

Engaging Men as Social Justice Allies in Ending Violence Against Women: Evidence for a Social Norms Approach

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This article looks at using a specific form of social change marketing and education – the “social norms approach” – as applied to sexual violence efforts on college campuses. Although the title implies working with a variety of forms of men’s violence against women, it only examines sexual violence. While this is the case, it is also true that there are implications for other forms of educational efforts that do focus on other forms of gender-based violence.

The social norms approach, coming largely from the arena of substance abuse prevention, suggests that people tend to have unrealistic assumptions about the social behaviors of others, and use these assumptions to base their own decision-making about their own social behavior. For example, most college students have been found to assume that other college students drink more heavily than they actually do. They then use this misperception to explain their own drinking behavior. There has been work recently to apply the social norms approach to sexual violence educational programs on college campuses. The working assumption of this application is that men misperceive other men’s sexually aggressive behavior, support for rape victims, importance of consent, etc. They then explain their own sexual behavior based on this supposed misperception. Applying the social norms approach to sexual violence education means identifying what the “real” attitudes of men are in a given area, and then educating men about these real attitudes. The assumption and hope being that as men learn what other men “really” think, they will change their attitudes and behavior.

The current research project examines the use of the social norms approaches with men on college campuses to decrease the likelihood of sexual assaults.

They begin by highlighting the findings of several programs working to educate men. The programs highlighted, according to the authors, focus on the role of men as “social justice allies” with women. An ally is then defined as a “member of a dominant or majority group who work to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through the support of and as an advocate with, the oppressed population” (p. #4). Men can thus act as allies by changing their own personal behavior as well as confronting other men’s problematic behavior.

The authors then explore what is known and practiced in terms of sexual assault prevention education with men. According to the authors, the majority of programs working with men begin with an exploration of “rape culture” as a foundation, but does not tend to offer concrete ways for men to act as allies to deconstruct rape culture in their personal lives. In addition, there has been a substantial amount of research on “rape proclivity” – or the likelihood that men may choose to act in sexually aggressive ways. There has not been a similar amount of research

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(“scant” is the word used by the authors”) on the characteristics of men who are unlikely to rape. The research seems to suggest that many men do not themselves believe in or support the societal myths about U.S. masculinity, but also believe that most other men do. It is this assumption that other men do believe in the ideals of masculinity for which men tend to feel a pressure to “measure up” when around other men.

The current research was designed to explore to related dynamics: 1) the importance placed on consent in sexual intimacy, and 2) the willingness to intervene on behaviors that could lead to sexual assault.

The research project occurred at Western Washington College (WWC) in Bellingham, WA. 583 students agreed to respond. 56% of the respondents were female and 78.5% were European American (roughly reflecting the demographics of the campus. The survey instrument was a questionnaire designed from the following two scales – “Discomfort with Sexism” scale and the “College date rape attitudes and behavior survey.” The final instrument asked each respondent to answer the questions from three different perspectives: their own, that of the average male WWC student and that of the average female WWC student.

RESULTS

The Importance of Consent

“There was no significant difference found between men and men regarding the actual norm for the importance placed on consent” (p. #12). Men and women demonstrated nearly identical scores on their personal commitment on “obtaining and honoring” consent in terms of sexual relationships.

Men tended to underestimate, by a substantial degree, the importance of consent held by both male and female peers. Men’s misperceptions of male norms were greater than men’s misperceptions of female norms (as also judged as extremely objectifying – mean of 9.3).

Willingness to Intervene

This study found a great deal of ambivalence for both women and men to intervene. Again, there was no significant difference between women and men’s scores on this measure. Men tended to underestimate other men’s willingness to intervene while overestimating women’s willingness to intervene.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The strongest predictor of males’ personal importance of consent was their perception of women’s norm of consent. Men’s perceptions of the importance that other men placed on consent was also significant on their personal importance of consent. According to the author, these findings suggest that educational programs designed to correct men’s misperceptions about their female and male peers’ attitudes towards consent could influence the value that men place

on getting consent. The authors also interpret the findings as evidence of the need to incorporate factors on the willingness to intervene in educational programs for men

The authors then provide five key considerations for strengthening campus cultural environments to reduce sexual assault:

- 1) Strengthen the dominant culture of safety and respect. By this, the authors suggest that developing programs that build on men's willingness to be part of the solution to ending sexual violence.
- 2) Engage men as allies.
- 3) Reduce the effect of norms misperception (the "boomerang effect"). While holding perpetrators accountable for their behavior, it is also important for campuses to also honor and encourage men's willingness to intervene against sexual violence.
- 4) Strengthen accurate campus norms through multiple communication strategies. In addition to using traditional educational formats (workshop sessions), the authors suggest using a multiple of techniques to strengthen the message. A social norms model is again suggested.
- 5) Amplify the voice of the silent majority. The authors suggest shifting the focus of educational programs from the "rape culture" to what they identify as the "culture of protection" they suggest a likely increase in success in involving and mobilizing men to act as allies for social justice and work to end sexual violence.

REFLECTIVE THOUGHTS

This research provides valuable information in an area that is poorly examined – how to effectively engage men. Utilizing a social justice model (as opposed to a legal justice model, or a public health model alone) seems to have some very positive and potentially powerful possibilities in working with men not only about sexual violence, but all forms of men's gender-based violence. The use of social marketing and multiple educational strategies also seems to be an important consideration in developing educational programs for men.

Although this research found that both men and women placed very similar importance around obtaining consent, it is worth examining how men and women may define consent (particularly behaviorally) differently. Other research has consistently found a difference between what women think is consent and what men think is consent. This research also measures more accurately men's ideas about consent, more than their actual behaviors and attitudes. In other words, most men probably do have the *idea* that it is important to obtain consent, but there is often a difference between actual behavior and one's idea.

Finally, it is worth examining the weight of peers' attitudes on one's own beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. Men of college age tend to put a great deal of weight behind their peers that are most

close to them. Developing a social marketing approach talking about the “men on their campus” may have some impact, but men will likely measure that information with the information they receive from the men they are most close to. Any discrepancy will likely go to their peers as opposed to the marketing campaign. Developing tools to reach these sub-groups seems like a crucial next step in developing the lessons learned so far.

These considerations aside, the research project and paper summarized here does seem to be a powerful tool in developing programming for working with men not only in regards to sexual violence, but in other forms of men’s gender based violence as well.