



**INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE AMONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUNG
ADULT WOMEN**

By: Dr. Wachell McKendrick

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Interpersonal Violence
Among
African American Young Adult Women

Dr. Wachell McKendrick, MSW, CAP

Florida A&M University

Department of Social Work

Tallahassee, FL 32307

The term Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is defined as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former spouse or partner” (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, and Mahendra,

2015). Such harm can be actual or perceived by victims and occurs in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, affects millions of Americans, and occurs across the lifespan (CDC, 2012). While dating relationships typically begin in adolescence and continue to develop into young adulthood, only recently has research had a general focus on young adult dating violence (Jennings, Okeem, Piquero, Sellers, Theobald, and Farrington, 2017). Moreover, recent National Crime Victimization Survey data show that the highest rate of serious violent crimes is also during the ages of 18–24 compared to other age categories (Truman, Langton, & Planty, 2013). Further, while current media attention and previous research has been focused on college IPV among a range of colleges and universities, specifically sexual assault, the Historically Black University and College (HBCU) experience has been missing in the literature (Barrick, Krebs, and Lindquist, 2013), as well as prevalence of IPV based on racial/ethnic background and sexual orientation of the victims and perpetrators (West, 2012).

Among college students the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) noted that almost half of female victims' (47%) first experience of dating violence, by an intimate partner, occurred between the ages of 18 and 24 years (Black, Basile, Breiding, Smith, Walters, Merrick, Chen, & Stevens, 2011). Black females experienced intimate partner violence at a rate 35% higher than that of white females, and about 22 times the rate of women of other races. Approximately 4 out of every 10 women of non-Hispanic Black (43.7%) have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Among sexual minority groups of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) college women, West (2012) found that lesbian women experienced higher rates of IPV than gay men. In another study utilizing the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC) and focused on sexual minorities, females who were both perpetrators

and victims of dating violence were either bisexual or lesbian (compared to heterosexuals) and reported higher rates of victimization experiences (Hughes, McCabe, Wilsnack, West, & Boyd, 2010). African American women in general, and specifically college students warrant attention given that the “actual context of the college campus and its close-knit, highly social environment lends itself to and points to higher victimization rates” (Sabina and Ho, 2014).

Associative factors. Researchers have begun to examine correlates associated with physical/sexual, controlling and dating IPV victimization among a population that had been largely neglected in IPV research (Bremond, Ahn, and Boykin, 2014; Barrick, Krebs, and Lindquist, 2013). Among college women attending HBCUs, factors associated with IPV suggest that this population is at a fairly high risk for IPV and these associated factors distinguish the incidence of IPV in this population. In their research focused on demographic characteristics such as length of dating relationships, household income, and age related to IPV, Bremond, et al. found that the longer individuals have dated and the younger they started dating, the more abusive they tended to be. Students’ lower household income and lower class standing were also related with the occurrences of physical dating violence. Lack of economic resources and adjustment difficulties associated with less time at college could be the source for stress, thus increasing the occurrences of physical abuse among African American college students.

Some researchers have advanced the notion that stresses, strains, and oppression are factors that may contribute to African American men periodically losing their control (Taft, Bryant-Davis, Woodward, Tillman, and Torres, 2009; Brice-Baker, 1994). Brice-Baker explored and argued that institutional racism, internalized racism, and other societal factors play a large role in the development of African Americans' self-esteem and that internalized racism fosters self-dislike on an individual level and discord within the community. Hence, this possible

internalized oppression is not manifesting itself in direct self-harming behaviors but in the harming of others, namely African American women and African American male students were more physically violent than African American female students. This conclusion is also supported by earlier research which indicated that men who tend to hold traditional patriarchal views were more likely to support the use of violence against women than those with egalitarian gender role attitudes (Baker & Stith, 2008). Further, the relationship between IPV victimization and substance misuse and abuse is significant as a history of repeated victimization appears to increase the likelihood of substance abuse, in many instances as a coping mechanism. For example, Bremond, et al. (2013) found that women who were both sexually and physically assaulted within the context of abusive relationships were more likely to report substance abuse. Fowler and Faulkner (2011) posit that victimization and substance use problems are often so intricately tied together that researchers and treatment professionals should consider the duality as co-occurring.

