; Galambos, Almeida, & Peterson, 1990). Developmentally, adolescents are also seeking to individuate from their parents through the establishment of social relationships outside the family (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007). Peer networks within such settings as schools begin to exert a greater influence on personal attitudes and behaviors (Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000). The MVP program has sought to work with communities of young people during these formative years as they negotiate interpersonal relationships. In the high school setting, the primary goals of the MVP program are to train a group of student leaders (MVP mentors) to catalyze change in gendered social norms around the acceptance of abuse, harassment, and violence; to equip peers with concrete options on how to intervene as empowered bystanders; and to encourage all students to respond to abuse, harassment, and bullying before, during, or after the fact. MVP mentors identified to serve in a student leadership capacity must closely mirror the ethnic and racial composition of the entire student body so as to increase the likelihood that mentors and their respective mentees can relate directly to each other's experiences. Participation in leadership training that consists of a variety of topics, such as group facilitation skills; dating violence prevention, bullying, and harassment awareness; awareness of harassment and targeting of gay, lesbian, and transgendered students; role-play activities; and a review of the MVP playbook's structure and content, helps to provide mentors with skills and practice to lead and conduct meaningful MVP sessions. In most cases, student MVP mentors are likely to acquire nearly 16-20 hrs of training and instruction in MVP prior to facilitating mentoring sessions with groups of younger students.

## Research Questions

The current study examines the influence of the MVP program in a high school setting. To this end, the following research questions are examined:

*Research Question 1:* Are students who are exposed to the MVP program, directly through working with MVP mentors and indirectly through implementation of the MVP program through associated school initiatives, more likely than students who attend a comparison school in which MVP has not been implemented to view behaviors associated with types of violence as wrong?

*Research Question 2:* Are students who are exposed to the MVP program directly through working with MVP mentors and indirectly through implementation of the MVP program through associated school initiatives more likely to report taking action when witnessing such behaviors compared with students who attend a school in which the MVP program has not been implemented?

*Research Question 3:* Do any differences between the MVP school and the non-MVP school persist with respect to perceptions of how wrong behaviors are when the MVP mentors are removed from the analysis?

*Research Question 4:* When the MVP mentors are removed from the analysis, do any differences between the MVP school and the non-MVP school persist with respect to reported likelihood of intervening?

## Method

### Participants

Students in Grades 9 through 12 at the respective schools were chosen for sample inclusion. Of the 894 student respondents (89% completion) from the MVP school, 53% were female and 47% were male. The average age of the students was 15.59 ( $SD = 1.15$ ). The percentage of students from each grade level were as follows: 9th grade, 37%; 10th grade, 24%; 11th grade, 25%; and 12th grade, 14%. With respect to racial/ethnic background, 50% self-identified as White, 23% as Hispanic, 7% as African American, 5% as Asian, 4% as Native American, and 12% as Other. Of the 850 (91% completion) student respondents from the non-MVP school, 55% were female and 45% were male. Grade-level distribution was as follows: 9th grade, 29%; 10th grade, 29%; 11th grade, 24%; and 12th grade, 19%. With respect to racial/ethnic background, 55% self-identified as White, 5% as Hispanic, 36% as African American, 3% as Asian, and 2% as Native American. Chi-square analyses revealed significant differences between the MVP school and the non-MVP school with respect to ethnicity,  $\chi^2(5, 1,721) = 386.09, p = .000$ . The most notable difference between the two schools is the percentage of African American and Hispanic students in the schools. Because of this difference between the two schools, ethnicity was controlled in all predictive analyses.

