



YOUTH VOICE PROJECT

Social Norms Interventions

The core of social norms efforts to reduce harmful behavior and increase positive behavior comes from this key observation: When people misperceive the behavior and attitudes of their peers, their behavior is likely to be influenced by that misperception. The social norms approach is a data-driven, environmental approach that grew out of research conducted by Wesley Perkins and Alan Berkowitz at Hobart and Smith colleges in the mid-1980's. Berkowitz wrote in 2004:

“The social norms approach was first suggested by H. Wesley Perkins and myself (Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986) in an analysis of student alcohol use patterns. In this study we determined that college students regularly overestimated the extent to which their peers were supportive of permissive drinking behaviors, and we found that this overestimation predicted how much individuals drank. Our recommendation that prevention efforts focus on providing students with accurate information on peer drinking attitudes and behavior (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Berkowitz & Perkins, 1987a) represented a radical departure from traditional intervention strategies that provided information on abuse and negative consequences and concentrated primarily on the identification, intervention, and treatment of problem users. When drug prevention emphasizes problem behavior without acknowledging the actual healthy norm, it may foster the erroneous belief that drinking problems are worse than is actually the case and inadvertently contribute to the problem it is trying to solve. In contrast, interventions based on social norms theory focus on the healthy attitudes and behavior of the majority and try to increase it, while also using information about healthy norms to guide interventions with abusers.”

The social norms approach is based on the assumption that people incorrectly perceive other people's attitudes and behaviors. When we misperceive other people's attitudes and behaviors as more damaging and destructive than they really are, we are likely to change our own attitudes and behaviors to line up with the perceived actions of our peers. For example, the more students think their peers drink, the more likely they are to report drinking themselves (Borsari & Carey, 2000; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). These misperceptions are likely to drive behavior. Young people who do not plan to smoke, drink, or have sex at an early age may act in risky ways that do not reflect their own values. They do this in large part because they have inaccurately perceived that they are the only ones who have those values. In addition, youth who lean toward risky or harmful behaviors but have mixed feelings about these actions may be more likely to act on their negative or potentially harmful impulses if they have inaccurately perceived that the majority of their peers are with them. We can correct misperceptions when we collect and disseminate credible, accurate information about peers' actions and beliefs.

The researchers studying social norms approached this question in a novel and productive way. They asked, “Are people influenced by their perception of what their peers do and believe, even if those peers don’t overtly pressure them to do something?”

Stan was part of the Maine Tobacco Reduction project in the 1990s, which led to a reduction in the young adult smoking rate in Maine from 28 percent to 14 percent. As part of that initiative, he asked fourth and fifth grade students how many teens and young adults in Maine they thought smoked cigarettes. The students in each discussion confirmed research in this field by overestimating the proportion of youth who smoke, often by a large margin. In most of the discussions, large numbers of students thought more than half of Maine’s young adults smoked, and often the estimates were higher than 75 percent.

To dispel the students’ misperceptions, Stan took his video camera into a high school auditorium in which 800 students were gathered for an assembly. As he panned the camera across the crowd of students, he asked everyone who had not smoked a cigarette in the past year to stand up. Approximately three quarters of the students stood up. This video was shown to younger students throughout the school district. Often youth reacted with surprise, followed by thoughtful silence. After one six-session series of lessons about tobacco, elementary school children told Stan that the video of the kids standing in the auditorium was the one thing they remembered most.

Earlier in the campaign, the teen advisory group to the statewide program proposed posting signs saying “Maine has the highest young adult smoking rate in the United States.” The campaign decided not to use that sign because youth might interpret it as meaning, “most kids smoke,” and that interpretation might inadvertently increase the youth smoking rate. Instead these signs were redesigned to say, “72 percent of Maine teens do NOT smoke.” This campaign was paired with pictures of youth describing why they chose not to smoke.