Cultural Stereotypes. Finally, the macro issue of societal and cultural stereotypes, has been identified as an associative factor in the incidence of IPV among African American young adult women. Stereotypes present in mainstream American culture present African American women as non-feminine, independent, and overpowering – not deserving of protection. As noted by Taft et al. (2009), the African American woman is often portrayed as being unnaturally powerful with regard to relationships, sex, finances, and physical prowess. In that vein, the particular stereotype of “Black super woman” (Asbury, 1987; Brice-Baker, 1994; Bell & Mattis, 2000) may actually serve to contribute to violence against African American women. The notion that these women are invulnerable, insensitive, stoic, and in need of control and domestication may then leave the lack of societal responsiveness to victimization in this population of women (Taft, et al., 2009).

This then contributes to the internalization of these ideologies and African American women themselves identify with the “Black superwoman”.

Of particular note is the strength, almost superhuman aspect of this particular stereotype. African American women and generations before them tend to be reared to be self-resilient, strong, and independent. The image of African American women as overly aggressive, unfeminine women, not needing protection nor desiring such is internalized in the collective psyche of the community. African American men then accept this stereotype and tend to respond in power assertive and hyper-masculine ways to African American women. Although becoming an adult is complicated, Hill Collins (2009) considers raising adolescent African American females as particularly difficult generationally. In her words, “In raising their daughters, Black mothers face a troubling dilemma. To ensure their daughter’s physical survival, they must teach their daughters to fit into systems of oppression” (Hill- Collins, 2009, p. 53). Green-Goode notes, “Viewing African American women unidimensionally, as self-reliant also obscures the detrimental effects of such on the emotional and physical well-being of these women” (2011). Thus, African American women are in a double-bind, an intersectionality of race, gender, and class oppressions (Hill-Collins, 2009) culturally and in the broader society.

As such, this socialization tends to shape how African American women and men interact in relationships. These intimate relationships are impacted themselves by internalizing aspects of systems of oppression and discrimination with its stereotypes of African American women. The belief that strength and independence, as well as emasculation of males is operating in their interactions with each other and then enacting the same tends to “ripen” these relationships for IPV. Lowered social positions negatively place strain but no realizable relief in these relationships outside of violence. This behavioral enactment may lead IPV victims to be reluctant

to show vulnerability, report victimizations and remain in IPV relationships due to denial of the abuse. Furthermore, the concept of strength in the “Strong Black Woman” persona has been generally accepted as positive in the African American context (Green-Goode, 2012) and permeates the cultural context. Wyatt (2008) in her review notes a definition of the strong black woman as one not showing any weakness or neediness, being the rock for everyone who needs her. This belief with its gender expectations for women constructed with this strength focus can be confining. As such, stepping outside of this cultural norm could result in exclusion from their communities, thus reinforcing acceptance and perpetuation of this cultural notion. It further reinforces the isolation women may feel in these violent relationships.

Internalization of stereotypes and ideas regarding the Strong Black Woman is that process where stereotypes are unconsciously taken in and operate in persons lives. Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2004) note that “persons either act out the stereotype (i.e. self-fulfilling prophecy) or react against the stereotype as a way of managing the negative affect associated with it.” In this particular instance, African American women may act out of or in reaction to the stereotype concept of strength about their group without realizing that they are doing so and without recognizing the consequences of their behaviors. These women may then be reluctant to appear in need of assistance from others by not sharing details or seeking help for victimization from others (Taft, Bryant-Davis, Woodward, Tillman, and Torres, 2009). They are likely to prefer to rely on the inner resources, “strengths” that they perceive and believe the “superwoman” possesses (Bell & Mattis, 2000). Such internal responses to their own victimization are barriers that affect African American women’s ability to secure assistance that may help them to remain free from IPV.

Response to Violence against Women on Campus

Few articles have focused specifically on IPV, associative factors and interventions to address such in college attending African American women. In light of the aforementioned prevalence rates of IPV, governmental investigations of institutional intervention and/or negligence, has prompted institutional responses to issues of IPV on campus (Office of Civil Rights, 2015). Further, The Clery Act (1998) requires schools that receive Title IV funding to disclose publicly not only their annual crime statistics, including sex offenses, but also state their policy on sexual assault and describe the educational programs provided by the college to promote awareness of rape and other sex offenses (Coker, Cook-Craig, Williams, Fisher, Clear, Garcia, and Hegge, 2011). Finally, the dearth of research focused on African American women's matriculation and experiences of IPV at HBCUs presents the field with an opportunity for focus and exploration of these issues and subsequent interventions to effectively address them.