### Procedure

The present study is based on data gathered from surveys administered in two high school settings in a Midwestern state. One school had implemented the MVP program, whereas the other school had not implemented the program at the time of data collection (non-MVP School). The data for this study were drawn from the second wave of a survey administered in a school that has gradually implemented the MVP program over the past 9 years. The non-MVP school was recruited as a matched comparison school for evaluation purposes based on the size of the student population and the diversity found within the student body. Surveys were administered to all students in attendance at the two schools on a preselected day during grade-level homeroom periods. A script was provided for teachers to follow in informing the students of the purpose of the survey and to ensure students understood the nature of confidentiality and their right not to participate. No specific student identifiers were collected. Passive consent was used as parents were informed at the beginning of the year of efforts to evaluate MVP and school programming. Parents were asked to notify the school administration if they did not want their child to participate in the survey. Although the core items of the two surveys are the same, slight variations in the surveys were administered as a result of administrative input and refinement of the instruments. As a result, demographic comparisons between the two schools are limited. Survey administration occurred with students at the MVP school approximately 3 months after the final MVP session had been implemented. In the non-MVP school, surveys were administered in late fall. With MVP implementation taking place during the freshman year, all students in the MVP school had been exposed to MVP at the time of survey administration.

## Measures

Although the survey instruments varied slightly across the two schools with respect to demographic information collected, the core scales used in this study were the same. These scales were originally developed to parallel the scenarios found in the MVP Playbook, which represent situations that students may encounter in their schools and communities. Two main sections of the survey instrument are used in the current study. The Student Perceptions of Wrongfulness section of the survey contains 16 items that represent a range of coercive or violent behaviors. In the stem of the questions, students are asked how wrong they believe the following situations to be on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not wrong at all*, 5 = *very wrong*). Example items include, “A student pushing another student”; “A student making sexual advances on someone who is drunk”; “Students telling jokes that make fun of women and girls”; “Students beating, pounding or otherwise hurting someone”; and “Students threatening others with guns or other weapons.” The 16-item Student Self-Report of Taking Action asks students the likelihood of taking action to stop a situation when confronted with it. The situations mirror those found in the Student Perceptions of Wrongfulness. The participants are asked on a 5-point Likert-type scale how likely they are to take action to stop the behavior (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*). Although the items do not speak to specific incidents of engaging in bystander behavior, they do speak to students’ perceptions of their willingness to engage in such behavior. Given that these measures were newly created for the current study, psychometric analyses were performed.

The 15 items of each scale were examined using principal components analysis (PCA) with SPSS Version 15. PCA showed two components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 42.15% and 8.24% of the variance, respectively, in the Perceptions of Wrongfulness Scale, and 51.67% and 7.55% of the variance, respectively, in the Taking Action Scale. To aid in the interpretation of the two components in each of the scales, oblimin rotation with Kaiser Normalization was performed. Consistent across the two scales were items that loaded on one component that incorporated 11 items that reflect a range of behaviors that were less aggressive in nature (e.g., making fun of gays; insulting others; pushing another student) and a component in which more aggressive behaviors (four items) are found (e.g., beating, pounding, or otherwise hurting someone; threatening others with a gun). One item (“students making negative remarks about other races”) was dropped from the current analysis due to insufficient loading on either factor.

Four outcome variables are of interest to the current study. The Taking Action–Less Aggressive (TALA) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ) dependent variable is a summative mean score of participants’ reported willingness to take action when witnessing less aggressive forms of violence (e.g., pushing another student; insulting other students; telling jokes that make fun of women and girls; arguing in what seems to be a violent way). The Taking Action–Aggressive (TAA; Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ) dependent variable is a summative mean score of their reported willingness to take action when witnessing more severe acts of violence (e.g., threatening to hurt others physically; beating, pounding, or otherwise hurting someone; making sexual advances on someone who is drunk; threatening others with guns or other weapons). The Perceived Wrongfulness–Less Aggressive (PWLA) dependent

**Table 1.** Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Perceived Wrongfulness and Taking Action Variables by MVP School Status

	MVP school (n = 755)		Non-MVP school (n = 825)	
	M	SE	M	SE
Perceived wrong—less aggressive	3.82	.03	3.37***	.03
Perceived wrong—aggressive	4.43	.03	3.33***	.03
Take action—less aggressive	3.05	.04	3.09 <sup>ns</sup>	.04
Take action—aggressive	3.58	.05	3.19***	.04