Berkowitz (2004) summarized this process:

“An extensive literature has documented the importance of peer influences and normative beliefs on health behaviors of youth. Research suggests that these peer influences are based more on what we think others believe and do (the ‘perceived norm’) than on their real beliefs and actions (the ‘actual norm.’) This gap between ‘perceived’ and ‘actual’ is referred to as a ‘misperception’ and its effect on behavior provides the basis for the social norms approach. Presenting correct information about peer group norms in a believable fashion is hypothesized to reduce perceived peer pressure and increase the likelihood that individuals will express pre-existing attitudes and beliefs that are health promoting. Thus, providing normative feedback to correct misperceptions of norms is the critical ingredient of the social norms approach.”

The social norms approach has been used primarily to reduce alcohol and tobacco use among older adolescents, and it has been effective. Applying the social norms approach to reduce peer mistreatment in schools and promote more inclusive, supportive behaviors among students seems like a natural next step. For example, it is likely that young people believe that their peers really don’t mind when youth tease, exclude, spread rumors, and make fun of other students. Correcting these misperceptions may not only reduce the prevalence of peer mistreatment, but also may promote more supportive, inclusive behaviors among youth. Like other risky behaviors, peer mistreatment is a realm in which youth are likely to misperceive.

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Since peers are often silent in the face of frequent negative action, it is easy for youth to believe that very few of their peers want these actions to stop.

Justin Patchin and Sameer Hinduja are considered leading experts on cyberbullying. They both have posted on their blogs about social norming. Patchin wrote about the need to correct the perceptions about cyberbullying:

“I ask them to tell me what percent of students cyberbully others. Their estimates are all uniformly very high (70-80-90%). They are surprised when I tell them that the correct number is actually much lower than that – less than 10% have done it in the previous 30 days. I was at a school this spring that had just collected data from its students about cyberbullying. I quickly skimmed through the handout that the principal gave me with a summary of the results and noticed that 9.5% of the students admitted that they had cyberbullied others. Yet when I asked the students during my presentation, they too estimated the number to be in the 80-90% range.

Correcting the perceptions of youth about these facts is important because if they come to see a certain behavior as normative, they may feel free to engage in that behavior. Or they may feel pressure to “fit in” by doing what they think “everyone” else is doing. Well, the truth is that most students are not cyberbullying others. I tell teens that it is in their best interest to work to reduce the 10% number even more because, like them, the adults in their lives often see the behaviors of the 10% and assume that most young people must be behaving similarly. I mean, there is no shortage of examples in the morning paper or on the nightly news of teens getting into trouble for misusing technology. But these examples represent the exceptions rather than what is most often occurring.

In the end, perceptions can be just as important as reality in terms of influencing behaviors. Which is why we need to work to educate teens and adults alike about what most youth are doing online, using valid and reliable data.”

To understand how adolescents’ social norms can shift using social networking sites, we will briefly describe a recent experimental study designed by Dana Litt and Michelle Stock (2011) from George Washington University. The purpose of their study was to examine the influence of social descriptive norms delivered via Facebook on adolescents’ (13-15 year olds) attitudes and behaviors toward alcohol use. They wondered if they could shift adolescents’ attitudes (e.g., favorable attitude toward alcohol use) and behaviors (e.g., willingness to drink alcohol) towards alcohol use simply by presenting photos on Facebook of older teens drinking, along with comments from friends related to their at-risk behavior.

Adolescents were split into two groups. One group viewed Facebook profiles that included photos where the majority of older peers were drinking alcohol and read posts related to alcohol use such as, “you were so drunk last night.” The other group viewed Facebook profiles where the majority of high school students were not drinking alcohol and read posts about other topics, such as, “Do you want to go to the movies tonight?”

As the researchers predicted, adolescents who viewed Facebook profiles that featured alcohol use reported that they were more willing to use alcohol themselves, had more positive attitudes towards alcohol, had more favorable images of alcohol, and were less likely to see themselves as vulnerable to the consequences of alcohol use.

