

# The Report on Social Norms

Volume 2 Issue 9

July 2003

## Feature Article: A Visit to the Archive: Applications of Classic Social Psychology to Social Norms Interventions

"One can conceptualize social norms interventions as grand experiments in basic social psychology... I have discovered that attention to classic social psychology has the potential to make social norms work more sophisticated and effective. A wide variety of social psychological findings apply to social norms work."



early a half century ago social psychologist Solomon Asch published the first study in his landmark research on conformity. Asch's research design was elegant in its simplicity: he presented his participants with a single vertical line (called the standard line) and a set of three comparison lines. The task was to choose the comparison line that was closest in length to the standard line. Observers had little trouble accomplishing this visual-perceptual task. Only 5 percent made even a single error across several trials when they were alone. But when an individual participant was in a small group in which everyone else reported an incorrect judgment, over 70 percent made at least one error in the face of unspoken but powerful interpersonal pressure. How did Asch find groups of people who would consistently report the wrong answer? He hired them to do so in order to assess the effects of social pressure on publicly reported judgments.

Asch's research is relevant today and it is particularly applicable to social norms work. The social norms approach focuses on how incorrect perceptions of group attitudes and behaviors influence an individual. Unlike Asch we don't have to hire anyone to give the wrong answer. Misconceptions about alcohol abuse, sexism, rape-supportive attitudes, and other dangerous social judgments are already held by large segments of the population.

One can conceptualize social norms interventions as grand experiments in basic social psychology: attempts to use informational interventions to correct misperceptions and the behaviors that reflect these misperceptions. I refer to these experiments as grand because,

unlike Asch's experiments, they take place in the real world rather than in a laboratory.

I have discovered that attention to classic social psychology has the potential to make social norms work more sophisticated and effective. A wide variety of social psychological findings apply to social norms work. I will describe a few here and speculate about their potential for improving our interventions. My own work has been in sexual assault prevention programming for men, and therefore I mainly use this area in the applications I describe below. However, it is possible to make similar connections between social psychological findings and other kinds of (mis)perception change efforts.

Sexual assault is the result of prejudice, a topic frequently studied by social psychologists. I think of it as a reflection of women hating. Gender-based violence exists because we live in a culture that denigrates females and feminine characteristics. Many stereotypical fraternities, athletic teams, and informal men's groups reinforce the expression of these attitudes. (Note here that I use the qualifier *stereotypical*. Not all men's groups propagate these beliefs.). Women hating combines with personal characteristics (such as adherence to "rape myths," feelings of being harmed or ridiculed by women, and a history of childhood maltreatment) to produce sexual assault. In other words, the negative attitudes toward women that many men display in group settings act as "enablers" to the most rape-prone men in the group. The good news (and the social norms message) is that most men do not hold these attitudes privately, but they misperceive that most of their peers do. Thus considered, sexual assault is partly a product of

*continued on page seven*

# Editor's notes

It is hard to believe that this issue of *The Report on Social Norms* coincides with the Sixth National Conference on the Social Norms Model and the second full year of the Report. Neither would have been imaginable to me when Wes Perkins and I did our initial work on social norms. Who could have predicted the way this approach would capture the prevention field and address the need for theory-based and evidence-based approaches to prevention? It seems fitting at this time to reflect on the current state of the field and on the challenges facing us.

As the readers of this *Report* are no doubt aware, interest in the social norms approach is growing, research continues to validate the theory, and new applications are being developed in a variety of areas. At the same time, numerous federal, state and non-profit agencies are funding social norms efforts. With this growth and expansion and the inevitable enthusiasm that accompanies it are, I believe, a number of dangers. First, we must be vigilant to not get carried away with ourselves and with our successes. We must remain open to new ideas, other approaches and even to our critics. Second, we must learn from unsuccessful interventions, which are increasing along with the numerous and growing examples of success.

