Feature Articles: Review of Dying to Drink

Trying to Think: A Review of Henry Wechsler's *Dying to Drink*

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- From Dr. John H. Pryor's review

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- From Dr. Robert Chapman's review

Thereare few topics of more import in higher education than the role of alcohol in contemporary collegiate life. And if collegiate drinking is a topic of significance, then Henry Wechsler is certainly on the "short list" of influential voices on this subject. But being on this list and being one of the most frequently cited authorities by the media is not exactly synonymous with being a seer.

Dying to Drink, co-authored with Bernice Wuethrich, is Dr. Wechsler's latest offering on the subject of high-risk collegiate drinking, or what he has deemed "binge-drinking" (i.e., 4 or more drinks in a row for women or 5 or more drinks in a row for men). It is an exhaustive review of the myriad alcohol-related threats faced by today's college students. From its thorough review of media perceptions regarding collegiate drinking, through the role of "big alcohol" in aggressively marketing to underage drinkers, to proffering an unfortunately subjective list of recommendations, this tome is relentless in its intent to deliver America a wake-up call regarding the pandemic currently raging in higher education.

As a treatment and prevention specialist who has dedicated his professional career to addressing problems associated with alcohol abuse, I recognize the concerns cited by the authors and do not take issue with their facts. But I do question their myopic view of the issue and their "out-of-hand" rejection of several promising practices currently being employed to address it.

The information cited in *Dying to Drink (D to D)* justifies the authors' admonishment to assertively address the problem. However, its description as extrapolated from these facts is

A Social Norms Perspective on *Dying to Drink*

Henry Wechsler and Bernice Wuethrich's *Dying To Drink: Confronting binge drinking on college campuses* covers a wide range of college drinking topics, including their views on social norms.

The authors let you know clearly where they stand with the title of Chapter 7: "Alcohol 'Education.'" The quotation marks around the word "education" imply that there is no actual education taking place on college campuses. The placement of this chapter, under a larger section of the book entitled "Big Alcohol," perhaps reflects the authors' interests in examining educational efforts for their connections to the alcohol industry rather than for their effectiveness. In this book, however, the evaluative lens is focused on the connection between alcohol education programs and the alcohol industry. The rest of the book actually has very little information on alcohol education programs.

Wechsler and Wuethrich describe social norms as relying on "two unproven assumptions" (p.139). In other parts of the book, they convey a main criticism of social norms as having little scientifically rigorous evidence of effectiveness. In this case, the authors have a point. There is a scarcity of evaluation data on social norms programs that test the model with a control group strategy. Unfortunately, this is the case with almost all forms of alcohol education, not just social norms programs. Paradoxically, in the paragraph directly after the statement about the lack of research examining social norms, the authors seem to admonish the federal government for "throwing millions of dollars behind the social norms idea" by funding exactly what they say is missing, namely,

Editor's *notes*

It is hard to believe that *The Report on Social Norms* is now entering its second year. Many thanks are due to the Advisory Board of this publication, who wrote and reviewed articles and provided guidance and support, to the hard-working staff of PaperClip Communications, with special thanks to Julie Phillips, to all of this year's authors, and to you the reader, who made this effort possible.

The reader will note some slight changes as we begin year two. Last year, *The Report on Social Norms* was published quarterly as *The Social Norms Quarterly* along with seven Working Papers. Over the course of the year it became clear that there was more news, new information, and recent research than could fit into four quarterlies. As a result, *The Report on Social Norms* will now be published five times a year along with four Working Papers. At the end of the year an index will also be published.

This issue is a testament to the growth of the field: new awards, more successful interventions, a growing body of research, and creative applications. Please remember that you are welcome to share your comments, observations, and experiences with social norms in future issues.

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A Social Norms Perspective

...those who look to this book for new ideas will be disappointed. The recommendations in the latter sections of the book are ones that many health educators, researchers, and policy makers know, and, indeed, have been working toward for many years.

that rigorous evaluation of the program.

