Go Big or Go Home: Reaching for a More Integrated View of Violence Prevention

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Objective: The purpose of this commentary is to present key questions and challenges for the development of a more comprehensive violence prevention agenda. *Method:* Partial answers to questions posed come from a review of examples of violence prevention and intervention that illustrate bridge building across topics and developmental moments. *Results and Conclusions:* Researchers and practitioners are encouraged to locate and use opportunities for bridging across areas of prevention (e.g., drawing innovations from other areas like substance abuse prevention) and across the life span (e.g., finding ways to connect skill building in childhood and adolescence with prevention education in early adulthood). We can leverage the good knowledge that already exists about preventing violence by making stronger connections between the disparate locations where this knowledge has been generated and by envisioning a more interconnected plan for violence prevention that moves beyond single programs, limited doses, and an all-too-exclusive focus on individual rather than community change.

Keywords: violence prevention, interdisciplinary, community change

Inspiration for this commentary comes from a view of the ongoing hurdles faced by violence prevention researchers and practitioners. The past few decades have brought to light some promising practices for violence prevention. For example, Zielinski, Eckenrode and Olds (2009) showed the impact that early intervention can have on rates of child maltreatment among at risk parents, Foshee et al. (2004, 2012) demonstrated reduced rates of adolescent dating violence after a comprehensive in-school education program combined with family and community capacity building, while several other research groups have described promising practices to address problems of bullying in schools (Menard, Grotpeter, Gianola, & O'Neal, 2008; Olweus & Limber, 2010). These innovations moved the science and practice of violence prevention forward, and yet the complexity of this

problem means we do not yet have a clear solution. This commentary highlights several key aspects of a violence prevention agenda for the next decade which should include work across types of violence, a focus on skill promotion as well as risk reduction, integration of efforts across developmental time-points, and attention to prevention efforts that change bigger societal norms around violence rather than solely focusing on individual behaviors. The aim is to raise questions to move forward a more integrated vision for violence prevention. I use the example of college campus sexual violence prevention to illustrate many key points.

In 2009 the Institute of Medicine released a prevention report "Preventing mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders among young people: Progress and possibilities" (O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009). In it the authors outline a comprehensive vision for next steps in promoting emotional health for youth. They stress the need to consider "promotion" not just "prevention" (2009, p.30), or the need to build foundations of protective skills and conditions rather than simply removing risk factors. Biglan, Flay, Embry, and Sandler (2012, p. 267) followed this report with their presentation of a more inte-

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grated model of overarching risk and protective factors that should be considered together to create a foundation for positive youth development. Working across topics in child development and across models of risk and protection, they highlight four overarching themes that could be the focus of efforts to promote this positive growth for children early in the life span. Though theirs is an overarching roadmap for child development, their call for integration and bridging contains some lessons that may help the field of violence prevention more specifically move forward. Their calls for working across topics and time frames as well as focusing on positive skill promotion are timely lessons for our field. I use their work to pose three key questions for violence prevention.

A Broader Violence Prevention Agenda

A first question we can ask is, "how do we generate ideas for a more broadly focused violence prevention agenda?" One answer is that we need to find ways to work across silos within the violence field, a field which though quite interdisciplinary by profession (encompassing fields including sociology, psychology, criminology, public health, social work, nursing) maintains a norm of single category expertise— where work on child maltreatment remains relatively disconnected from work on adolescent dating violence, college campus sexual assault, or community IPV (Hamby & Grych, 2013). This point is the central focus of the recent book by Hamby and Grych called *The Web of Violence*, which outlines a research agenda that explicitly considers the intersection and co-occurrence of different types of violence across the life span for understanding mental health consequences of victimization and how they may be ameliorated. Within the violence prevention field, many common themes and topics could be a starting point for bridges (and many are similar to key elements highlighted by Biglan et al., 2012, such as the need to identify and reinforce prosocial behaviors not just risky ones and factors to reduce the toxicity of social environments by reducing violence and its correlates). Yet with the increased volume of research in this area there are often few opportunities for the synthesis generating projects that are needed as conferences and journals become more specialized (Hamby, 2012). The advent of

review journals like *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* and special issues of journals that focus on one topic may be the sort of locations where working across areas can take place but we must also intentionally create this space in other ways as well. For example, many journals are decreasing the page limits for peer review articles. Although this opens space for more articles and thus more ideas, it also often means truncated literature reviews to leave room for descriptions of complex methods and results. Can we find ways to encourage panel submissions to conferences that include different areas of the violence field in the same session? Can we create broader connections across topics beyond the violence field, whose lessons learned may be a source of innovation?