Given the ubiquitous nature of technology use among adolescents, it makes sense to use social networking sites to communicate messages about how to treat others. We know that peer acceptance takes a front seat to other adolescent needs, particularly during early adolescence. In fact, if you have spent any time with a teenager lately, you know that they spend an inordinate amount of their time checking and rechecking how they are measuring up to the “standard” of other adolescents. What if we exploit adolescents’ preoccupation with what others think of them to promote more positive, supportive beliefs about how we treat others?

We can do this by exposing youth to pro-social models of adolescent behavior that include supporting other students when they are mistreated, inviting others to their friendship group, and reaching out to youth who may be alone. For example, we can highlight high status teens on Facebook who use photos and postings to promote supportive, inclusive behavior of all. Similar to the Litt and Stock (2011) study, we can use engaging photographs and relevant postings to communicate pro-social normative attitudes about how we treat others. We could also use high status adolescents (older than the target population) to shift attitudes about peer mistreatment towards specific marginalized populations. For example, we could highlight pictures and posts of high status kids connecting with disabled students, students who get help from special education, or students who have been mistreated with a focus on sexual orientation.

In summary, it is a promising intervention to apply scientific findings to reduce peer mistreatment and promote positive behavior. First, we need to show youth the positive things that most of their peers do and believe. Results from a myriad of studies about social norming suggest that we should target adolescents’ descriptive norms if we want to change their thinking patterns about a specific behavior.

Secondly, we can show students the discrepancy between perceived norms and actual norms for a behavior. We can do this by collecting real student data about what they think adults and other students should do when someone mistreats someone else at school. When the consensus of peer attitudes is positive, we can show students what their peers have said.

Several studies have shown that adolescents’ beliefs or descriptive norms are wide open to change from social influences. However, studies also show that as adolescents age and enter young adulthood, they become more resistant to their peers’ influence (e.g., Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009). Consequently, it is important to double our efforts to use the social norms approach during the adolescent years to maximize our efforts to promote more inclusive, supportive behaviors.

Core elements of successful social norms interventions

Successful social norms interventions rely on a set of core elements, including collecting and presenting valid, reliable, and relevant data; avoiding negative messages that contradict positive youth norms; and using both quantitative and qualitative data.

If peers’ attitudes are significantly more positive than negative, disseminate that information in a variety of ways, using repetition and a variety of modalities to make the data memorable, and meaningful.

Make sure data presented is accurate and credible. It may be tempting to add a few percentage points to the frequency of positive responses, especially if those responses are low. However, if teens realize that we have inaccurately changed the data, we lose trust and effectiveness. If attitudes and behavior truly are more negative than we had hoped, we can use other strategies to change attitudes and behavior. There are many other effective techniques we can use to change perceptions, including discussions to raise awareness, experiential activities to

build empathy, and encouraging high-status youth to convince their peers of the importance of adopting more constructive beliefs surrounding specific behaviors. On the other hand, if our data show us that youth attitudes and behavior are mostly positive, we can use social norms interventions and thus avoid the risks associated with telling teens what to think or do.

We often want to make clear to a wider public how prevalent or dangerous a negative action is. As such, we are often tempted to use scare tactics. However, in doing so, we run the risk of convincing youth that most of their peers are using negative actions—thus unintentionally making the negative behaviors more likely.

Social norms interventions are most effective when we mix survey percentages with personal stories to make the normative attitudes and behaviors more vivid and meaningful to students. This combined strategy appeals to both intellect and emotion. It is important to make sure that the personal stories we use represent strategies or behaviors that match our quantitative, numerical survey data. In other words, don't use personal stories that represent the exception to the norm.

Like other risky behaviors, peer mistreatment is a realm in which youth are likely to misperceive. Since peers are often silent in the face of frequent negative action, it is easy for youth to believe that very few of their peers want these actions to stop.

Outside of the Youth Voice Project, Stan facilitates anonymous online student and staff surveys at schools he consults with. A number of the questions in these surveys can be used in social norms interventions.