I believe that failed interventions can be very instructive and help us articulate, refine, clarify and expand the model. Most of these failures are due to lack of fidelity to the model, while others raise important theoretical questions, including the importance of attitudinal or injunctive norms (in addition to descriptive norms), how to use the approach in very heterogeneous communities, and how to creatively adapt it to different health and social justice issues.

The challenges facing the social norms approach can be placed within a few broad categories: readiness to conduct a campaign, salience of norms, message credibility or believability, thoroughness of the program evaluation, and responding to critics. These are described below:

- 1) developing the necessary infrastructure to support a social norms campaign (readiness);
- 2) deciding which messages are appropriate and relevant for which audience (salience);
- 3) creating credible messages in terms of message, source, and explanation of data (believability);
- 4) making sure that program evaluations are thorough and reveal any successes (evaluation), and;
- 5) responding to critics.

For me, the most difficult challenge has been that of responding to the critics of social norms. It seems often that we are held to a higher standard of evidence and implementation than other approaches, and that many of the complaints are gratuitous, based on misunderstandings, or lack of effort to read and understand the research. Yet I have found that taking these criticisms seriously helps me to deepen my understanding of social norms, articulate important questions, and notice areas of sloppiness in my thinking or in implementation.

This issue provides examples of these themes. In the Feature Article, Chris Kilmartin places social norms in the context of classical social psychological research, which can offer insight into some of the theoretical issues in the field and provides explanations for what works. It is important for all of us to be aware of the larger research literature and to place social norms in a bigger

context. Kilmartin's article provides a good example of how the theory of social norms is consistent with other important theoretical frameworks within the social sciences and is validated by the research in support of these theories. Linda Hancock and Jeff Linkenbach reflect on the challenges facing the field on the occasion of receiving national awards for their work. Finally, the recent research section extends the literature to issues of gambling and bullying and provides information that can be used to address some of the concerns raised by critics.

A careful look at the composition of the Advisory Board (see page 8) reveals some changes. Wes Perkins and Jeanne Far have stepped down. I am extremely grateful to both of them in too many ways to be mentioned here, but I would like to specifically thank them for their support and input during our first two years of publication. Wes' contributions to the field are well known and probably do not need to be described. In addition to being the co-founder of the approach he is a pre-eminent researcher, theorist, trainer and practitioner of social norms and is the editor of the first book on social norms. Jeanne is well known for developing (with John Miller at Washington State University) the small group norms challenging model, extending the social norms approach to indicated or secondary prevention. This application is rapidly gaining in popularity and has been applied to alcohol prevention, sexual assault prevention, and gender issues. Jason Kilmer and Linda Hancock have joined the Advisory Board as of this issue. I have great respect for them as individuals and for their work and look forward to their contributions.

Finally, many thanks to you, our readers, for helping this venture be successful and continue into a third year.

Sincerely,  
 Alan D. Berkowitz, Ph.D.  
 Editor  
*The Report on Social Norms*  
 E-mail: alan@fltg.net  
 Telephone: 607 387-3789

## Recent Research

Recent research continues to confirm the basic propositions of social norms theory, extend the model to other issues (such as gambling and bullying behavior), and refute claims made by critics about the approach (for example, that social norms does not work with heavy drinkers and that it fosters conformity motivations). Research reported in both this issue and the previous issue of the *Report* confirm the importance of injunctive or attitudinal norms in addition to behavioral or descriptive norms in predicting behavior. (The Editor).