Returning to the "unproven assumptions" claim, it is again perhaps ironic that the dismissal of "unproven assumptions" is made without any reference to "proof." In fact, there is a long line of literature that does indicate that people are influenced by perceptions of alcohol use by others. While much of this literature is correlationally based, so is much of Wechsler's work in establishing the so-called "binge" rate. Perhaps it is that Wechsler and Wuethrich misunderstand social norms. Social norms does not claim, as Wechsler and Wuethrich state, that students will match their drinking to the campus norm. Social norms merely states that this is an influence. And, as the research shows, it can be a powerful influence.

Henry Wechsler has a long and distinguished record as a scientist dedicated to examining and uncovering the damaging effects of alcohol on college students. His attention to high-risk drinking and the secondary effects of drinking, and the media coverage of this research, has focused the nation on serious problems with our campuses and our students. For many of us, the resources and visibility of what we do on a day-to-day basis have been increased at our institutions due in no small part to the efforts of Henry Wechsler and his team of researchers. *Dying to Drink* summarizes that research, but those who look to this book for new ideas will be disappointed. The recommendations in the latter sections of the book are ones that many health educators, researchers, and policy makers know, and, indeed, have been working towards for many years. Many were set forth in April of 2002 in more detail and with greater support in the literature by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) report "A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges."

For the social norms advocate, *Dying to Drink* will likely provoke anger at the simplistic way in which the program is portrayed and the exaggerated influence of the alcohol industry. The hundreds of social norms programs that exist today across the country that have no connection to the industry were to all purposes ignored in the book. Directors of social norms programs will unfortunately need to be familiar with the book and its arguments in order to counter the claims made by Wechsler and Wuethrich. *Dying to Drink* does the alcohol field a disservice by creating a social norms "straw man" and then knocking him down with little regard to the scientific rigor they claim was lacking in the program.

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Trying to Think: A Review of Henry Wechsler's *Dying to Drink*

suspect. For example, the book dust jacket states: "Perhaps more chilling even than the cold facts and figures are the personal confessions gathered from Wechsler's survey and Wuethrich's independent interviews." What the dust jacket does not mention, however, is that approximately 25 percent of students account for approximately 67 percent of the alcohol consumed in college. Thus, to only interview "these" students or others affected by "these students" does not provide an accurate picture of "all" college students.

If the extent and definition of the problem are suspect, so are the recommendations, which are at best dated and already made by others. Many of them have been available to the public on the web site of the Higher Education Center (HEC) since well before publication of this book. For example, *D to D* calls for schools to explore "social alternatives" to high-risk social outlets, but as early as 1997 the HEC has been advocating for "alcohol-free" and "late night" programming as key parts of a comprehensive package of environmental strategies to curb high-risk drinking. Similarly, *D to D* dismisses social norms programs as "soft-selling the message" while paraphrasing a classic social norms tag line that "a majority of students want a change in the tenor of campus life" to justify its call for "tougher enforcement" of campus policy. A chart on page 217 even outlines percentages, showing that a majority of students support such environmental strategies as "cracking down on underage drinking" and "enforce rules more strictly." These are the identical recommendations made by the HEC in its comprehensive collection of environmental strategies to curb collegiate high-risk drinking and in its endorsement of social norms campaigns as promising tools for the collegiate preventionist's toolbox.

The Audience

Dying to Drink is written to a very specific and receptive audience, namely the parents of current and future college students. As such, ANY publication that is likely to reach this population has an obligation to present the entire story. Unfortunately, this work does not pursue this objective.

I have cited many of the facts delivered here myself. Unless, however, they are couched in the reality of the "rest of the story" (as Paul Harvey used to say), they are meaningless at best and incite unwarranted fear and reactionary responses at the worst. The "six o'clock news syndrome" does nothing to further the development of proactive steps designed to impact the real problem of alcohol abuse by some students. Unfortunately, this book stops short of providing an objective view of that problem. Rather, it breeds shortsighted responses that tend to "react to" problems rather than "act on" them. Just as a technician who neglected to include a ruler or other reference point in the photograph of evidence found at a crime scene could seriously compromise the photograph's usefulness to a criminologist, so does the absence of reference points call into question the snapshot this book provides of higher education.