As the college campus is a microcosm of the world with services, policies and interventions can be provided to address such victimization and decrease violence among partners and overall in the college community. Colleges and universities must develop interventions and programs that address IPV, dating violence, and sexual assaults on their campuses. While awareness campaigns can increase knowledge regarding these issues, attitude shifts and changes can and have been noted to be short term with interventions such as seen in risk-reduction programs. These programs have been shown to increase protective behaviors, but no effect on rates of sexual violence in particular was noted (Gidycz, Rich, Orchowski, King, & Miller, 2009). Wietzman, Cowan and Walsh (2017) note in their research using national data from the No More study, how governmental investigations and institutions advocate bystander interventions as an effective means to preventing violence. They further note how The Department of Education endorsed bystander interventions through its Dear Colleague Letter campaign, which threatens to

withhold federal funding from public schools and universities if they do not report, investigate, and address violence on their premises (Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2015).

The bystander who is a third party witness to high-risk situations of violence who by their presence, as McMahon and Banyard (2012) note, can do nothing by supporting or ignoring the behavior, or may also by their presence make the situation better by intervening in prosocial ways. Bystander interventions then shift the focus to the community/peer context in which college women are located. These bystander programs focus on the entire community being engaged, not just those at risk or those who have been victimized. This ecological perspective and approach focuses on changing not only the individual, but community interactions, norms and behaviors centering on the human quality of empathy. The inclusion of the community in efforts to prevent and intervene as “engaged helpers” in violent situations, particularly in IPV and sexual assaults is the primary premise in bystander educational programming (Casey and Ohler, 2012). These programs educate participants about violence and encourage them to speak up and stand up in the face of disrespectful, aggressive and/or intimidating behaviors. The bystander intervention has the potential to provide members of a community, particularly those who perceive they share common interests (i.e. fraternity members, dorm mates, team mates), with a constructive, concrete role to play in reducing violence. As well, this approach has the capacity to fundamentally shift violence-related social norms to more prosocial norms as more people take a vocal stance against exploitive or misogynistic behavior (Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan, 2004). Although bystander prevention programs target both men and women as possible helpers, a variation in this approach is the focus aimed at engaging men as allies in ending violence against women (Foubert and Perry, 2007; Foubert, 2000). Central to men's engagement programs is the idea that men may be especially effective in confronting violence-

supportive behavior or speech among their male peers (Flood, 2005 in Foubert and Perry). As noted by Earle (1996) in his seminal work, this is predicated on the assumption that men may be more swayed by male peer messengers. Further, Foubert and Perry state, “Male bystanders may therefore have greater access to and influence over the norms and behaviors of their peers and, concomitantly, have a critical role to play as “allies” in reducing violence against women”.

African American Culture and Intervention

It is especially difficult to develop prevention programming targeting the African-American male population that addresses this issue because of the scarcity of published literature on dating violence among African-Americans (West & Rose, 2000). Community values can play a strong role in whether one defines a violent dating relationship as meriting or requiring outside intervention. Those cultures which place high value on community and collective efficacy have young adults who report greater bystander actions to prevent IPV (Edwards, Mattingly, Dixon, and Banyard, 2014). These communities emphasize and value interdependence; that is these communities place primary importance on interpersonal connections and relationships. Persons within these communal groups, primarily African American, Hispanic, and Asian groups, tend to see themselves as a part of others in the community. Thus, using and advocating bystander interventions with an African American community of college students to prevent IPV appears to be almost intuitive. Hill-Collins (2009) notes that in the context of institutional racism, African Americans have “long aimed to present a united front to Whites” and many will police each other to maintain this unity. Paradoxically, members of the community will not report to outsiders any dissent, but will attempt to regulate behavior internally. African American hesitation to expose their personal *business* due to centuries of discrimination (Boyd-Franklin,

2009), may give the wrong message that persons should not intervene in couples' relationships (Weisz and Black, 2008).