**Normative Misperception and the Impact of Descriptive and Injunctive Norms on College Student Gambling. (Forthcoming). Mary E. Larimer and Clayton Neighbors. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*.** This article addresses two issues of interest to social norms practitioners: the relative influence of descriptive and injunctive (or attitudinal) norms, and the relevance of social norms to gambling. In two studies of college students the authors found that self-reported gambling frequency was lower than what was perceived as typical college student gambling behavior (i.e., the perceived norm was exaggerated), and that both descriptive and injunctive norms uniquely predicted self-reported gambling frequency, expenditure, and negative consequences related to gambling. Thus, those who perceived other students to gamble more frequently and spend more money on gambling, and who thought that important others in their life were more approving of gambling, were themselves likely to gamble more often, at a greater cost, and with more problems. In general, actual gambling was infrequent (a median of once or less a year). Those who over-perceived the norm reported gambling more frequently than those who didn't. An interesting finding was

that injunctive norms were not influential for pathological gamblers (suggesting that for these individuals what others think of their gambling is not an important factor in their gambling.) This research extends previous findings on misperceptions and false consensus to gambling and suggests that a social norms approach to gambling behavior could be effective.

**Alcohol Problem Recognition as a Function of Own and Other's Perceived Drinking (Forthcoming). Gina Agostinelli, Tim Floyd, Joel Grube, Gill Woodall and Joseph Miller. *Addictive Behaviors*.** This study extends the authors'

long-standing interest in understanding the role and impact of normative feedback on individual drinking behaviors. In this study they found that heavy drinkers were more

likely to acknowledge that they had a drinking problem when they perceived that their own drinking quantity was above the norm. This suggests that providing normative feedback to problem drinkers will increase the likelihood of their recognizing and acknowledging that they have a problem. The authors propose a "self-regulation" model of drinking in which drinking decisions are made in relationship to internal, personal standards (including the relationship of one's own drinking to others). Thus, changes in drinking made in response to normative feedback are derived from internal motivations and not, as has been suggested by others, by a conformity motivation. Finally, the authors found that the manner in which normative

"In this study they found that heavy drinkers were more likely to acknowledge that they had a drinking problem when they perceived that their own drinking quantity was above the norm."

feedback is provided has an effect on how it is experienced and recommended that procedures that induce defensiveness should be avoided.

**Seeing Eye to Eye? Comparing Students' and Parents' Perceptions of Bullying Behavior (2002). Mark J Bigsby. *School Social Work Journal*, 27(1):37-57.** The author surveyed students' and parents' perceptions of the frequency and definition of bullying behavior among 3rd-5th graders in an elementary school. The surveys included scales measuring the student's or parent's perception of how often the student (or the child) had been bullied, what types of behavior constitute bullying, where it occurs, and what actions are effective in dealing with it. Both children and parents overestimated the frequency of bullying behavior, that is: "participants in this study believe that other children are being bullied more often than they perceive themselves (or their own children) to be. This finding could be used to guide intervention efforts at the school within a framework of the theory of social norms...." Fifth graders misperceived the frequency of bullying more than fourth and third graders did.

**The Emergence of Homegrown Stereotypes (2002). Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller. *American Psychologist*, 57(5):353-359.** The work of Prentice and Miller, both psychologists at Princeton University, is of extreme value

*continued on page eight*

**Errata:** We apologize for an error in the May 2003 issue of the REPORT. Part of a sentence was dropped from the last item in the "Recent Research" section. The full sentence should read: "As with many other studies, this points to the importance of the context in which the feedback is given as an important determinant of its effectiveness." (portion in italics was deleted by mistake)

# from *the* field

## An Interview with Linda Hancock and Jeff Linkenbach

*Editor's Note: Each issue of the Report on Social Norms will feature model programs or interventions that have been successfully implemented in a community setting. This issue features an interview with two of the foremost pioneers of the social norms approach. It was conducted on the occasion of their receiving national awards for their exemplary work developing successful social norms programs. These awards are described on page six of this issue."*

**AB (Alan Berkowitz):** Congratulations on your awards and on being recognized for your important work in executing successful social norms interventions. Is there anything that you would like to share with other practitioners about lessons learned or cautions when using the social norms model?