We know from the very first College Alcohol Study conducted by Dr. Wechsler in 1993 that while significant numbers of students reported consuming 5+ drinks in a row if male and 4+ drinks in a row if female, the majority did not. The most recent CAS, conducted in 2001, found that less than a quarter of students reported drinking in this fashion two or more times in a two-week period prior to being surveyed. Another 19 percent reported that they had consumed no alcoholic beverages at all in the previous 12 months. I would not suggest that a quarter of our students drinking five or more drinks two times in two weeks is not a problem. But to read *D to D* is to wonder if the authors are ignoring the fact that most students in their studies are not the contemporary collegians portrayed on the 6 o'clock

news and in TV tabloids. The quote prominently displayed on the book's dust jacket seems to applaud this very inaccuracy: "That college students drink to get drunk is no myth. It is the simple truth….(sic) But being statistically normal doesn't make [binge drinking] right, and it certainly doesn't make it safe…" (sic). Yet the authors' own data indicate that "binge drinking" is NOT "statistically normal." Again, my point is not to deny the extent of high-risk drinking by today's collegians. Rather, the facts that indicate we SHOULD BE concerned need to be considered in the context of what ALL students are doing.

The Problem

While there is a significant alcohol problem on our college and university campuses, this book does NOT provide an objective overview of what students are doing with alcohol in college. As noted above, Dr. Wechsler's own College Alcohol Study statistics indicate that it is not even what most students are doing.

The traditional argument says that "if even one student is drinking too much" or "even one student is drinking under age" it is a problem. Similarly, I do not take issue with the authors' claim that "if 23 percent of college students" are consuming five or more drinks in a row two or more times in the previous two weeks, we should go to whatever lengths necessary to curb this alarming trend. But to present this as the gist of the story is not good science.

If the "out of context" presentation of facts is of concern, so is the "out of hand" dismissal of current prevention and intervention strategies. The authors' almost parochial rejection of social norms programs as being based on "unproven assumptions" and "soft selling the message" reminds me of someone who is blinded to the truth by a dogged adherence to dogma. Rather than explore social norms as science, *D to D* banishes the approach—implying that

the Gathering Place

Editor's Note: "The Gathering Place" brings together news, announcements, and important developments in the field of social norms.

NIAAA Funded Study. The National Institute for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse has funded another study that will incorporate the social norms model. The "Safer California Universities Study" will be conducted by prevention researcher Robert F. Saltz at the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, California. It will involve 14 campuses from the University of California and the California State University systems that will test how social norms and environmental management strategies work in combination. The experimental design will block the 14 campuses into matched pairs with one campus (chosen at random) implementing each of two treatments ("experimental" sites). One intervention will target misperceptions of drinking norms and the other will be a comprehensive "environmental risk management" approach. Half of the experimental campuses will start with one or the other strategy and then use both in the second year, while the remaining sites will combine the two strategies in reverse order. Eventually, all experimental campuses will implement both strategies in combination to discover whether there is a synergistic effect of them together. Comparison sites will provide controls for matched experimental sites across the years of the study and serve as a check for outside influences that might interfere with study outcomes. This project is one of a number of controlled studies funded by the NIAAA that will test the efficacy of the social norms approach. For information contact:

Robert F. Saltz, Ph.D., 510-883-5733 or saltz@prev.org

Peer Theatre Scripts incorporating social norms messages are available from Bacchus/Gamma. Topics include: "Double Take: Misperceptions and Alcohol" and "If Our Campus Was Ten People" and feature characters "Miss Perception" and "Social Norm." These performances are among a much larger series of theater scripts available from Bacchus/Gamma focusing on a wide range of topics relevant to college students and come with guidelines and instructions for staging. For information or to purchase, contact: Bacchus and Gamma Midwest Office, 612-824-3362 or dhellstrom@quest.net

Criticisms of the Social Norms Approach were featured in the September/October 2002 issue of "Be" magazine, a free, health-oriented publication made available to college students at campuses around the country. The article repeated criticisms and misunderstandings of social norms that are commonly found in the media, including that social norms doesn't work, that it promotes conformity, and that the beverage industry funds social norms programs because they "encourage you to drink."

Budweiser/Anheuser-Busch recently ran a half-page color ad in the *Washington Post* with the image of a young man heading a soccer ball with statistics about adolescents including that "83 percent of adolescents don't drink." The text thanks parents who talk to their kids about alcohol and reminds them that they are "making quite a difference."

