

What research says about the social norms approach to adolescent substance use

Articles /resources providing useful guidance for the application of normative approaches to adolescent substance use.

'The Social Norms Approach: Theory, Research, and Annotated Bibliography'

Berkowitz, A. (2004) [27].

Key points/findings:

The evidence for the social norms approach was summarized in 2002, when the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA) in the USA appointed an expert panel of approximately twenty national prevention specialists to make recommendations for the field. Communicating accurate social norms was among the strategies suggested by this panel, which commented in its final report that:

"Initial results from programs adopting an intensive social norms approach are promising. Several institutions that persistently communicated accurate norms have experienced reductions of up to twenty percent in high-risk drinking over a relatively short period of time.... Together these findings provide strong support for the potential impact of the social norms approach. Although any case report in this literature could be challenged methodologically, the results of each study are remarkably consistent." [28]

The term "misperception" is used to describe the gap between actual attitudes or behaviour, and what people think is true about others' attitudes or behaviours. Thus, a misperception occurs when there is an overestimation or underestimation of the prevalence of attitudes and/or behaviours in a group or population. Individuals may misperceive their social groups or larger social environments in a number of ways that influence their behaviour. For example, the majority who engage in healthy behaviour may incorrectly believe they are in the minority (pluralistic ignorance.) In contrast, the minority of people with unhealthy attitudes and/or behaviours may incorrectly think that they are in the majority (false consensus). Finally, an individual may enjoy thinking that her or his behaviour is more unique than it really is (false uniqueness)

Social norms theory can be used to develop interventions that focus on the three levels of prevention specified as universal, selective, and indicated [29] – also referred to as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Universal prevention is directed at all members of a population without identifying those at risk of abuse. Selective prevention is directed at members of a group that is at risk for a behaviour. Indicated prevention is directed at particular individuals who already display signs of the problem. Interventions at all three levels of prevention can be combined and intersected to create a comprehensive program that is theoretically-based and has mutually reinforcing program elements.

There are certain questions that must be answered in order for the social norms model to be applied effectively:

- 1) What misperceptions exist with respect to the attitude or behaviour in question?
- 2) Are there over or under-estimations of attitudes and/or behaviour?
- 3) What is the meaning and function of misperceptions for individuals and groups?
- 4) Do the majority of individuals in a group or community hold these misperceptions?
- 5) Does the target group function as a group with respect to the behaviour in question? That is, are the group norms "salient," and are the individuals in the group an influence on each others' behaviour?
- 6) What is the hypothesized effect of these misperceptions?
- 7) What changes are predicted if protective behaviours that already exist in the population are supported and increased?

Social Norms - An approach to drug education

A Guide to marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities

Haines, M., Rice, R., Perkins, H., Rice, R., & Barker, G. 2004,. Illinois: National Social Norms Research Center [30].

Key points/findings:

A free copy of the guide book can be downloaded from <http://www.socialnormsresources.org/pdf/Guidebook2.pdf>

A Guide to Marketing Social Norms for Health Promotion in Schools and Communities is intended as a comprehensive, step-by-step manual for those who are interested in using the social norms approach to address school-age and community-wide issues.

'The growing appeal of social norms is due largely to two related phenomena. First, many of the usual strategies designed to address the problem behaviours in adolescent and young adult populations have been largely ineffective, leading many professionals to look for other options. Second, there is a growing movement in the prevention field toward evidence-based evaluation, a requirement that dramatically contrasts the ineffectiveness of past methods with the impressive data emerging from various interventions using the social norms approach'. p 5

"A review of the literature...strongly suggest that the social norms approach is an appropriate strategy for targeting ...substance use in secondary education.... A number of...studies have shown that the overestimation of peer alcohol and cigarette use is widespread among students of middle and high school age (Perkins and Craig, 2003; Botvin et al, 2001; D'Amico et al., 2001; Sussman et al., 1988; Thombs, Wolcott, and Farkash, 1997; Beck and Treiman, 1996). Other research has found that ... adolescent onset of use can be significantly delayed by reducing misperceptions of alcohol and cigarette use among peers (Haines, Barker, Rice, 2003; Linkenbach and Perkins, 2003; Perry et al., 1992; Hansen and Graham, 1991)." P 10.

During the late 1990s a project was conducted DeKalb and Sycamore High Schools in the USA – the DCP/SAFE. Below is an example of a postcard from that project, with normative information that was sent to secondary students. Note that the card could be presented at a popular local shop for a free biscuit, a strategy used to help the recipient "retain" the message.

