



Myths and Facts¹

by Paul Kivel

THERE IS A COMMON PROCESS of public speaking and public education which relies on a technique I'll call "myths and facts." It is used in the rape crisis and domestic violence movements, which is the area I work in, so I will draw examples from this area. But its use is very widespread outside these areas as well.

This method of education has several specific variants, one of which goes something like this. Facilitator asks the participants to describe what the characters would be like if they saw a newspaper headline which read "Man Rapes Woman." Who would she be? Who would he be? A list of adjectives is generated which are supposed to represent the stereotypes. Then the facilitator systematically goes through them and explains that they are stereotypes, myths meant to confuse us, and in turn presenting the facts about the rapist and the survivor. Sometimes the myths are presented by the facilitator as commonly held beliefs and then demolished or corrected with the facts. There is more audience participation in the former method, although it becomes a set-up because all the audience answers are "incorrect" and subsequently corrected by the facilitator. This leaves the group feeling like it must rely on "experts" like the facilitator because their own efforts to understand were so wrong.

In any case a couple or many myths are gone through and corrected, leaving the audience with more accurate information about the situations or issues under discussion. Sometimes a fact sheet or myth and fact sheet is handed out to everyone to leave with so they can refer back to it after the presentation.

An example of this method in a rape prevention workshop might be that the audience would say that the woman who was raped was young, dressed in a sexy way, and maybe hitchhiking. The presenter would then talk about the wide age range of rape survivors, e.g. from three-years-old to 94-years-old, the variety of

¹ Reprinted from *Helping Teens Stop Violence: A Practical Guide for Counselors, Educators, and Parents*. Allan Creighton with Paul Kivel (Hunter House: Alameda, CA 1990/92) © 1990 Paul Kivel. Allan Creighton had a major hand in shaping this article and collaborating in the work of understanding and working on adultism represented here.



situations they are raped in, and the variety of dress and activities involved in these situations. Then the presenter would move on the next “myth.”

Although this example seems simple enough, in fact, it is a complicated piece of information filled with emotional as well as factual content. Let’s look at the methodological assumption of this educational process, and then explore the complexities of a couple of commonly used myths.

Basically I understand a major underlying assumption of this method to be that people are either terribly misinformed, and/or ignorant and that just giving them the right information will enable them to make reasonable choices about situations in which they find themselves. To some extent this is true. Our society mystifies and falsifies much of the information we get and we certainly need more and better information so that we can make more informed choices. However, we are not perfectly reasonable, rational people. We make decisions based on our experience, other people’s experiences, our knowledge, our estimation of the danger, our sense of the options and their results, and various personal and cultural characteristics. Furthermore, we take in, believe, sort through and re-use information based on all the above named factors. Let me use an example.

Myth: Most rapists are Black males and/or most Black men are potentially rapists. **Fact:** Most rapes occur within racial groups, i.e. white men usually rape white women, and the only reason Black men are tried and convicted more often of rape is because of the racism in the legal system.

This is a common myth perpetrated in the media and in everyday racist culture. It is implicit and explicit throughout our society. We’ve learned it, though, not simply as a piece of wrong information. We’ve learned it, as we’ve learned all racism, as part of the emotionally-laden, experientially-charged fabric of our lives. As part of the training we’ve had as non-Black people to grow up, live in, and maintain the system of racial power. Or as part of the training we’ve had as Black people to belittle and undervalue and mistrust ourselves and each other. My belief that Black men are rapists is not just misinformation. It is information I learned at great hurt and cost growing up, from the people I loved and trusted. My mom and dad, my friends, relatives, etc. This information affected me very differently if I was white or Black or of another racial background (along with many other factors such as my gender, my class, and my sexual orientation).



If I am white then the information and the implications of that information (i.e. that there are people I must fear, people I can't trust, people I can't be friends with, fears around sexuality, people to protect, or who needed protection i.e. white women) were unwanted, resisted and ultimately forced on me so that it seemed that I had no choice but to accept the information in order to survive.

