

## **Social Norms Interventions for Other Health Issues and Social Justice Issues**

Many of the normative influences that affect alcohol and tobacco use are also operative for a wide variety of other health and social justice issues, including sexual assault and violence, disordered eating and body image disturbance, academic climate, and prejudicial behaviors. An article by Berkowitz (2003b) suggested that social norms efforts be used to address these problems, reviewed research documenting misperceptions for different health and social justice issues, and provided examples of innovative programs. These interventions include a social norms interventions designed to prevent sexual assault (Bruce, 2002; Hillenbrand-Gunn et al, 2004; White, Williams, & Cho, 2003), and a homophobia prevention workshop that incorporates a small group norms challenging activity (Smolinsky, 2002). Heterosexual individuals were found to overestimate the homophobia of their peers in two studies (Bowen & Bourgeois, 2001; Dubuque et al 2002). In two other studies, the primary factor influencing men's willingness to intervene to prevent sexual assault was men's perception of other men's willingness to intervene (Fabiano et al, 2003; Stein & Barnett, 2004). These findings are consistent with other research suggesting that perceived social norms can influence whether or not individuals' express prejudicial beliefs to others (Crandall et al, 2002). Berkowitz (2003b) suggested that these misperceptions might discourage individuals who are uncomfortable with prejudicial remarks from speaking out against these comments.

In preliminary studies, predictions based on social norms theory have been confirmed for beliefs about masculinity and gender appropriate behavior, body ideal, how often people pray, the prevalence of bullying behavior, and honesty in paying taxes. For example, Gottfried (2002) found that men misperceived other men's beliefs about how men should behave, with men overestimating the extent to which other men hold stereotypical beliefs about masculinity. Greater disparities between men's perceptions of themselves and of other men were correlated with lower self-esteem. The results of this study parallels findings of research conducted with young boys and girls, who both expressed interest in playing with stereotypically "boy" and "girl" toys but perceived other members of their gender to be only interested in same-gender appropriate toys (Prentice & Miller, 1996). And, in a study of misperception of bullying behavior in an elementary school setting, Bigsby (2002) found that both students and their parents overestimated the amount of bullying behavior that occurred.

In a study of body image, women significantly overestimated the degree of thinness that male and female peers considered to be ideal. These

overestimations were positively correlated with measures of body dissatisfaction, disturbed eating, and concern with appearance (Kusch, 2002). Hancock (2003) documented misperceptions of prayer. She reported that individuals who pray underestimated the prevalence of praying among their peers, and suggested that this misperception may cause individuals to reduce or hide prayer behavior in academic environments. Finally, Wenzel (2001) documented taxpayer misperceptions of willingness to be honest on income tax forms (i.e., most people thought that others were less honest than themselves) and found that correcting these misperceptions increased honesty in the reporting of some deductions.

With respect to academic success, a pilot project at Ball State University documented misperceptions indicating that students perceived their peers to be less academically motivated than themselves on a variety of variables. The “Academic Success Norming Campaign” corrected these misperceptions with the goal of encouraging behaviors that are associated with academic success and retention (Abhold, Hall & Serini, 1999).

Finally, Linkenbach, Perkins, and DeJong (2003) documented misperceptions among parents regarding parenting attitudes and behaviors, such as how often parents talk with children about alcohol use and family rules, and discussed how correction of these misperceptions can be utilized to strengthen effective parenting.

Although these projects are preliminary and have not yet produced strong outcome data, they suggest the applicability of the social norms approach to a broad range of behaviors related to health, social justice, and fostering community.