The 2002 National Conference on Tobacco and Health, held Nov. 19-21 in San Francisco, had six programs featuring social norms approaches to reducing tobacco use and promoting tobacco cessation. These included presentations by the Coalition for Healthy Communities (Maryland); Bacchus/Gamma, Virginia Commonwealth and University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh; the Vermont Department of Health Tobacco Control

Program, and Wheaton College in Norton, Mass. Conference abstracts are available from: www.tobaccocontrol.org

The National Science Foundation has awarded a grant to Northern Illinois University to assess the impact of a social norms intervention to improve the participation and retention of women in mathematics. Social norms media will be used to change negative campus perceptions regarding women's roles, abilities and achievements in mathematics and a group of women will be followed to determine how the campaign affects women's willingness to enroll and persist in math courses. For more information go to www.socialnorm.org or contact Amy Levin (alevin@niu.edu) or Diana Steele (dsteele@niu.edu).

Customized Social Norms Posters are available from Bacchus/Gamma that can be tailored to include photos and data from individual campuses. Purchasers choose a template and provide local data and photos or have the option of using generic photos and/or national data. Bacchus/Gamma suggests that these posters can be effective in preparing for a more rigorous social norms campaign. For more information contact: Bacchus and Gamma Midwest Office, 612 824-3362 or dhellstrom@quest.net.

National College Health Assessment Again Documents Healthy Drinking Norms Among College Students. In the year 2001 most students drank moderately or not at all, most students used a number of protective behaviors to drink safely, and serious harm as a consequence of drinking was uncommon. In addition, students reported that alcohol was not among the major impediments to academic performance. This data is from 32 institutions that self-selected to participate in the Spring 2001 NCHA survey, with a total of 16,813 students chosen by random sampling techniques comprising the sample for this analysis. It is available from the website of the National Social Norms Resource Center (www.socialnorm.org).

Recent Research

Correction of Normative Misperceptions: An Alcohol Abuse Prevention Program.

(1999) George Steffian, *Journal of Drug Education,* 29(2):115-138. College men were assigned to a normative education group (experimental group) or to a traditional alcohol education program (control group). The experimental group participated in a group consensus exercise in which the group made predictions about campus drinking norms and then were presented with actual data, evidence of their own misperceptions, and a discussion of social norms theory. The control group watched a film on the physiological effects of alcohol. "Participants in the normative education groups demonstrated more accurate perceptions of campus drinking norms and a significant reduction in the consequences of alcohol use while those in the control group did not. Changes in normative perception were among the strongest contributors to a function discriminating between those who decreased their drinking and those who did not."

Student Factors: Understanding Individual Variation in College Drinking.

(2002) John S. Baer. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Supplement 14: 40-53. This literature review summarized research on individual differences in relation to alcohol use in college. The author concluded that "social processes appear especially important for drinking in college venues and may contribute to individual differences in drinking more than enduring personality differences." In a section on the influence of perceived norms on heavy drinking, he noted that the literature on this influence was equivocal and concluded that "perceived norms for drinking may justify or exacerbate heavy drinking only under conditions where more accepting social attitudes already exist."

Relationship of the Estimation of Binge Drinking Among College Students and

Personal Participation in Binge Drinking: Implications for Health Education and Promotion.

(1999) *Health Education*, 30:98-103. Binge drinkers were found to have significantly higher estimations of rates of binge drinking than non-binge drinkers, with both groups over-perceiving the actual norm significantly. In addition, these overestimations predicted binge-drinking itself. For example, "One quarter of the men who estimated that the prevalence of binge-drinking among men on campus was below 50 percent were binge drinkers. By comparison, the relative risk of binge drinking was 3.0 times greater among those who perceived the prevalence was 50-80%… the relative risk increased 6.6 times among those who perceived the prevalence of binge drinking among men was greater than 80 percent."

A Social Norming, Comprehensive Marketing Campaign's Impact on First-Year College Student's Self-reported Alcohol Drinking Behavior.

(2001) *Dissertations Abstracts International*, Vol 61(7-A):2625. At the University of South Dakota, pre-test data were gathered for first-year students during the opening week of fall semester in 1999. Following a campus-wide social norms marketing campaign, post-test data was collected in the spring semester 2000. "…initially first-year students increased their drinking. By the second semester, the first-year students had begun to show signs of modifying their drinking. Second semester, first-year students modified their drinking from more than 15 drinks per week at three or more sittings to 14 or less drinks per week at less than three sittings."