Linda Langford (2012), for example, outlines a clear need for a comprehensive and coordinated campus community response to relationship and sexual violence—building connections between different offices and areas of campus focused on the topic of sexual and relationship abuse so that law enforcement and judicial processes are working hand in hand with educators and advocates. But what about linkages across campus issues like alcohol, hate crimes, eating concerns, suicide. Given limited resources for prevention, how can we combine efforts and extend lessons learned in one area to another like links in a chain? Bystander intervention is a good case study here. It is a promising violence prevention strategy embraced by those working on bullying, relationship violence, and sexual assault in many community contexts. Yet it is also relevant to issues like alcohol use (e.g., drunk driving) or suicide prevention. How can we use a common theme like this to talk across our expertise on these issues and figure out a comprehensive way to mobilize communities to help others and to create the nurturing environments Biglan et al. (2012) and O'Connell et al. (2009) talk about? Rosenbluth, Whitaker, Valle, and Ball (2010) have begun to discuss this in terms of knitting together the prevention of bullying with dating violence and sexual harassment. What other issues might be bridged as well?

As another example, both O'Connell et al. (2009) and Biglan et al. (2012) highlighted the need to focus on promotion—to reinforce prosocial behaviors. This is another theme that might serve to connect across silos of expertise.

Violence prevention is still often quite reactive, aiming to reduce risk. Clearly this is an important focus. However, it is still only one piece of the puzzle. Again bystander intervention on campuses may serve as a case example. While a promising focus for addressing sexual violence by mobilizing witnesses or third parties to step in and help when they perceive escalating risk for violence, the focus of education is mainly on mobilizing bystanders when risk is high. Bystanders are trained to be reactive to risk. Less discussed are the foundation of positive attitudes and behaviors that are needed so that bystanders will make the choice to step in and help (e.g., communication and conflict resolution skills, assertiveness to challenge group norms, and templates for healthy interactions and relationships that make instances along the continuum of sexual violence more clear as a problem). Also less discussed is how college students can forge healthy relationships free from coercion so that bystander intervention is not needed. The foundation of these positive behaviors could be built by drawing from lessons from other prevention areas. For example, Life Skills Training to prevent substance abuse (Botvin & Tortu, 1988) or the Social Emotional Learning approach for primary and secondary schools (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien et al., 2003) both have been successful in improving abilities like social skills.

Creating Stronger Doses of Prevention

A next question asks, "how can we strengthen the dose and effectiveness of prevention efforts that we know are already working?" The answer and persistent challenges embedded in this question lie in creating research and practice plans for developmentally linked prevention—making clear connections between prevention efforts at different points in time. Different areas of the violence field, like different pieces of a puzzle, are already tackling the problem of violence at different points in the life course—from interventions to support infants and new parents to bullying prevention in elementary schools, dating violence programs for adolescents in high schools, to social marketing campaigns to reduce sexual violence on college campuses (e.g., Potter, 2012), and bartender training in communities (e.g., Bossong, 2010). To date, however, these programs exist

separately. Few of these pieces have been connected into a more comprehensive vision of violence prevention and we must ask, "how can we help an individual make connections between prevention work and skill building that is done in elementary school as a clear foundation for what happens in middle school, high school, college?"

Some examples of this linking can be found at earlier phases of the life course. For example, Graham-Bermann and colleagues (2007) found interventions for children who witnessed intimate partner violence were more effective for children whose mothers also received a parent-focused intervention. Foshee et al.'s (2004) SafeDates program includes education not only for youth in schools but also resources to educate parents and community-based professionals. But these efforts focus more on bridging across key players at one point in time—children and parents in the same family. How might we make more links for individuals across phases of their own developmental trajectory? A piece of this is making sure more children have access to violence prevention across development. But more than this, how do we clearly connect the curricula for elementary aged children, with what additional skills they need as middle school students, as a foundation for healthy relationships perspectives they may be offered in high school and on college campuses? This has implications for both research and practices. For practice, we need to bring together practitioners who work with each age group and prevention specialists who design programs to work with each age group, have them work together to create a comprehensive roadmap that defines key foundational skills that can be taught and nurtured in young children and then directly builds on these in specific parts of the curricula for youth as they get older.