In these surveys he lists specific negative peer actions and asks: "If students do these things, what do you think adults at school should do?" The answer options are: Adults at school should take action to stop it or Adults at school should not try to stop it. For the same list of actions, he asks "If students do these things, do you think other students should tell adults at school?" The answer options are: Students should tell adults at school or Students should not tell adults at school.

These questions give us an opportunity to measure the number of youth who want adults to take some kind of action to stop a specific negative behavior and the number of youth who disapprove of that action.

Stan consistently finds that a majority of students want most potentially hurtful peer behaviors to stop. When 60 percent or more—a clear majority—of the student population report that they want a behavior to stop, we can respond by feeding their data back to youth and by aligning our policies around those student responses.

Stueve and colleagues (2006) suggested that we ask youth about whether they think they should tell adults about a wide range of specific behaviors. As Stueve and colleagues recommend, we can disseminate this information back to students to make it easier and more acceptable for youth to tell us their concerns. As they learn that their peers think these actions should be reported to adults, students would be willing to do so.

At the same time, we can use survey data about peer attitudes about telling adults to wonder why few youth think they should tell adults about some potentially harmful actions. We need to ask the questions, have these young people routinely seen adults not take action about these frequent behaviors? Have adults discouraged students from reporting these actions? Have adults just not informed youth that they want to hear about these actions? We can use the answers to these questions to make it more likely that youth will tell us about negative actions by their peers.

We described above the natural process by which students are more likely to hear about antisocial or risky actions by peers than to hear about safe, positive actions. When we disseminate our students' positive narratives, we can reverse that process and create more of an accurate perception of peer social norms. Personal stories have a unique power to move others emotionally, and subsequently, promote action.

In the Youth Voice Project, we asked youth to write anonymously about what they have done to help others who were excluded or mistreated and about what happened next. We had no idea how many youth had chosen to use positive, supportive actions toward peers. We expected that some of the youth who had used these actions would choose not to write about them at the end of a long survey. To our surprise, more than 9,000 of our 13,000+ survey subjects took the time to write their responses to these two questions. Here are a few, chosen to reflect what mistreated youth said helped them the most:

"Yesterday Me and my two other friends saw a person in our grade all alone at a tree. She was crying and we ran over to see what was wrong. She said 'I'm so tired of being alone' or something like that. So me and my friends all sat with her and made her laugh and feel better."

"I befriended them. And my friends followed my example. Then [the people we helped] didn't want to hurt themselves anymore."

"Well once there was this girl and no one really liked her and I felt really bad for her because she was sitting all alone and stuff so I went over there and sat down with her and we talked and when my friends saw me they came over and asked me what I was doing and I told them I was hanging out with my new friend...anyways after a few days of hanging out with her I came out one day and there was a lot of new kids with her so I was pretty pleased to see that plus it made me happy because like well I don't know I guess knowing that I helped her get a lot of really cool friends made me feel good about myself."

Schools could share similar stories of alliance building and hope with their own students. Such narratives can be used as a starting point to seed positive cultural change in schools. It is best for schools to collect and use stories of their own students' positive actions. These narratives (with personal information removed) can be made into posters and spread throughout the school. They can be shown on the wall during lunch, programmed into electronic signs, read during announcements, dramatized in skits and/or sent home in parent newsletters.

Young peoples' answers to a similar question can also be used to encourage alliance and support: "What was the most helpful thing other students did when you were mistreated? What happened when they did that?" The following are some responses from the Youth Voice Project:

What was the most helpful thing other students did? "My absolute best friend stayed by me, she was the only one and made me feel good about myself and reassured me that i wasn't as mean as the other girls."

What happened when she did that? "It made me feel more confident that i would be able to keep being myself and not let this ruin my life."

It is worth reiterating that it is important to de-identify narratives thoroughly when using with students. Especially in small schools, it may be too easy for students to identify the writer or the person who was mistreated if they read or hear a student account.

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