Note: Means in the same row.  
 \*\*\*p < .001.

variable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .86$ ) is a summative mean score of how wrong they perceive less aggressive forms of violence to be (e.g., pushing another student; insulting other students; telling jokes that make fun of women and girls; arguing in what seems to be a violent way). The Perceived Wrongfulness–Aggressive (PWA) dependent variable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .83$ ) is a summative mean score of how wrong they perceive severe acts of violence to be (e.g., threatening to hurt others physically; beating, pounding, or otherwise hurting someone; making sexual advances on someone who is drunk; threatening others with guns or other weapons).

Gender was a dichotomous variable (0 = *females*, 1 = *males*). MVP Mentor Status was a variable created to reflect whether a student was a MVP mentor, a student in the MVP school, or a student in the non-MVP school.

## Results

### MVP School Status

The research questions exploring whether students who are MVP mentors and students who are exposed to the MVP program directly through the MVP mentors and indirectly through associated MVP initiatives within the school perceive aggressive behaviors differently and report a greater willingness to intervene with such behaviors than students in a non-MVP school were examined using a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with SPSS (see Table 1). In these analyses, the four dependent variables were used: PWLA, PWA, TALA, and TAA. Gender and ethnicity were controlled for in the analyses.

Initial analysis compared the MVP school, which includes MVP mentors and nonmentor peers who have been exposed to the MVP program, with students at the non-MVP school. As the two student populations had different ethnic profiles and also because gender differences in helping behavior are found in the general literature, both of these variables were controlled for in these analyses. Statistically significant effects were found for the control variable gender,  $F(4, 1,573) = 24.78, p < .000$ ; Wilks’s Lambda = .94; partial

**Table 2.** Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Perceived Wrongfulness and Taking Action Variables by MVP Peers and Non-MVP Peers

	MVP peers ( <i>n</i> = 507)		Non-MVP peers ( <i>n</i> = 825)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Perceived wrong—less aggressive	3.79	.04	3.37***	.03
Perceived wrong—aggressive	4.42	.04	3.34***	.03
Take action—less aggressive	2.96	.05	3.09 <sup>ns</sup>	.04
Take action—aggressive	3.45	.06	3.19*	.04

Note: Means in the same row.

\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

eta squared = .06, but not for ethnicity,  $F(4, 1,573) = 1.43, p = .22$ . For the research questions under examination in the current study, a statistically significant main effect for MVP school status was found,  $F(4, 1,573) = 201.67, p < .000$ ; Wilks's Lambda = .66; partial eta squared = .34. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs revealed significant differences among three of the four outcome variables using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01. Significant differences were found between the MVP school and non-MVP school for the dependent variable PWLA,  $F(1, 1,576) = 113.25, p < .000$ ; partial eta squared = .07. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students in the MVP school perceived these behaviors as more wrong ( $M = 3.82, SD = .78$ ) than did students in the non-MVP school ( $M = 3.36, SD = .80$ ). Significant differences also emerged for the outcome variable PWA,  $F(1, 1,576) = 680.49, p < .000$ ; partial eta squared = .30. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students in the MVP school perceived these behaviors as more wrong ( $M = 4.43, SD = .79$ ) than did students in the non-MVP school ( $M = 3.33, SD = .78$ ). No significant differences were found between the MVP and non-MVP schools for the outcome variable TAL,  $F(1, 1,576) = .507, p = .47$ ; MVP School,  $M = 3.02, SD = .99$ ; Non-MVP school,  $M = 3.11, SD = 1.10$ . However, with respect to the outcome variable TAA, significant differences were found between the MVP and non-MVP schools,  $F(1, 1,576) = 34.65, p < .000$ ; partial eta squared = .02. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students in the MVP school ( $M = 3.56, SD = 1.24$ ) reported being more likely to intervene than non-MVP students ( $M = 3.20, SD = 1.20$ ) when they encounter situations involving more aggressive types of behaviors.