**LH (Linda Hancock):** I think the greatest lesson I have learned is that we need to share everything. Share campaign ideas, share successes, and share failures. Each time I have freely shared an idea, I have received much more in return by way of feedback to improve or change a strategy. At VCU (Virginia Commonwealth University) we share our campaign ideas at the website [www.smokefreeVCU.org](http://www.smokefreeVCU.org). The campaigns are purposely available for use and adaptation by other groups. These ideas have been used by high schools, communities and other colleges. Both of the non-smoking social norms campaigns developed by VCU have used themes that cut across gender, ethnic and age barriers. The two campaigns, "True

Facts of Modern Life" and "The Optical Illusion" campaign, are both print campaigns that can be easily adapted for all ages and groups. As a result of sharing with others, I have received back variations on the campaign that I could then use with my own population. One group adapted the poster campaign to a radio commercial and then sent the text back to me. Synergy is a powerful thing and health is too important to be stingy with ideas.

**JL (Jeff Linkenbach):** Thank you Alan for this opportunity to share my thoughts. My experience is similar to Linda's. The greatest lesson that I have learned is one that the Beatles taught us — which is, "We get by with a little help from our friends." Although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration presented this award to me, it is really an acknowledgement of the work that many people have done to contribute to the "Most of US" Campaigns. I am grateful to our staff here at Montana State University and to the national leaders like yourself, Wes Perkins, Michael Haines, Koreen Johannessen, Pat Fabiano and others. Our collaboration and sharing of ideas is what makes our field so great. How wonderful it is to be able to run an idea by each other, and rework drafts of messages or survey questions so that there are many different minds working together. This is the kind of process that we engage in

at MSU and with folks nationally and why I like this field—I am constantly learning from my mistakes and benefiting from the input of other people.

**AB:** It seems from both of your comments that collaboration, gratitude and generosity are critical to your work and its success. We can all use more of these qualities in our personal and professional lives. On another note, what are the barriers, if any, to the successful execution of a social norms campaign?

**JL:** Barriers can come at so many levels of a successful intervention. I think that I have been a poster child for making mistakes and encountering all of them in the different types of campaigns that we have operated. Some of the most

"I think the greatest lesson I have learned is that we need to share everything. Share campaign ideas, share successes, and share failures. Each time I have freely shared an idea, I have received much more in return by way of feedback to improve or change a strategy."

Linda Hancock

"Some of the most common barriers to success include: 1) poor survey question construction or methodology of administering the survey, 2) over-simplified, singular-one-size fits all message development, 3) failure to utilize injunctive (attitudinal) norms in addition to behavioral norms, 4) failure to manage the campaign environment to minimize competing (non-normative) messages, and 5) inadequate dosage and saturation of campaign messages as a result of trying to operate a campaign in too broad of a region in comparison to the resources that are available."

Jeff Linkenbach

*continued on page five*

## From the Field

*continued from page four*

common barriers to success include: 1) poor survey question construction or methodology of administering the survey, 2) over-simplified, singular-one-size fits all message development, 3) failure to utilize injunctive (attitudinal) norms in addition to behavioral norms, 4) failure to manage the campaign environment to minimize competing (non-normative) messages, and 5) inadequate dosage and saturation of campaign messages as a result of trying to operate a campaign in too broad of a region in comparison to the resources that are available. (i.e. a mile wide and an inch deep). Any or all of these problems can undermine a campaign.

**AB:** What are your thoughts, Linda?

**LH:** In addition to those mentioned by Jeff the biggest barriers I have seen are time, money and an inadequate understanding of the theory behind the intervention. If people truly understand social norms theory then they don't get confused and give mixed messages in their media. If they truly understand the marketing theory, then they understand that you have to reach market saturation... which means that it takes time and money. I wouldn't say I was an expert in social norms theory, but I will say that I continue to enjoy learning about it every day. I have seen campuses just "give up" when they made their first mistake and had a campaign failure. Humans learn by trial and error. If your campaign didn't quite hit the mark, then realize you just had a huge learning curve. Reframe the experience as a valuable ah-ha experience. We can't abandon social norms marketing because the populations we need to reach are so large and the resources are so limited. Buck for buck, this strategy has got to be the most cost effective tool we have. So, I would say, don't give up, just get better.