Ward (1995) points out and agrees in her writings that African-American communities have had strong traditions of people caring for each other. However, she believes that economic and political changes have undermined this tradition during the last 30 or 40 years. Very few studies report directly on African-Americans' views on intervening in violent intimate partner relationships. In light of gaps in the literature on the incidence of and intervention in IPV in the African American community specifically among college students, this present article presents a description of a bystander intervention campaign instituted at a Southeastern HBCU and its impact. This fills a gap by providing data from a campaign focused on IPV utilized with African American college students.

Brief Description of the StandUp! ManUp! Program

The StandUp! ManUp! Program was a preventive, experiential intervention and campaign adapted from the Violence Interruption Process (Hayden, 1997) to prevent interpersonal violence in the college community. The Violence Interruption Process (VIP), modeled after the work of the Oakland (CA) Men's Project, and undergirded by liberation theory, seeks to change the attitudes and behaviors of violent men. The Oakland Men's Project began its work by reaching out to difficult populations such as perpetrators of domestic violence and at-risk youth (Kivel, 1990). The premise undergirding this work are four assumptions in liberation theory (Sherover-Marcuse, 1994), the first being that violence is a learned behavior through socialization whereby men are trained that the way to get power is to wield it over someone who is, within the social milieu, less powerful. Hurting others through physical and sexual assault, harassment, exploitation and discrimination creates a cycle of violence and that social institutions reinforce

these practices by producing violence, lack of equality, poverty, and physical and mental disability for communities and the larger society (Kivel, 1997). Assumption two: violence has an institutional dimension and interpersonal dimension. Assumption three: individual acts of violence are the expression of personal choices that people make and individuals can learn new, nonviolent modes of communication, behavior, and conflict resolution. Lastly, assumption four states that no contradictions of social or interpersonal power and violence are final and ultimate. The VIP model shifts the emphasis from negative sanctions and behavioral reinforcement to the cultural belief systems that support and sustain men's abusive behaviors.

In this program participants gained tools needed to recognize, resist, and change potentially abusive attitudes, situations, and behaviors. They were encouraged to become allies and advocates for persons at risk, particularly on a minority campus. Our approach had two key elements of education: 1) didactic and 2) interventive. Emphasis was placed on the premise that each person must become aware of his role played in the perpetuation of the cycle of violence and make changes. In line with the above stated assumptions, we used an array of activities: didactic presentations, role-playing, group exercises, and discussions to support a sense of empowerment, to encourage active involvement from participants, and to establish community-building to facilitate support and problem-solving.

This included two parts, first with the assistance of three male facilitators and one female facilitator trained in the process, didactic presentations were conducted regarding violence and the liberation theory assumptions about violence as oppressive and institutional for a two week period with various male campus groups and co-ed campus groups. In the second part, facilitators guided intervention activities of role-play and group activities of: "Act Like a Man", focused on gender-role socialization and expectations in the society for males to use aggression

and violence in proving they are a “real” man (i.e. “Real men don’t cry”); the Male Stand-up, a nonverbal exercise encouraging empathy as participants identify if any of the gender role statements apply to them as well as their feelings about the statement, while those seated are asked to support those standing by watching them and getting in touch with their own feelings (i.e. “*Stand silently if you have ever been in a fight because you had to prove you were a man*”); and Male Speak Out and Ally Commitment where male participants speak to men and discuss questions focused on commitment to change and interrupting the cycle of violence (i.e. “*I pledge to stand with women as an ally by...*”). In co-ed groups women were asked to observe the men in their groups during the Stand-up and then participated in the Women’s Stand-up as the men observed. The groups were held for 1.5 hours and took between two to four weeks to complete. While this intervention was voluntary and open to all students, the primary recruitment was in male student groups on campus, whereby facilitators focused on and met with the Greek Panhellenic Council and Housing staff. Total student participants was 406 (male: 180 female: 226). At closure all groups discussed the process and experience in groups and dyad, then signed Ally cards denoting their commitment to intervening in situations of violence toward women.

Feedback. When asked “What three things about the program led to changes in your attitude?” feedback from students in a short questionnaire indicated that the Stand up! process was most impactful in attitude change. This question was asked to determine empathy and what accounted for changes in attitude, if any. Responses in this category emphasized a better understanding of what victims of violence in its varied forms go through, increased empathy toward others, and more sensitivity toward IPV as a general concept. Many used the word *understand* to describe their increased sense of empathy toward survivors.