### MVP Exposure Status

The research questions of whether students who are exposed to the MVP program indirectly perceive aggressive behaviors differently and report a greater willingness to intervene in such situations than students in a non-MVP school were examined in a similar manner using a one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (see Table 2). In these analyses, the four dependent variables were used: PWLA, PWA, TALA, and TAA.

For this analysis, MVP mentors' responses were removed. The independent variable was whether students had been exposed to the MVP program indirectly (i.e., the MVP school) or not at all (i.e., the non-MVP school). As in the previous analysis, gender and ethnicity were controlled for. A significant main effect for gender was found,  $F(4, 1,325) = 20.83$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Wilks's Lambda = .94; partial eta squared = .06, but not for ethnicity,  $F(4, 1,325) = 1.41$ ,  $p = .23$ . A statistically significant main effect for exposure was found,  $F(4, 1,325) = 145.65$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Wilks's Lambda = .69; partial eta squared = .30. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs showed significant differences among three of the four outcome variables using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .01. Significant differences were found between the MVP school and non-MVP school for the dependent variable PWLA,  $F(1, 1,328) = 75.35$ ,  $p < .000$ ; partial eta squared = .05. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students exposed to MVP perceived these behaviors as more wrong ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) than students not exposed to MVP ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .80$ ). Significant differences emerged for the outcome variable PWA,  $F(1, 1,328) = 491.14$ ,  $p < .000$ ; partial eta squared = .27. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students exposed to MVP perceived these behaviors as more wrong ( $M = 4.43$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) than students not exposed to MVP ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .78$ ). Analysis for the outcome variable TALA indicated there were no significant differences between students exposed and students not exposed to the MVP program,  $F(1, 1,328) = .507$ ,  $p = .04$ ; MVP school,  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = .98$ ; Non-MVP school,  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ . With respect to the outcome variable TAA, significant differences were found between the students who were exposed to MVP and those not exposed,  $F(1, 1,328) = 11.15$ ,  $p = .001$ ; partial eta squared = .01. Examination of the mean scores indicated that students exposed to MVP ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ) reported being more likely to intervene than students not exposed to MVP ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which exposure to the MVP program had an impact on high school students' attitudes and beliefs about how wrong they thought certain aggressive behaviors were and how likely they would be to intervene as bystanders if they observed such behaviors in their school or community. In more general terms, this study offers insights into how high school students view behaviors that represent a range in seriousness and aggression. Although research often focuses on the more severe forms of violence that adolescents may experience, limited work has focused on the range in seriousness of aggressive behaviors (e.g., sexist, misogynistic, or racist language) that often serve as a foundation and context for the perpetration of more violent behaviors. Findings of this study revealed how students view a range of aggressive behaviors. Although more aggressive behaviors are commonly seen as being more "wrong," understanding student perceptions of less aggressive behaviors is important for educators and programmers. The less aggressive behaviors are more likely to occur in students' everyday lives, and when they are met by silence, can contribute to an atmosphere in which acts that are more aggressive in nature are condoned as well. Understanding student perceptions and whether they believe they would intervene is important for dialogue among students and for programmatic purposes.

Analyses from this study revealed that the high school students exposed to the MVP program, directly or indirectly, were more likely to report a range of behaviors as being wrong than students who had not been exposed to the program. The findings also revealed that the MVP students were more likely to intervene in contexts in which aggressive behaviors were being exhibited than students not exposed to the MVP program. These initial findings are promising and indicate that further programmatic and empirical investigation in the MVP program is warranted. The MVP program is a peer-driven, prosocial bystander model that offers a forum for student exploration and discussion. School climates in which students view a range of aggressive behaviors as wrong, and where students are reporting they are willing to intervene in more serious behaviors, may help create school norms that mitigate against aggressive acts.