Impact of Normative Feedback on Problem Drinkers: A Small-Area Population Study.

(2001) John A. Cunningham, et. al. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 62:228-233. An intervention pamphlet containing normative feedback was mailed to over 6,000 households in Toronto. In the month following the mailing a general population survey was conducted to assess alcohol use. "472 respondents from households receiving norma-

tive feedback reported significantly lower alcohol use than 225 controls, but this effect occurred only among respondents who met an objective criteria for problem drinking and who perceived some risk associated with their drinking."

Misperceptions of Social Norms About Tax Compliance, Working Paper #7 (A Prestudy) and Working Paper #8 (A Field Experiment).

Centre for Tax System Integrity, Australian National University. Michael Wenzel, 2001. These two fascinating studies document how taxpayers underestimate the extent to which other taxpayers believe in the obligation to pay one's taxes honestly. The first study provides research documenting the misperception, and the second study details a controlled intervention to give taxpayers correct information about other taxpayers' beliefs about paying taxes. Tax deduction claims for four groups of taxpayers were analyzed. While there were no effects of the intervention on claims of work-related expenses, there was a significant reduction of claims for other deductions in the experimental condition. *(Abstracts available at www.socialnorm.org)*

Perceptions of Other's Masculinity Beliefs: Conforming to a False Norm?

(2002) Michael Gottfried. Presented at the *110th Conference of the American Psychological Association*, Chicago, Aug. 22-25. College men surveyed were found to overestimate what they believe other men believe about being a man. Men held less stereotypical views of themselves as men but thought that their peers and society in general were more stereotypical in their beliefs about masculinity. Greater disparities between how a man sees his masculinity and what he believes other men and society in general believe about being a man were associated with less self-esteem. The author suggested that when men overestimate what their peers believe about being a man they act in conformity with the overestimation to gain group acceptance. Interestingly, perceptions of women's beliefs had no predictive value in

from *the* field

A Report on the Fifth Annual National Conference on the Social Norms Model

Editors Note: Each newsletter of the Report on Social Norms *will feature model programs or interventions that have been successfully implemented in a community setting.*

Over 300 individuals attended the Fifth Annual National Conference on the Social Norms Model, held July 10-12, 2002 in Philadelphia, Penn. There were approximately 30 sessions devoted to a wide range of issues, including:

- *Using Social Norms in Peer Theater* described a successful project at the State University of New York at Albany that integrates social norms information and data into the performances of the *Middle Earth Players*, a peer theater program. This intervention has demonstrated success in correcting the misperceptions regarding alcohol use at the university, solidifying the presence of protective behaviors, and reducing rates of alcohol use on campus.

- *The What, Why, and How of Rigorous Focus Group Methodology* concentrated on methods of transforming qualitative research theory on focus groups into hands-on applications that participants could use in the development of their social norms marketing projects.

- *Data Collection and Analysis* was the focus of a number of sessions. Topics addressed included: the relative merits of various survey instruments; problems in the collection and analysis of data based on consistent measures; data collection tools and techniques of use in community settings, on college campuses, and in national assessments; and market testing techniques for social norms media development.

- *Social Norms and High-Risk Drinkers* were discussed in sessions devoted to using social norms to tar-

get various high-risk populations, such as athletes, fraternity and sorority members, and heavy, frequent drinkers. Intervention methods discussed included: personalized feedback profiles; the small groups norms-challenging model; and specifically targeted print, electronic, and peer educator strategies.

- *Special Topic Panels* were a new feature of the conference this year, where researchers and practitioners addressed topics such as funding issues, media relations, the application of social norms to social justice issues, and the special challenges and opportunities of using social norms in community settings.

Given the breadth of conference offerings, it is perhaps best in this brief report to highlight some of the key information presented there.