**AB:** Thank you for your thought-provoking and insightful remarks. It seems clear that there are many challenges in

executing a successful social norms intervention and that there are opportunities for mistakes that may not be evident when first encountering the model. When others see your successes, they may not realize that you have also made many mistakes and wrong turns along the way. I think it helps to be reminded that social norms requires a long-term commitment and is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

In closing, what do you feel are the challenges facing our field at this point in time?

**LH:** In the future, I hope that people who use social norms campaigns will always have to ask themselves if the campaign ideas ring true in peoples' hearts. In other words, do the campaign ideas speak to attitudes and values that are held by most of the people? Does it make people smile? Does it make people feel better about themselves? Does it make people think and learn? If the ideas ring true with peoples' hearts, then the campaign will be a success. Social norms is more than just statistics. It's about truth. It's about the norm of being human. And the true norm is that most people do care about their health and the health of their friends. The challenge is to capture that feeling in our campaigns.

**JL:** Another critical challenge is explaining what we do to others. I think that challenge is a good thing. I think that our greatest challenge will be the need to conduct and publish good science.

Ironically, as the social norms approach becomes more popular and widely used, there is more room for errors and poorly done interventions. Our on-going challenge as a field is to continue to adhere to the fidelity of what has produced results while at the same time we push into new frontiers. For example, it is already common to hear people say, "We

"I hope that people who use social norms campaigns will always have to ask themselves if the campaign ideas ring true in peoples' hearts. In other words, do the campaign ideas speak to attitudes and values that are held by most of the people? Does it make people smile? Does it make people feel better about themselves? Does it make people think and learn? If the ideas ring true with peoples' hearts, then the campaign will be a success."

Linda Hancock

tried social norms and it didn't work." But statements like these need to be probed further—to find out why it didn't work. If Linda and I had not persisted beyond our initial early mistakes we could have ended up saying the same thing. So we need to challenge ourselves to identify "best practices" versus hanging up a few colorful posters once a week. Our challenge is to conduct good science and share that with each other, recognize these efforts and then build upon them. How exciting to be a part of a process like this that actually helps to make the world a healthier, safer, better place for all of us.

**AB:** You have both given us a lot to think about. Thank you both for your openness and for sharing your thoughts and experiences with our readers.

*Linda Hancock is the Assistant Director for the Office of Health Promotion at Virginia Commonwealth University. She can be reached at [lchancoc@vcu.edu](mailto:lchancoc@vcu.edu) or calling (804) 828-7815.*

*Jeff Linkenbach is the Director of the Montana Social Norms Project and a faculty member at Montana State University. He can be reached at [jwl@montana.edu](mailto:jwl@montana.edu) or by calling (406) 994-3837.*



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

**Good news about teen ATOD use.** The Monitoring the Future study recently announced positive trends in teen use of substances, documenting reductions in ecstasy, illicit drugs, alcohol and cigarette smoking. In particular, they noted that "American young people are turning away from cigarette smoking at a pace that should bring cheer to parents, educators, and health professionals alike." For more information go to: [www.monitoringthefuture.org](http://www.monitoringthefuture.org)

**Lemmings won't go away.** The popular imagination can't seem to get away from (mis)understanding social norms as conformity. This time it was in a review of the book *The Social Norms Approach* that appeared in the *New Republic* (April 14, 2003) under the title "Sober Lemmings." The review located social norms within the social psychological literature on conformity and raised a number of ethical concerns about using conformity motivations to "manipulate people." Questions were also raised about the methodology and conclusions in the case studies presented in the book. Although the book was criticized for its "unusually inelegant academic style" the reviewer also noted that "the book deserves a lot of attention" concluding that "Perkins and his colleagues deserve considerable credit for developing a promising method for reducing harmful behavior, one that has the unusual virtue of improving matters without relying on punishment or even regulation."