So someone may come along and tell me that Black men are not rapists. I may even believe you. But that may in no way affect how I feel when I next walk down a street and a Black man approaches. For me to accept new information and for it to affect me there has to be an emotional shift of all the beliefs and experiences which connect to that one. The shift can only occur when I can release my fear and reopen my heart. Beliefs are emotionally laden and therefore we cannot change them without a process for working through emotional content. Otherwise I will probably still be afraid of Black men on the street but now perhaps also feel guilt and self-blame about being afraid because I "know" they are not rapists. This confusion may, in fact, make it even more difficult for me to make useful, appropriate decisions in potentially unsafe situations.

The alternative to just giving me new information might be to explore with me how we've learned a whole set of information about Black people and Black men in particular. Where and when and from whom did we learn it? How has it hurt us, whatever our racial heritage--how is it used to oppress us all? What fears are attached to letting go of these beliefs and how can I get support for continuing to work on this after the facilitator leaves?

There are specific techniques for doing each of these steps. Without some process which addresses these aspects of the "information," new facts are not going to help me change. I can use the information to tell other people they're wrong or myself that I'm wrong because the facilitator said so. And the facilitator becomes one more authority in my life telling me what to believe or not to believe, not an ally helping me be more powerful and less willing to pass on racial violence in the guise of protecting myself.

Even more serious questions are raised about these techniques when this myth represents the way that racism is dealt with in a presentation. This, in fact, may be the main referent to racism in a workshop on sexual violence. Although it is clearly inadequate as a method for addressing racism in the content and methodology of a workshop, I have heard this myth-fact exercise justified because "we have to deal with racism." Obviously, covering this myth does not deal with racism. Individual beliefs do not even constitute



racism. Individual beliefs are the result of the institutionalized oppression and violation of one people by another based on race. Since, in our society, this provides the context for our entire lives and belief systems, dealing with racism involves examining that context, healing the pain and hurt, correcting the misinformation, setting a process in motion to continue dealing with racism, and acting to challenge the system of institutionalized violence itself in a community of people engaged in such activities. Parts of each of these tasks can and need to be incorporated into every workshop intentionally and effectively.

Another myth commonly debunked is this: **Myth:** The man to fear is a stranger. **Fact:** A woman or child is most likely to experience sexual or physical violence from someone they have known intimately and trusted such as a husband, father, step-father, friend or date.

This is earthshaking news indeed. Not something to toss out as part of a section on protecting oneself. If we are allowed to explore this “fact” together we may learn why we don’t already know it, or do but can’t acknowledge it. We would have to process how we personally have been hurt by those we love, how our concept of love itself is bound up with violence and how we might have to re-evaluate and shift our entire perception of people in order to accept this “information.” And depending on who we are and where we live and other factors, it may or may not be true for you or me. The implication of this “fact,” that I should fear and protect myself from those I love and who love me, carries assumptions we must examine together and that we can’t take out of context.

The myths-and-facts presentation also makes it appear that these two myths are unrelated and that sexism and racism are separate issues. It seems clear, however, that male violence against women and children in families is protected and hidden by training us (both whites and people of color) to look at people of color as dangerous and violent. We are taught that the danger is out there, in/from “them,” and that we need our fathers and white men to protect us. It is extremely difficult to challenge your abuser if you believe that you need his protection because there are even worse dangers abroad.

I have heard each of these myths presented, built up and then demolished in five or ten minutes. I’ve seen people be told they’re wrong for believing the myths. I’ve seen people be confused, upset, disbelieving, frustrated and made to feel inadequate or stupid because they couldn’t just throw out their life’s learning and experience and accept a few simple new pieces of information. But



they could figure out well enough what we want to hear. And on a post-test they can give the right answers.