Measurement and Message

In the plenary session, Dr. H. Wesley Perkins addressed the complex interrelationship of social norms measurement and message. His remarks, largely cautionary, focused on several current concerns in the field:

- **Single Measure Mindlessness.** Singular attention to any one measure can cause one to neglect other important data. One example of this is the five or more drinks at an occasion question. Often inappropriately used as a single cut-off measure, it is notably insensitive to any reduced consumption achieved among the heaviest drinkers. By contrast, use of a continuous variable will yield a more comprehensive analysis of project impact.

- **Single Message Mantra.** Single message campaigns swiftly go stale and are branded by the target population. By contrast, campaigns with a variety of messages stay fresh and provide a fuller picture of the accurate norms.

- **Injunctive Norm Neglect**. In our work we often focus on descriptive or behavioral norms, neglecting the injunctive or attitudinal norms of a population. We need to be aware that the injunctive norms, which are also frequently misperceived, can provide rich and positive data for our campaigns.

These comments significantly augment the points that Dr. Perkins made during his pre-conference workshop, where he noted that evidence has begun to accumulate that the most effective social norm campaigns share the following characteristics:

- There is a clear, positive norm underlying the campaign. Nevertheless, successful campaigns often provide a variety of messages that give a fuller picture of the actual norms.

- Competing, scare tactic messages are absent.

- Message dosage is high, ongoing and intense, and both message recall and acceptance by the target audience are frequently evaluated.

- Synergistic strategies are used so that normative messages are delivered in various contexts.

- Normative messages are delivered to the general population, not just targeted sub-groups. This counters both the personal and the contextual misperception effects.

Social Norms and Tobacco

Among the key findings presented at the conference include the successful use of social norms to reduce cigarette use. Two projects in particular have built on the work of the DCP/SAFE Social

From the Field

Norms Project that has achieved significant reductions in cigarette use among students in two Midwestern high schools. The first, the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh's *You Know You Want To...* campaign, has thus far achieved a 33 percent reduction in smoking rates among students. One of the innovative elements of this campaign is reflected in its primary normative message: "96 percent of UW Oshkosh students who smoke want to quit before graduating." Most tobacco-related social norm campaigns focus on the fact that smoking is not the norm (E.g., "seven out of 10 students don't smoke…"), a strategy that may inadvertently antagonize the target population of smokers by further ostracizing them. By contrast, the UW Oshkosh approach suggests a way to positively connect with smokers and then augment the primary message with additional normative information, some injunctive, some descriptive.

The second successful campaign reported on, the Montana *Most of Us Are Tobacco Free* social norms project, targeted youth between the ages of 12 and 17 in seven western Montana counties. In this community-based intervention, post-test data revealed that only 10 percent of the teens in the campaign area reported first time cigarette use as compared to 17 percent of the teens in a control sample from the rest of the state. (Post-test interviews were conducted with 641 of the original 848 teens in the intervention and control samples.) This represents a 41 percent difference in the proportion of teens that reported initiation of smoking in the intervention counties as compared with those in the rest of the state.

Protection Trumps Risk

Finally, important research was presented that focused on the strategies that college students employ to minimize their risk for alcohol-related harm when drinking. Previous work has identified a

cluster of what might be called Personal Protective Drinking Behaviors that, when used regularly by college students, reduced the likelihood of harm. Research has also shown that, as the number of different protective behaviors employed by students increases, the probability of alcohol-related harm decreases. This relationship exists for moderate drinkers as well as less moderate drinkers. The protective behaviors identified are:

✦ Determine, in advance, not to exceed a set number of drinks.

✦ Choose not to drink alcohol.

✦ Keep track of how many drinks you are having.

✦ Pace yourself to one or fewer drinks per hour.

✦ Avoid drinking games.

Statistical analysis of the aggregate National College Health Assessment data revealed that the incidence of alcohol-related harm drops nearly to zero for those students who practice a cluster of four or more of these protective behaviors. Most importantly, this is true whether the student's BAC level is above or below .10. This has obvious implications for the field, since it strongly suggests that protection trumps risk. Traditional prevention approaches that focus solely on abstinence or attempt to minimize the behavior have generally failed; this work suggests that a more effective method of risk reduction would be to identify and promote a target population's indigenous protective behaviors.

This year's conference benefited from the financial support of the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board and the Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc.

by Rich Rice, National Social Norms Resource Center

notable quotes

praiseworthy and critical comments about the social norms approach

"It may well be questioned whether *fear* after a certain age, is a motive to which we should have ordinary recourse. The human character is susceptible of other incitements to correct conduct, more worthy of employ, and of better effect."