**Charitable giving and social norms.** Two recent mentions of the social norms approach contained interesting information about norms correction as a way of increasing charitable giving. In an Op-Ed in the *New York Times* on April 15, 2003,

Ian Ayres and Barry Nalebuff referred to the social norms approach and suggested that the IRS provide accurate normative information about charitable giving as a way of encouraging people to give more. This would potentially induce people who give at a rate that is below the average to increase their contributions. A similar point was made by Cass R. Sunstein in the *New Republic* review noted above. He stated that "studies show that people are far more likely to give to charity if they are informed that many or most people give to charity."

**Health terrorism fails (again).** Most of us think of the term "health terrorism" (coined by Jeff Linkenbach) as a metaphor. However the association has been literal in an ad campaign sponsored by the White House Office of Drug Control that linked drug use to support of terrorism. A recent press release noted that "The White House anti-drug office will end its controversial drugs-and-terror advertising campaign..." after a study of the ads found that they were not effective. The ads were criticized by the "Partnership for a Drug Free America"

(which refused to participate in the campaign) when one of its directors noted that they violated a basic premise of consumer advertising by telling people that "what they are doing is stupid and bad." (Information from an article posted on the website [www.adage.com](http://www.adage.com) on April 1, 2003).

**Social norms and violence prevention.** The "Building Partnerships to End Men's Violence Initiative" (BPI) is hosting a series of on-line discussions of issues related to men's role in ending violence. Each discussion is centered around a paper focusing on a particular theme along with case study examples. Papers will be posted on topics such as batterer intervention programs, responsible fatherhood, and building effective partnerships with schools. The paper on "Young Men as Allies in Preventing Violence Against Women and Girls: Building Effective Partnerships with Schools" contains a case study on "The Social Norms Approach to Violence Prevention" by Alan Berkowitz. To sign up for the BPI initiative and on-line discussion go to: <http://endabuse.org/bpi/>.

## Awards Given to Social Norms Innovators

Congratulations to Dr. Linda Hancock and Dr. Jeffrey Linkenbach for awards recognizing their innovative work in the drug prevention field utilizing social norms.

**Dr. Hancock** received the Henry W. DeJong Award for Vision and Leadership in Collegiate Tobacco Control from the BACCHUS and GAMMA Peer Education Network for her work combating tobacco use on campus and in the larger community. The award was given at the Second National Collegiate Tobacco Symposium held May 1-2 in Providence, RI, with representatives from more than 50 college and university campuses, state and local agencies and others attending. Hancock was one of the first to utilize social norms marketing to reduce and prevent tobacco use. For more information on programs she has developed or contributed to visit [www.smokefreeCAMPUS.org](http://www.smokefreeCAMPUS.org) or [www.smokefreeVCU.org](http://www.smokefreeVCU.org)

**Dr. Linkenbach** was the recipient of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2003 Public Service Award in recognition of his achievements advancing statewide social norms strategies to reduce impaired driving and increase safety belt usage. Linkenbach has been a pioneer in the field of social norms and is credited with expanding social norms applications to macro-level settings such as states and communities for a variety of public health issues, including alcohol and tobacco use and traffic safety. Information on these campaigns can be found at [www.mostofus.org](http://www.mostofus.org).

Linkenbach and Hancock join other social norms pioneers who have been recognized by national organizations for their work, including Alan Berkowitz, Michael Haines, Koreen Johannessen, Pat Fabiano and Wes Perkins.

## A Visit to the Archive

the misperception of the normality of the underlying prejudice of sexism.

Therefore, we can conceptualize sexual assault prevention as an effort in prejudice reduction, an area of longstanding interest to social psychologists.

