

**Future Directions for BIPs:  
Examining the Power of Male Peer Support  
and  
Building Alternative Support Communities**

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Male peer support – and the strength and direction of that support – is undeniably a factor in the decision-making of male batterers regarding the infliction of violence, verbal denigration and coercive controls on their intimate partners.

Scholars have preliminarily examined how male peer support (defined by Drs. Schwartz and DeKeseredy as “the multidimensional attachments men form to male peers...”) explicitly promotes sexual or physical assault, particularly when male peers, themselves, assault women. Male peer support may indirectly facilitate battering and sexual violence by providing male peers with the “resources that perpetuate and legitimate such assaults.”<sup>1</sup> In a recent audioconference, Dr. DeKeseredy offered a brief overview of male-bonding activities as the context, platform, stimulant and cohesive power underpinning men’s violence against women.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Kimmel’s **Guyland**<sup>3</sup> sheds light on male peer support and culture in a cohort of young men that may promote violence against women. If Michael is correct and there is a “Guyland,” a period of prolonged adolescence, largely inhabited by young (16 – 26 years), mostly white, largely middle-class,\* unmarried, educated, communally-

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<sup>1</sup> Walter DeKeseredy and Martin Schwartz et al. “Separation/Divorce Sexual Assault: The Contribution of Male Support.” *Feminist Criminology*. Volume 1, Number 3. July 2006, 228-250. Martin Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy et al. “Male Peer Support and A Feminist Routine Activities Theory: Understanding Sexual Assault on the College Campus.” *Justice Quarterly*. Volumen 18, Number 3. Sept. 2001, 623 – 649.

<sup>2</sup> A MP3 of Dr. DeKeseredy’s remarks is available from the author. The research and analysis of Drs. Alberto Godenzi, Martin Schwartz, Walter DeKeseredy, David Tait, Shahid Alvi, Mandy Hall, and Danielle Fagen was included in the supplemental materials of a recent audioconference on “Patriarchy, Male-Bonding and Domestic Violence.”

<sup>3</sup> Michael Kimmel. **GUYLAND: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men. Understanding the Critical Years Between 16 and 26.** Harper. (2009).

\*Kimmel suggests that the while many “Guyland” participants draw on middle-class, male entitlement and privilege to confirm that they are superior, the population of “Guyland” extends to working-class young men who work or play in male domains.

living, employed in low-paying/prestige jobs, directionless men, who spend their substantial free time in drinking, sex and violent and/or pornographic video games, AND if their discourse is punctuated with objectification, denigration and exploitation of women and derisive of boys and men outside their enclave or who don't subscribe to the "Guy Code" AND if their 'standard operating procedure' is "intimately crude male bonding," the intense peer support that cements their identity and supports their alliance may facilitate and celebrate the use of violence against women.<sup>4</sup>

I am not aware of research that investigates the role of "negative" male peer support (strong support that is hostile to women or is intimate partner violence-espousing) in the decision-making of men to choose to batterer their women partners. Nor am I aware of research on the countervailing influence of "positive" male peer support (strong support that honors women and eschews violence against intimate partners) in decision-making to stop battering and coercive controls. Similarly, I am not aware of any research on strategies to achieve transformation of male peer support from violence-facilitating to violence-intervening or to assist battering men in seeking out new male support in a community that reinforces their commitment to change and violence cessation. And because I have not been a student of the assessment processes and curricula employed by BIPs (batterer intervention programs be they educational,

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<sup>4</sup> The data on the prevalence and injuries of intimate partner violence reveal that young women are at highest risk from violence by male partners. (Callie Rennison. Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim, 1993 - 99. Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1999. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/ipva99.htm>) However, Urban Institute research on the Judicial Oversight Demonstration Initiative in Dorchester, MA suggests that forceful intervention by criminal courts and aggressive probation can significantly interrupt the violence of young predators (including those with extensive criminal histories). (Adele Harrell et al. **Final Report on the Evaluation of the Judicial Oversight Demonstration: Executive Summary**. NCJRS Document No. 219386. August 2007.)

therapeutic or monitoring), I do not know if BIPs inquire about the configuration or significance of male peer support for participants in the programs, and I am not familiar with modules in BIP programming that address male support networks and strategies for finding new networks that promote respect for women and subscribe to relationships of equality without violence or coercion. And maybe I just am ignorant of the literature/work.

Nonetheless, male peer support (and its strength and direction) surely is a variable that can confound or enhance the interventions of BIPs. We recognized this early in the history of the battered women's movement and employed diverse strategies to build new support networks for batterers.