The finding of no significant differences between students exposed to the MVP program and those who had not been exposed to the MVP program (i.e., MVP school vs. non-MVP school) with respect to their reported likelihood of intervening in less aggressive behaviors warrants further exploration. Although there were significant differences in perceptions of how wrong the behaviors were, students did not differ in their reported willingness to intervene. Given how likely these types of behaviors are to occur in both the school and the students' social networks, the potential impact of not intervening would be an important element in changing school climate and norms. It is possible that the mere frequency of such behaviors in the daily lives of students gives students pause. Intervening in such situations may be more real to students, and subsequently students may be more questioning as to whether they have or would intervene in such realistic situations. Alternatively, the frequency at which such behaviors occur within a school setting may reach a saturation point in which students perceive they would be constantly intervening. As such behaviors are more common and can ultimately contribute to the foundation for subsequently more aggressive behaviors, this is an important area for further investigation and programmatic work (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi, 2004). Student beliefs about the seriousness of behaviors and their perception of the degree to which they can take action are important elements in understanding the likelihood of actual bystander behaviors occurring (Ajzen & Cote, 2008). Finally, although the current study includes a range of aggressive behaviors, further exploration is warranted to examine a broader array of violent behaviors, especially those found in mixed or same gender contexts. As previously discussed, bystander models have moved from a gender focus as originally conceived with the MVP program to a more gender-neutral approach. Further exploration is warranted to examine whether gender-focused bystander programs, such as the MVP program, have differential effects on aggressive behaviors that may or may not be gender based when compared with gender-neutral programs. In simple terms, understanding which types of programs are most effective for which types of behaviors is an area for empirical investigation that will be important and useful to schools and communities alike.

The significant findings obtained from surveying the MVP schools in the spring following the implementation of the MVP program are promising, especially in light of the fact that students in the high school where MVP was being implemented managed to report more favorable, prosocial bystander attitudes than their non-MVP peers, even though the

majority of MVP sessions took place in the late fall and winter months. That said, having multiple points of data would have allowed for a more refined examination of any trends in student perceptions with respect to the outcome variables. Further evaluation plans being developed within the MVP school as well as the non-MVP school by these researchers will shed some light on this issue.

The findings that emerged through this effort offer an initial analysis of the impact of the MVP program. Subsequent investigations of the MVP program should examine several key areas. One of the main premises of the MVP program is the role of gender in interpersonal aggression. In the current study, gender was used as a control variable in the exploratory analyses. Subsequent work should examine more closely the role of gender in student perceptions of how wrong behaviors are and their willingness to intervene in such situations. The current study also does not offer insight into gender differences with respect to the perpetrator of the incident. For example, the study does not allow for an analysis of whether young men or women were more or less likely to intervene in cases where young men were harassing or abusing young women, versus young men abusing each other, or young women abusing each other, and so on. In addition, the relationship between the bystander and either the perpetrator or the victim was not considered. The extent to which the bystander knows or does not know the perpetrator or victim would likely play a critical role in how likely he or she is willing to intervene; therefore, further investigation is necessary pertaining to relationship and familiarity.

Further research is warranted to examine potential ethnic differences in perceptions of how wrong behaviors are and students' reported willingness to intervene in such circumstances. Within group and across ethnic group differences with respect to perceived norms of wrongfulness and engagement is an area of limited investigation. In general, limited research exists on prosocial behavior among student populations other than White, middle-class populations. Investigation of minority students' perceptions of their engagement in prosocial bystander behaviors in contexts where students of the majority are engaging in coercive or aggressive behaviors is needed, as are investigations of majority students' perceptions of their willingness to intervene when students of a minority group are engaged in coercive or aggressive acts. Studies that explore students' willingness to engage in prosocial bystander behaviors regardless of ethnic differences as well as potential racial/ethnic misperceptions in prosocial bystander behavior are also necessary.