Why is it that we want to believe that this methodology works? I can only offer some suggestions. We often have a certain desperation about getting the message out, affecting people, helping them, protecting them. We believe that it is dangerous out there and this work will make it safer. Whether we have 15 minutes at a luncheon talk, or three hours at a workshop, there is always more to say, do and pass on to people than we have time for. We each want to feel powerful and effective in our lives and in our work. We want to feel that we make a difference. We also see people as victims of violence, unprotected, needing our help, relying on us to guide them through. These are all our own emotional needs and not the needs of those with whom we talk. We need to get support, appreciation, feedback, etc., from each other, as co-workers, so that we don't implicitly set up our methodology to meet our needs for reassurance, calming, hope and support as teachers, workers and adults.

Our theories of violence also tend to re-enforce this methodology. We speak of victims of violence. We talk of women or children as victims, as needing defense against violence. We begin to see our task to help protect women, make them less vulnerable to dangerous situations, to give them the advice they need to feel or be safer. And the world gets divided up into men who are abusers and women who are abused. In this model women need self-defense classes and safety advice. Women and children and men can use self-defense training and safety advice. But there are reasons why it isn't taught, and reasons why, once we know it we don't necessarily use it. In the complex reality in which we live, where we move into and out of relationships with a constantly shifting dynamic of power, no one is perpetual victim or abuser. We have all experienced and internalized the powerlessness of this society. We have all survived the violence in our lives. We have all learned to pass on our powerlessness and hurt by passing on hurt and violence to ourselves and those around us. (A man violated on the job may abuse his female partner; a heterosexual person of color, violated by white society, may violate gay and lesbian people; a woman violated by her boss or co-worker or husband may violate her kids, or her students; and any of us may violate ourselves through drugs, accidents, and not taking care of ourselves well.) We need theories which understand not only the external oppression, but the ways we have internalized and are complicit with that oppression both as perpetrators of and defenders against violence. We need methodologies which call on



our experiences and our survivor's strength to come together and challenge the values and expectations underlying our society. No one of us is simply a victim. We are all complex players and survivors of a system which tries to destroy us and keep us apart. As facilitators, it is crucial that we acknowledge our own roles and experiences in this society and acknowledge the strength, experience, and concern which absolutely every person brings to our workshops.

A final and important reason we stay with this methodology is because it is safe for us as facilitators. We risk nothing. We have all the information, all the facts. We no longer believe the myths and are cured of the disease of sexism, or racism, or whatever. We don't have to be open, or vulnerable. We don't have to deal with other people's difficult experiences. We don't have to risk ourselves. The only things we really have to do is to have our facts correct and to have entertaining presentations so that people will absorb the information and take it home with them. We don't have to love or care about or even necessarily respect the people we are talking with, and we don't have to feel any common bonds. In fact, we don't have to feel much at all. After all, this is just an exchange of information and the debunking of myths.

Our lives are hard, our work situations difficult at best, this particular kind of work poorly rewarded, and all of us have been hurt by the violence of our society. Most of us have never been given a chance to work through our personal issues and heal from our painful experiences. We don't always feel powerful in this work, powerful enough to risk our lives, powerful enough to trust the people in our workshops, powerful enough to open ourselves up to others in our work. And because of this sense of powerlessness we stick with safe techniques which keep us in control, feeling powerful and effective and separate. In keeping in control we ultimately end up feeling more powerless because people invariably don't make the changes we want them to, we remain isolated and our work is ineffective in building community responses to end the violence.

When our needs for support are getting met elsewhere, when we can acknowledge our common bonds and struggles with the people with whom we're speaking, when we love and respect them, and understand the complexity of our common situation, and when we can let go of our need for control and personal safety--only then can we take the time to listen to whom we're speaking and make room for their questions, concerns, experiences and knowledge to be the framework for our work. And the work's effectiveness can then be measured in the empowerment of the participants, not in



the amount of information transferred by the facilitators. And the myth that this methodology of “myths and facts” works will be just that, another myth and not a fact of our work together.

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