

The Social Norms Approach to Violence Prevention

Alan D. Berkowitz

www.alanberkowitz.com

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The social norms approach to violence prevention is being used in the United States by colleges, universities, health departments and State Coalitions Against Sexual Assault to engage men as allies in preventing violence against women. Social norms interventions have had considerable success in addressing alcohol, tobacco and drug use and abuse in high school, college, and community settings (Berkowitz, 2003A, Perkins, 2003).

Social norms research suggests that most males are mistaken about other male’s attitudes and behaviors towards sex. Similarly, most males are uncomfortable with violence against women and with the attitudes, behaviors, and language of men who commit such violence (Berkowitz 2002, 2003B). However, men do not act on our beliefs or express our discomfort because we falsely think that other men do not feel the same. For example, men overestimate both the extent to which other men are sexually active and other men’s adherence to rape myths (Berkowitz, 2002, 2003B). What men think other men think and do is one of the strongest determinant of how men act – even when these perceptions and beliefs are mistaken. Thus, most men feel uncomfortable with characteristics and attributes of male socialization but falsely think that other men are comfortable with cultural definitions of masculinity (Gottfried, 2002). Similarly, most men seek consent in intimate relationships and are uncomfortable with language and behavior that objectifies and hurts women, but falsely assume that other men do not employ consent and are not uncomfortable with other men’s negative behavior towards women (Berkowitz, 2003B; Bruce, 2002, Fabiano et al, 2003, Kilmartin, et al 1999; White et al. 2003).

A consequence of these misperceptions is that men and boys keep our true feelings to ourselves and do not act on them, becoming bystanders and passive observers of other men’s problem behaviors (Berkowitz, 2002, 2003B). Simultaneously, men who engage in verbal and physical violence against women incorrectly interpret other men’s silence as approval, thus feeling emboldened to express and act violently towards women. Thus,

when values and behaviors associated with patriarchy and violence against women are seen as hegemonic, they cause most men to hide the parts of ourselves that seem inconsistent with it. Engaging men as part of the solution to violence against women requires that men come out of hiding to express attitudes and behaviors that will serve to inhibit violence by other men.

The social norms approach has been used in health media campaigns (Bruce, 2003, White et al 2003) and in small group workshop settings (Far & Miller, 2003), where accurate group norms are revealed in posters and/or through interactive group exercises. In a related application of the social norms approach Smolinsky (2002) developed a small group norms intervention to foster heterosexual ally behaviors towards GLBT individuals by revealing that most straight individuals overestimate the homophobia of their straight peers.

Social norms interventions require that data be collected about actual and perceived norms. The actual norms are then reported back to the target population. Knowing that one is not alone in one's beliefs and desired actions has the effect of freeing oneself to act on them. In the case of men and boys, it provides permission to censor and express discomfort with the attitudes and behaviors of other males that embody "rape culture."

The following information can be included in workshop presentations or social norms marketing media : 1) men's misperceptions of other men's sexual activity, 2) incorrect beliefs about other men's support of rape myths, and/or 3) false assumptions about other men's comfort with degrading language towards women. For example, Kilmartin et al. (1999) designed a poster and media campaign that documented the majority of men's discomfort with inappropriate language about women. After the campaign men reported a reduction in their misperception of other men's level of comfort with such language. Bruce (2002) implemented a similar campaign at James Madison University to change men's intimate behavior towards women. Data was collected revealing positive attitudinal and behavioral norms among men regarding sexual intimacy and a poster campaign was developed to advertise these norms. Three messages were developed:

- A Man Always Prevents Manipulation: Three out of four JMU men think it's NOT okay to pressure a date to drink alcohol in order to increase the chances of getting their date to have sex.
- A Man Talks Before Romance: Most JMU men believe that talking about sex doesn't ruin the romance of the moment.
- A Man Respects a Woman: Nine out of ten JMU men stop the first time their date says "no" to sexual activity.

This campaign was followed by a significant increase in the percentage of men who indicated that they "stop the first time a date says no to sexual activity" and a significant decrease in the percentage of men who said that "when I want to touch someone sexually, I try and see how they react." In another social norms campaign directed at men and women and focusing on misperceptions of consent behaviors, sexual assaults were reduced (White et al, 2003).

These studies have a number of implications for individuals working with boys in schools and can be used to develop formal and informal interventions. They suggest that a key to effective prevention is the fact that most males are uncomfortable when we witness harassment and other forms of violence, even when we don't know how to respond. Thus, boys can be approached as partners who have a role in ending violence against women, rather than as adversaries or as part of the problem. It is important to remember that the climate of violence and sexism that boys grow up with is hurtful to us as well, and that opportunities to talk about feelings and discomfort are healing and can set the stage for social change. Social norms marketing validate and normalize these otherwise hidden feelings and beliefs.

With this in mind, teachers, coaches and staff can elicit student reactions to problematic incidents through one-one conversation or informal surveys and encourage individuals to not be bystanders, while also enforcing policy and setting limits on acceptable behavior. For example, if I am a coach on a team and one of my players tends to use derogatory language towards women, I can find out what others feel about this language and then let team members know that they are not alone in their discomfort.

Here are a few different ways to identify and reveal norms of intolerance among men towards violence against women (adapted from Berkowitz, 1998):

- Give workshop participants blank cards and ask them to describe how they would feel if they were aware of intimate violence or overheard derogatory remarks about females. Collect the responses, shuffle them, and read them aloud.
- Design surveys that assess how males feel about different types of violence, if they have witnessed it happening to others, and if they think that these situations would bother male peers.. Present responses in workshops or in social marketing campaigns.
- Ask teacher, parents, coaches, etc. to talk to bystanders when they learn of an incident of verbal or physical abuse and assess the bystander's feelings about what happened. Collect a number of examples and discuss them with students to reveal that most of their peers are uncomfortable such behavior. Encourage group discussion and review ways for bystanders to support each other to respond.

Resources for the social norms approach include websites hosted by the Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention (www.edc.org/hec/socialnorms), the National Social Norms Resource Center (www.socialnorm.org), and The Report on Social Norms (www.socialnormslink.com). The process of asking the right questions, collecting data, presenting it in a manner that is believable and relevant, and addressing questions that arise when accurate norms are disseminated require training and familiarity with social norms theory and with common implementation failures. With this in mind, the social norms approach can be a powerful

tool for fostering male ally behavior and can be used to design effective interventions that complement other violence prevention strategies.

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