### *Limitations*

This study reports on an effort to implement the MVP program in a high school setting. The data derive from one school system's internal efforts to evaluate the MVP program as a strategy to address gender violence and improve school climate. This project is but one step in the process of developing a foundational base of knowledge that may support more extensive evaluation efforts within the district specifically, and within the field of gender violence prevention in high school settings more generally. Recognition of and commitment toward more extensive evaluation designs are emerging. Although the study contributes to this foundational knowledge, it is not without limitations. Some limitations are



associated with those generally found with applied survey and evaluation research, whereas other limitations are unique to this study.

The inclusion of a comparison school in this study that had not yet implemented the program provided some comparative data for consideration when examining students' perceptions and likelihood of engaging in prosocial bystander behaviors. From this study of two very similar schools in size and ethnic diversity, the findings indicate that students who are exposed to the MVP program directly or indirectly have different views than those who have not been exposed. The findings are strongly suggestive. However, there may be other characteristics of the schools that account for the differences. A related limitation of this study is that it uses data from one point in time from both schools. In addition, student identifiers have not been included in the survey up to this point, so the ability to track individual students over time is not possible beyond a cohort analysis. Ongoing research is currently being conducted that addresses the limitations of the study involving the two schools.

Implementing a program and a rigorous evaluation design within the context of a class period are common challenges faced by applied researchers. Accessibility and availability of students for data collection are often limited. The length of the school day, scheduling practices, and the importance of meeting additional academic requirements and expectations placed on school administrators and school leaders by state and federal mandates cumulatively affect the ability to successfully and effectively examine the social and emotional aspects of learning and development on young adults.

In survey research, difficult choices are often made regarding key variables and how they will be assessed. The current study draws on scales that speak to students' intentions or likelihood of engaging in prosocial bystander behaviors as well as their perceptions of such behaviors. Although perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes are conceptually linked with actual behavior (Ajzen & Albarracín, 2007; Ajzen & Cote, 2008), the current study does not ask students to report on actual prosocial behaviors in which they have engaged. Although the frequency of coercive and aggressive behaviors will vary, and subsequently the opportunities to engage in bystander behavior, future research should assess the degree to which students actually engage in the behavior through self-report and/or observational data. Associated with engagement in such behavior, an assessment of the subjective norms within the student body and/or peer network for engaging—or not engaging—in prosocial bystander behavior should be examined. Having teachers' and school administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of the MVP program, along with reported incidents of student bullying, harassment, and other gender-based aggressive behaviors, would be informative.

A final overall caution warranted in interpreting the results of the study is that although many of the findings are statistically significant, the overall effect size on some outcomes under investigation was often small. One possible interpretation of these small effects is that the findings, although significant, have limited meaning. An alternative interpretation is that the small effect size may be reflective of the time lapse from the implementation of the MVP sessions with students and the time when the survey was implemented. The MVP sessions described in this study were held in the early part of the school year (September-January), and the survey was undertaken in the late spring, during the month of April. It

could be surmised that this time lag between implementation and surveying may reflect some deterioration of program effectiveness that is often found in programming. As stated earlier, additional research that provides multiple points of assessment is warranted to provide clarification of treatment effects, factors associated with these effects, and any deterioration of effects that may occur with time. In addition, although small effect sizes are important to acknowledge in this study, educators and professionals who work closely with adolescents and young adults know firsthand the difference that one or two individuals can make in the lives of others. Profound results can occur within peer cultures even when one individual chooses to respond differently and engage as a prosocial, active bystander.

## Conclusion

The purposes of this study were to describe the MVP program, a founding program in the application of a bystander framework to gender violence prevention, and to offer an initial investigation of the effectiveness of the MVP program within a high school setting. The social justice roots of the program were presented to set a context for this evaluation study and for the ongoing programmatic and evaluative work occurring within two high school settings. The findings of this study suggest that although more research is necessary, MVP is effective in addressing a range of abuses and violence that occurs in the gendered social interpersonal world of adolescents.

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