A practice that we incorporated in the design of the first educational program for male batterers in Reading, PA in the early 80's sought to involve "supportive allies" in post-curriculum activities to promote continued non-violence of men completing the course. We believed that men would stop their abuse (physical, sexual, psychological, cultural, and economic) only if they had support from their allies (men with whom they had close relationships and whose respect they valued); and, thus, we decided to experiment with a process of education of male allies of batterers who were completing the core curriculum. Each man, nearing the end of the 26-week course, was asked to identify several men in their lives who might be recruited to learn about abusive and controlling behavior by men of their intimate partners and the culture of male entitlement that promotes battering. The participant was asked to suggest several men who might agree to be a "supportive ally" – men who would contract with the participant and the program first to devote time to learn about woman abuse (and to deconstruct their beliefs

about woman abuse and men's entitlement to control partners by violent and coercive behaviors) and thereafter to engage in confrontation with compassion to support the commitment of the BIP participant in ending battering and abuse of their intimate partners. Group members would offer their feedback about the candidates for "supportive ally," and the participant would then seek to recruit a volunteer for the intensive education and ongoing support. Candidates were invited to an educational program and to attend four sessions of the group with the BIP member.

The "supportive ally" component was implemented at a time that most BIP participants were 'socially mandated,' not compelled to attend by a court. It was a labor-intensive component. BIP workers were largely volunteer, as the BIP program was funded solely by participant fees. This strategy was shortly dropped because of the resistance of both participants and leaders to the time and investment required.

The Reading BIP's mission was limited to re-education of battering men to enhance their skills and commitment to violence-free partnerships. This mission differed from BIP programs initiated by the pro-feminist men's movement, which embraced the transformative mission of both ending sexism and misogyny in the culture and creating communities of non-violent, women-honoring men working in support of women's liberation.

Concurrent in time to the Reading, PA experiment, "Men for Non-Violence" was founded in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. John Beams described the first days of what now is the Center for Non-Violence in a recent audioconference. (I have lifted and summarized from his outline.) Five men, all of whom had day jobs and who had been influenced by local feminist leaders to become active in the movement to end violence against women,

identified rape, domestic violence and pornography as three areas of focus for the Center. The founders studied the work of liberation leaders dating back to the pre-Civil War emancipation and women's suffrage movements and were active in the civil rights and peace movements of the '70s. The Center adopted the Duluth Curriculum for the classes offered batterers. However, it also embraced a "building community" strategy for transformation of the culture that supports men's violence. The Center recognized that the way women are treated is reflected in, and also caused by, multiple cultural expressions. Community-building work addressed societal support for male violence and created cultural messaging and experiences to honor women and to promote peaceful, non-violent intimate partnerships. Art, music, spiritual ritual, food, dress, entertainment, poetry, story telling, dance, holiday observances became vehicles for transformation of the community.

In the early years, the staff hoped that batterers would evolve into activist allies in the community effort against violence. They held weekend retreats with men enrolled in the BIP program to promote a feeling of connection and community, by sharing music, ritual, play, drama, as well as discussion. They sponsored concerts and coffee houses, and invited BIP participants to join in these events. Staff was eventually confounded by the problem of maintaining vigilance against continued re-offenses while inviting men to become part of a shared community. The Center has mostly stopped trying to bring program participants into community building, and focuses upon building broader community alliances rich in cultural, artistic, and social justice activities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the Center formed a collaboration with a team of artists, including a visual artist, a published poet, a person skilled in African drumming and culture, and an improvisational dance instructor, to visit youth sites (children's home, juvenile detention

Almost contemporaneously, the Institute for Family Services (IFS) in Somerset, NJ was formulating its work with men who batter. The ‘sponsorship’ component is an essential practice throughout the work with abusers at IFS. Sponsors are men and women volunteers from the community who work in rotation with all program participants; on any occasion that a participant reaches out for support, he may speak with the sponsor on call. Sponsorship offers support to remain non-violent, to sustain changes embraced, and to avoid falling into abusive habits and societal norms. Sponsors provide connection to a community of support and celebration of new behaviors and norms. Sponsors may also support battered women as they negotiate through the courts seeking protections and reparations. Sponsors offer educational and recreational events for the children of the abusive men and battered women participants in the program; care is taken to support the choices of battered women about children’s participation in these activities. Through the process of preparation for and delivery of sponsoring activities, sponsors come to understand the connections *between* the male privilege, coercive control, misogyny, and social norms underpinning the violence of male participants *and* similar challenges confronted in the sponsors’ own beliefs, relationships and behaviors. Learning about inequality in relationships opens sponsors to an awareness of inequalities in society and support for social justice work. Sponsoring remains a vital part of the IFS approach.<sup>6</sup>

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facility, Center for Nonviolence youth groups, schools), to engage them in artistic expression (with the intent of opening avenues to discuss nonviolent ways of living, power sharing, relationship skills, and sexual responsibility). At the end of the school season, the Center sponsored a public concert in which the young people performed at the Fort Wayne Performing Arts Center.