'The Main Frame: Strategies for Generating Social Norms News'

Linkenbach, J., Berkowitz, A., Cornish, J., Fabiano, P., Haines, M., Johannessen, K., Perkins, H., & Rice, R. (2002) [31].

A free copy of the guide book can be downloaded from <http://www.socialnorm.org/pdf/themainframe.pdf>

Key points/findings:

This is a "practical, easy-to-use resource for social norms practitioners who want to generate coverage of their projects and the social norms approach in general."

"Creating press coverage from a social norms perspective is critical because this approach is one of the most effective ways of changing behavior and saving lives, but it has not received much public attention. This is partly because it is controversial: it challenges the perceptions that shape people's everyday lives." P3

Key concepts of social norms:

1. Misperceptions of norms reinforce negative behaviour
2. Accurate perceptions increase healthy behaviour - Communicating accurate information about the prevalence of healthy behaviour can lead to more healthy behaviour. We must create environments that consistently communicate the truth about health as the norm instead of highlighting the individuals who make poor choices.
3. Social norms uses multi-faceted intervention strategies - for varying levels of intervention that include policy, media, curriculum, small group intervention and treatment.
4. Social norms is community based - Social norms is founded on a bottom-up, community-based approach that relies on the strength of positive attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of the group.
5. Social norms is a science-based method - The importance of public health efforts demands that we use an effective and accountable science-based strategy like social norms.

Social norms is an environmental approach - It does not focus simply on individuals. Rather, it strives to change the perceptions that a group has about itself, thereby positively influencing individual behaviour". P 9.

The international development of the 'Social Norms' approach to drug education and prevention

McAlaney, J., Bewick, B., & Hughes, C. (in press), *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* [32].

Key points/findings:

Although the numbers of completed social norms projects outside the USA is small, the evidence from them is that the approach can be equally effective in both European and Australian contexts.

It is acknowledged that as an emergent field, there are limitations to the current social norms literature. There is a lack of randomized control trial studies, a lack of clarity of the role of referent groups and a need to better understand the processes through which misperceptions are transmitted. However, despite these issues, the social norms approach represents a new avenue for reducing alcohol and drug-related harm and is an area which merits further research.

The Social Norms Approach to Preventing School and College Age Substance Abuse: A handbook for educators, counselors and clinicians

Perkins, H. (Ed.)(2003) San Francisco: Jossey Bass [33].

Key points/findings:

"Students who, left to their own inclination, would choose to drink only a moderate amount of alcohol with limited frequency are likewise nudged along to drink more heavily by their mistaken notion of what most other peers expect them to do and what they think most others are doing at parties and other social settings...Finally, students who do have a permissive personal attitude, and who are thus personally prone to frequent heavy drinking or taking risks with other substances can do so without reservation, naively thinking they are part of the majority." p 9.

Examples of negative consequences of drinking

- Physical injury to oneself
- Physical injury to others
- Fighting
- Behaviour that resulted in negative reactions from others
- Damage to property
- Missing class
- Inefficiency in homework, classroom or lab assignment
- A late assignment or missed exam, or failure to study for an exam
- Damaged friendships or relationships
- Attempting intimate physical or sexual contact not desired by another person
- Being sexually active when the person otherwise might not have chosen to be active
- Engaging in unprotected intercourse when the person otherwise would not have
- Inability to remember events that occurred while drinking
- Missing or performing poorly in a sporting event.

Benefits of using web-based surveys for social norms work with secondary students:

- 1) improves student response rates
- 2) improves accuracy of student responses
- 4) reduces data collection costs
- 5) greatly increases the rapidity with which data can be made available back to schools
- 6) increases the integrity and efficacy of a social norms media campaign; and
- 7) facilitates an ongoing program assessment strategy.”

Social norms approaches can be used to reinforce effective parenting. “For parents, whether to yield or stay firm is a complicated and difficult judgement call. Leniency may be harmful, but being too strict may also have negative consequences. This is a situation that invites social comparison. Quite naturally, parents judge the adequacy of their own parenting by looking at what other parents say and do. Teenagers understand this intuitively. What parent hasn’t had the supposed leniency of other parents held up as a guide?” P 248.

Parents also misperceive the attitudes and behaviours of other parents “...If parents underestimate how frequently other parents are using certain protective strategies, this misperception may serve to undermine their own resolve to adopt those strategies or apply them consistently. Stated simply, it is harder for parents to uphold firm rules and standards when they believe they are among the few parents trying to do so.” P 249.