This is also a research agenda. We need a good deal more information about ordering effects—what skills need to come first, how do we reinforce those later while also layering on new skills and levels of awareness? How do we assess which pieces of prevention best come first, second, and so forth? How do we create the ongoing and multiple doses of prevention that research is clear we need to have a lasting impact. Most outcome research on prevention focuses on one program for one age group. Even when longitudinal work is done, it tends to

focus on one phase of development (e.g., how do the effects of one program persist across a year in college, or across high school?). If each of our prevention programs is separate, then we are not assessing that dose effect.

Campus sexual violence prevention serves as an example. Descriptions of these programs in the literature are usually fixed in their time consideration. Although practitioners and researchers may reference consideration of developmental issues for college students and how these are taken into account in the design of the program, authors rarely talk about how their programs assume certain prerequisite skills that students bring to campus with them from other earlier prevention/skill building programs. Analyses do not examine how campus program effects may differ by whether or not a student has, for example, been exposed to a dating violence prevention program in middle or high school. Conversations about campus efforts are focused only on campuses. What might a prevention agenda look like that, for example, built on best practices of antiviolence bullying programs from elementary and middle schools, combined with a dating violence and healthy relationships curriculum from high school to take students one step further on college campuses. Reaching this goal would entail making access to more systematic, empirically supported prevention programs more universal and promote linkages between the curricula of these programs, which are often siloed in their delivery. What skills need to come first and are necessary before an individual can move forward with behavior change to end coercion in relationships? Does teaching students to be active bystanders, stepping in to help when there is risk for sexual or relationship abuse make sense in their first semester of college, or is that the time to focus on clarifying consent and building victim empathy? Should consent be taught during high school as a platform for understanding complex intersections of violence and substance use in early adulthood? What combination of these things is the most effective dose for ultimately reducing the high rates of sexual and relationship violence we find among 16- to 24-year-olds? Interesting questions emerge from these considerations.

Bridges Between Individual and Community Changes

Finally, we must ask, "how can we bridge individual level efforts with broader social norms/community attitude change?" Biglan, Flay, Embry, and Sandler (2012, p. 267) call for a "move from a focus on individual problems to a focus on the prevalence of nurturing environments" for youth. Working across topics in child development and across models of risk and protection, they highlight four overarching themes that could be the focus of efforts to promote this positive growth (reducing risk factors that harm physical development, creating conditions for prosocial behavior and that teach regulation skills, creating monitoring conditions so that problem behaviors are less likely to occur or go unnoticed, and enhance factors that promote "psychological flexibility" [p. 257]). What is notable in this list is that it includes attention to factors at both the individual and environmental levels—the full ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Specific to violence prevention we might ask, "what broader community contexts are needed to support the foundation of skills we think individuals and communities need to be violence free?" Brown and Messman-Moore (2010), for example, found that perceptions of peer norms related to sexual violence were related to attitudes about being a helpful bystander in these contexts. The substance abuse prevention field has developed frameworks like community readiness to change that could take this analysis further (Plested, Smitham, Jumper-Thurman, Oetting, & Edwards, 1999). This theory and set of assessments examines how attitudes about the need for prevention and awareness of the problem that are widely held at the community level can have a profound impact on individual engagement with prevention messages. To date, however, few studies of prevention effectiveness simultaneously assess the community context in which the prevention program takes place or systematically varies the success of a program across different community attitude and behavior contexts. We know, for example, that a program developed and evaluated in one community may show both similar and different effects in another (e.g., Cares, Banyard, Moynihan et al., under review; Olweus & Limber, 2010), but we often do not measure how aspects

of community context may be driving those differences. In addition, there are now data about how social marketing campaigns may be an effective tool for changing broader community norms and attitudes (Potter, 2012), and the combination of broader social change techniques with individual skill building has the potential for important synergistic effects (Banyard, Potter, Cares et al., 2013). However, evaluation research continues to focus mainly on individual rather than community-level outcomes.

As the IOM report and Biglan et al. (2012) point out, prevention of a diverse array of problems has many key developmental foundations. They focus mainly on early childhood, but there is room to carry this work forward to build on models of successful early developmental skills to aid our violence prevention efforts later. To date, too much isolation by issue, by age group, and by discipline impedes these efforts. We need to find new ways to connect ideas and develop processes to create creative spaces for collaborative conversations. We know from research on creativity and insight that the newest ideas often come from those outside a particular silo of expertise (Paulus & Nijstad, 2003)—how do we build these interactive spaces into our field? How do we include practitioners in these collaborations? The IOM, Biglan et al. (2012), and Hamby and Grych (2013) present interesting and ambitious agendas for the prevention field—violence prevention can be a good testing ground for trying to actualize this vision. How will all of us start to take these next steps?

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