Thomas Jefferson, *The Rockfish Gap Report*

Situational Abstinence

A strategy that is being pursued in Norway with the assistance of the World Health Organization may have relevance to social norms interventions and the promotion of protective behaviors. "Situational abstinence" interventions create (or reveal) a consensus that certain situations should be non-alcoholic. In the Norway effort this includes driving, boating and bathing, sports, pregnancy, work, mourning and depression, in the company of children, and conflict situations. To apply this concept to drug prevention in higher education students could be surveyed to determine what situations they feel should be alcohol-free and whether the norms for situational abstinence are misperceived. For example, students might agree that abstinence is appropriate the night before an exam, before finals, prior to participation in an athletic event, as a spectator during an athletic event, etc. and situational abstinence messages could be incorporated into social norms campaigns. (Reference: "College prevention programs could benefit from emphasizing strategies for abstinence." *Monday Morning Report*, V26(9):1-3)

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the prevention model is the contrivance of "big alcohol"—and all but impugns the integrity of its proponents.

This summary rejection of social norms programs as "disturbing" and without evidence strikes me as curious. As a Harvard-trained Ph.D. Social Psychologist, I would expect that Dr. Wechsler's familiarity with the robust social psychology literature of the last 50 years on "social influence and conformity" would have been sufficient to adopt a "wait and see" posture regarding the current investigations into the efficacy of social norms campaigns, especially in light of their promising results. This social psychology research, dating back to the early 1950s, suggests that the views of others exert a significant social influence on the views of the individual. This influence can be sufficient for someone to abandon personal opinions in favor of those reported by others. Every reader of this review is likely to recall a situation where a personal position was altered in order to adopt one perceived to be more in tune with that of one's social group.

It would seem that the *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)* has also found reason to support social norms programs as worthy of consideration as a prevention strategy of promise. Recently added to its "model programs" web site is a report supporting the use of social norms, an excerpt of which states: "The Social Norms Media Marketing Campaign is the primary component of Challenging College Alcohol Abuse…Results show that negative consequences of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) use and positive perceptions of alcohol use decreased significantly. Heavy drinking decreased by 29 percent, as did AOD-related crimes" (see http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/).

The Future

I do not know what science will ultimately prove regarding social norms and other promising approaches to reducing high-risk drinking in college. As a practitioner I find the logic of contemporary prevention strategies to be compelling. Approaches to reducing high-risk student behavior such as social norming, environmental management, motivational-interviewing and harm-reduction should be investigated and funding provided to underwrite these investigations. We need look no further than the changes of the last 40 years regarding social perceptions of normative behavior with regards to cigarette smoking or reductions in drinking and driving fatalities to get a sense of how vulnerable public perceptions of normative behavior can be.

My experience is that there is no "silver bullet" or "one-size-fits-all" approach to solve any social problem. Most successful interventions involve a concerted effort mounted by a variety of individuals who collaborate to achieve a common goal. While the prevention field is indebted to Dr. Wechsler and his colleagues for placing the issue of high-risk collegiate drinking on the front page where it belongs, unfortunately *D to D* is sorely lacking as a call to collaborate on a solution.

Despite all this, this book is worth reading by higher education professionals working to prevent high-risk drinking, if for no other reason than "to demonstrate how *not to* do something." I would, however, caution parents that *Dying to Drink* is not representative of the views of all who are concerned about the problem. Likewise, many of the recommendations proffered have been advocated for some time by some of the very same agencies accused by the authors as 'sleeping with the enemy.' Thus, if you choose to read this book, please also take the time to find out "the rest of the story."

Note: for a comprehensive overview of "what's what" in higher education's attempt to address collegiate high-risk drinking I would recommend visiting the web site of the Higher Education Center at http://www.edc.org/hec. To learn more about the social norms approach visit http://www.socialnorm.org.

by Robert Chapman, Ph.D., Pennsylvania Regional Coordinator for the Network of Colleges and Universities Committed to the Elimination of Alcohol & Drug Abuse and Related Violence. He can be reached at: Chapman_PhD@yahoo.com