<sup>6</sup> There are many other programs that have distinguished themselves by engaging men and building male support networks beyond the groups with batterers. Space constraints, which I have already exceeded, permit me to name only a few – Men Stopping Violence,

Again, early in the movement, the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) called for full engagement of men (fathers, sons, husbands, friends, coworkers, neighbors, business leaders, educators, clergy) in creating communities of safety and justice for women and in celebration of new masculinities that reject the use of violence to subordinate women. Other men's alliances have since formed to stand with the battered women's movement to seek transformation of communities to end cultural, community and individual men's support for violence against women.

Efforts at "engagement of men" and "building male communities of support" - beyond the institutions of the movement (i.e. battered women's programs and BIPs) and the legal and human services systems - have not found significant traction among men. What is even more distressing is that cultural expressions of manhood appear to be ever more violent and subordinating of women. Further, the organizing and messaging of the men's rights movement - that trivializes male violence and battering and asserts equivalent violence by women against male partners - has achieved great attention in the mainstream media.

To illustrate the power of male peer support for violence against women, I offer the following recent experience. U.S. Army medics demonstrated the dynamics and power of male support for the sexual abuse of women. I happened to be an observer and intervenor. A group of 10 soldiers was sitting in the hallway of the San Antonio airport waiting for an airplane that would carry them on their first leg of deployment to Iraq. As each woman under the age of 30 passed, two of the soldiers made sexual overtures or

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National Compadres Network, manalive, Mending the Sacred Hoop, Second Step, and Caminar Latino.



disparaged the women, depending on their apparent assessment of how “hot” the young woman was. All the women lowered their eyes to the floor and kept walking. I went over and told the soldiers that they must stop, that their behavior was offensive to me, demeaning and violent towards the young women, and dishonoring of the Army. With mumbling and snickering, they stopped. Our plane, yes I was regrettably scheduled on the same flight, was cancelled, and we were sent to customer service to be re-booked. Because of my limited mobility, I was served in a line apart from the soldiers. However, when I got in the van for the hotel, a woman in the back spoke about the rudeness of one soldier to the desk agent. She said she was too embarrassed to speak up when the soldier asked the agent what he could get for the food voucher she issued – “Could he get a massage, or, better yet, would she give him a blow job?” No one spoke against his sexual harassment. Another man in the van responded to the dismayed woman that “boys will be boys” and that the agent should have been flattered by the attention. I told him he was offensive and that his support for the sexual harassment of the agent was reprehensible. He scoffed. I got out of the van first and went to the hotel clerks, two of whom were women, and told them that soldiers were following in a second van and that they had been verbally abusive to a reservation agent at the airport and might treat them likewise. I suggested that they call the motel security staff person to stand by while the soldiers checked in and to explicitly ask security to interrupt any further sexual harassment by the soldier or any soldier lending support to the offender. I said that I would be available if they needed me and would be happy to report continuing abuse to the command of the battalion. Meanwhile, the woman in the van reported that she didn’t feel safe with the soldiers and asked that she be checked in first. She was accommodated and given the

pager phone number for security. (A long, but very current, story about the common experience of women verbally assaulted and women witnessing verbal assaults and the collusion of men in support of the violence both by their silence and their spoken approval.)

Male peer support for sexual harassment abounds. I could not but wonder what these soldiers might do when they felt less inhibited by the conventions of public decorum and the potential scrutiny of command staff. I carry this experience vividly in memory, and I suspect that all the women diminished by the impunity of the sexual harasser and his associates have catalogued this series of offensive expletives in the places in their minds where they hone risk-assessment related to male violence.

This meeting was convened to discuss the context, parameters and methodologies of the work of BIPs, to consider the propriety of expansion of intervention work with male abusers, to examine methods of measuring the effectiveness of BIPs. I agreed to write a piece about involving families, friends and community in the work. I have done so. Sort of. Not to my satisfaction. I offer this cursory discussion of “male peer support” for battering and sexual violence to challenge us to explicitly incorporate/enhance the assessment of the role of men’s support networks in the precipitation, facilitation and cessation of their violence. I also acknowledge that our “consciousness” about the importance of men’s engagement and community in the work of BIPs spans the length of our movement. However, I believe that we have not fully considered and measured the effect of male peer support on recidivism and cessation, and I must conclude that we are missing an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of “engaging community” in support of men seeking to end their abuse. So, let’s enrich the

discourse on “engaging community” in the broad movement to end violence against women.