A male from the student academic support TRIO Group stated, “Society affects our understanding of abuse... our household affects our view of abuse”. Another male in the same group said, “Males staying in the box (of gendered socialization with constraints and attitudes) vs. jumping out of the box...I understand now what females go through in this world... (I) will jump out and stay out.” Yet another in this group stated, “Watching them (women) stand up for those things happening to them...that was intense and helped me to understand how they must feel in these situations.” Several males stated being shocked that they were reared in gendered ways and that “women were too and have endured violence and/or abuse in such ways you don’t usually think of, like being called out of their names...harassed.” Of particular note to these men was the realization that cheating is abuse, women feel emotionally unsafe and abused in a relationship where there is cheating.

Participants responded that they made connections and developed empathy for females when they saw male participants stand up indicating acts of violence in their own lives had occurred in their lived experiences. Further, 90% of male participants agreed that it brought new insights and stated they were prompted to action. This was noted and understood particularly after viewing males standing up for being bullied by adult males and male-to-male violence. One male student noted, ... (men) have to learn how to express themselves...I realize that social media have (sic) a negative impact on men and all individuals” One female in the Gaither Co-ed group encouraged male participants to “Jump out of the box...speak out when someone is wrong.” Another male stated, “The dramatization and passion of the presenters was powerful...Violence can be learned and unlearned...I will stop and make it right... One male noted that it was comforting that he is not alone in making changes, “Violence is learned and can be unlearned...it takes a community to stop this violence and begin the process.”

Discussion

Few articles have focused specifically on IPV, associative factors and interventions to address such in college attending African American women. In light of the aforementioned prevalence rates of IPV, governmental investigations of institutional intervention and/or negligence, has prompted institutional responses to issues of IPV on campus (Office of Civil Rights, 2015). Finally, the dearth of research focused on African American women's matriculation and experiences of IPV at HBCUs presents the field with an opportunity for focus and exploration of these issues and subsequent interventions to effectively address them. As the college campus is a microcosm of the world with services, policies and interventions can be provided to address such victimization and decrease violence among partners and overall in the college community. One bystander intervention campaign starting the cultural process of attitude change was the The StandUp! ManUp! Program presented here. The most consistent and almost satisfying response given by males who participated was regarding their attitude changes they particularly attribute to the non-verbal activity of the Standup, identifying ways in which persons had experienced violence in their lives. Participants said that this helped them believe that they were able to understand what female peers felt regarding IPV. Further, they reported making connections between this understanding and intervening as an ally to women in IPV situations.

Cultures which place high value on community and collective efficacy have young adults who report greater bystander actions to prevent IPV (Edwards, Mattingly, Dixon, and Banyard, 2014). These communities emphasize and value interdependence; that is these communities place primary importance on interpersonal connections and relationships. Persons within these communal groups, primarily African American, Hispanic, and Asian groups, tend to see themselves as a part of others in the community. Thus, using bystander interventions with an

African American community of college students to prevent IPV appears to be almost intuitive. Several comments made by participants in the present intervention campaign confirmed the assumptions of Liberation theory that shifts the emphasis from negative sanctions and behavioral reinforcement to the cultural belief systems that support and sustain men's abusive behaviors. Also, with the presentation of material in this manner, a shift in persons' attitudes occurs. One male stated that making the changes and stopping violence in the community *as* a community was encouraging to him. He indicated not feeling alone as an ally to women.

Participants noted and appreciated a male perspective as one participant said, as it emphasized and reinforced presenting the material and the program through the participants' self-perspective versus participants being approached as possible perpetrators of violence. Utilizing this approach is one translated into one for working with people that does not further the violence, but instead contributes to people's liberation. The responses of feeling a part of a community is empowering and according the assumptions in the VIP model, are integral to, happens best, and is maintained most strongly with group support. Community activity breaks down isolation, self-blame, guilt, misinformation, and extreme individualism. Finally, in this model and as distinguished in the present program, we are all connected and none of us is safe until all of us are safe; community is the greatest asset and means to empowerment and violence intervention. Ultimately, the vast majority of participants reported a change in attitude as a result of the intervention and were prompted to action to act as allies to women. This offers support for use of the intervention and its general assumptions and approach with young adults at an HBCU.

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