The social psychological research has considerable implications for social norms interventions to prevent sexual assault, particularly the literatures on prejudice and persuasion, which are related. In a sense, norms corrections interventions are an attempt to persuade someone to act based on their own attitudes and beliefs rather than on misperceptions of others. Social psychologist Elliot Aronson described the power of self-persuasion as the single common thread that runs through his prejudice reduction work. In direct persuasion such as speeches or advertising, people are aware that someone is attempting to influence them. In indirect persuasion, such as discussions, exercises, or the presentation of ideas that a person is invited to reflect upon, we place people into situations where they may change their attitudes but also believe that they have persuaded themselves rather than having been influenced by others. Because they experience the new attitude as coming from within, it is more powerful and enduring than social perceptual changes that have resulted from direct persuasion. This concept may be especially applicable to men, as the mainstream culture defines independence as a masculine quality.

Although it involves advertising, which is direct persuasion, part of the power of social norms is in its indirect approach—giving people some information and letting them decide for themselves what the message means. Noting that most students do not drink as much as people think they do, or that most men are uncomfortable with sexist talk invites people to reflect and to make up their own minds about their behavior

and the perceptions on which their behavior is based. Thus, social norms uses indirect persuasion to motivate people to change on their own.

It is tempting to add a prescriptive message to our descriptive one, e.g., we not only want to tell our audience about the misperception, but also want to tell them how they should receive it. For example, when social norms media include a descriptive message such as “our survey indicates that most men don’t like it when other men talk disparagingly about women’s bodies” we might also have the urge to add a prescriptive message like, “Sexism underlies sexual assault. Challenge sexist talk when you hear it. Others may be as uncomfortable as you.” We want to tell them what is true, but also what they should think about it.

However, social norms messages are not prescriptive because they don’t tell people what to do. This avoidance of prescriptive messages is supported by classic social psychological research. As Aronson found, the prescriptive message may have the unintentional effect of changing the experience of normative feedback from that of self-persuasion to that of being persuaded by others, resulting in a less effective and less enduring effect. We also know from other research that pushing too hard may be even worse than not pushing at all. Therefore, rather than clobbering your audience over the head with a prescriptive message, it is better to present something that is subtler, thus giving people the opportunity to engage in self-persuasion.

In addition to explaining why social norms works, attention to the body of classic social psychological research can

*continued from page one*

help us to frame new questions for our investigations and interventions. For example, I am left wondering if social norms interventions aimed at sexism might be as effective or more effective at reducing rape-supportive attitudes than going directly after the sexual assault issue. Below are a few more applications.

Another important area of social psychological research focuses on the relationships between groups, a fertile ground for misperceptions. Researchers have demonstrated that in-group members often alter their perceptions toward out-group members in a more sympathetic direction when they discover that

one of their own group has a positive relationship with a member of the out-group. Therefore, one possible social norms intervention is to merely describe the frequency of positive, egalitarian relationships between men and women. For example, about 90 percent of my students say that at least one of their three best friends is a member of the other sex (FYI, I suggest that we not

use the term *opposite sex*, as it is adversarial). Aronson has demonstrated that cooperative and meaningful contact with out-group members has the effect of reducing prejudice. The realization that such contact is the norm may be helpful in our efforts, as might the perception that most students have good friends who are light drinkers or non-drinkers.

Another potential application to social norms is based on the *out-group homogeneity effect*, i.e. the tendency to perceive members of the out-group as being more similar to one another than they actually are. To correct this tendency we might present information about

**In addition to explaining why social norms works, attention to the body of classic social psychological research can help us to frame new questions for our investigations and interventions.**

*continued on page eight*

## A Visit to the Archive

diversity among women. Describing the diversity among men might also be productive. If we present images of socially attractive men who hold healthy attitudes about masculinity and relationships with women, we encourage men to reduce their stereotyping of their own group. Persuaded that women are all different and that men are also all different, men might be less reluctant to engage in stereotypically hyper-masculine behaviors for fear that some of their friends might disapprove. And if people start to believe that all members of a sex are not alike, they may be self-persuaded to conceptualize people using categorizations other than sex, such as college major, activity preferences, personal characteristics, or talents and abilities. Thus they would become less gender-schematic or sex-stereotyped, and a reduction of stereotyping should be accompanied by a reduction of prejudice. In other words, it is impossible to perceive all members of a group negatively unless you perceive them as being all alike.

This practice—dispelling the uniformity of the norm—is supported by the research of Prentice and Miller on norms correction. They found that changes in behavior were explained by changing the perception that the norm was uniformly held rather than by correcting the misperception. Letting people know that the actual norm is not uni-

*continued from page seven*

formly held frees people from being concerned about what others do.

I will end by returning to Asch's research. A 5 percent error rate in individual judgments of the length of lines inflates to 70 percent in the face of pressure from a group that is unanimous in its opinions. I call this the *conformity effect*. But if *even one* member of the group gives the correct answer, the error rate drops below 10 percent. I call this the *ally effect*, and it is very hopeful. Regardless of whether we are talking about sexual assault, problem drinking, eating disordered behavior, or some other problem, if we can use our interventions to amplify the voices of people who hold healthy attitudes, then we empower others who misread their peers' silence as complicity. As a result, we take steps toward one of the superordinate goals of this work: to build a critical and visible mass of healthy people and hold them up as models to the world at large.

*Chris Kilmartin is a Professor of Psychology at Mary Washington College. He conducted one of the first social norms campaigns to address sexual assault and the survey items he developed have been incorporated into many social norms surveys. He can be reached at: [ckilmart@mwc.edu](mailto:ckilmart@mwc.edu).*

## Recent Research

*continued from page three*

to social norms practitioners. They have done extensive research on the nature and consequences of pluralistic ignorance and illustrated many of the dynamics and theoretical issues underlying the process of norms correction. In this study, they examined the phenomenon of “homegrown stereotypes,” i.e. “generalizations that groups develop about their own typical characteristics.” A prominent example is the appearance of American flags after 9/11 to indicate a uniform sense of patriotism and solidarity among Americans. They point out that homegrown stereotypes are a form of self-presentation that can reflect the true norm for a group, while in other cases they may be due to pluralistic ignorance – i.e. while most people do not adhere to the stereotype they think that most others do. Alternatively, homegrown stereotypes may start out as shared beliefs but then be maintained by pluralistic ignorance after they begin wearing off, or start out as pluralistic ignorance and then become accurate as the beliefs are internalized and accepted. They also note that “the most prominent and noticeable members of a group are likely to have a disproportionate influence on the group's homegrown stereotypes.” The article contains a good overview of the literature on pluralistic ignorance and discusses how pluralistic ignorance functions differently depending on whether it pertains to an in-group or an out-group.

*The Report on Social Norms is published by PaperClip Communications. Four working papers, five newsletters and one index are published each year as part of The Report on Social Norms publication. Copyright 2003. No portion of this newsletter may be reproduced without the express written consent of PaperClip Communications, Inc. • 125 Paterson Ave. • Little Falls, NJ 07424 • 866 . 295 . 0505 • fax 973 . 256 . 8088 • [www.Paper-Clip.com](http://www.Paper-Clip.com) • [www.socialnormslink.com](http://www.socialnormslink.com).*

### Editorial Advisory Board:

*William DeJong, Ph.D., Higher Education Center • Pat Fabiano, Ph.D., Western Washington University • Michael Haines, M.S., National Social Norms Resource Center • Linda Hancock, Ph.D. Virginia Commonwealth University • Koreen Johannessen, M.S.W., University of Arizona • Jason Kilmer, Ph.D. Evergreen College and St. Martin's College • Jeff Linkenbach, Ed.D., Montana State University • Richard Rice, M.A., National Social Norms Resource Center*

### Editorial Staff:

Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D., Editor  
Joellen Collins-Cardona

Andy McLaughlin, Publisher  
Julie Phillips