

Types of Misperceptions

The term “misperception” is used to describe the gap between actual attitudes or behavior, and what people think is true about others’ attitudes or behaviors. Thus, a misperception occurs when there is an overestimation or underestimation of the prevalence of attitudes and/or behaviors in a group or population. Individuals may misperceive their social groups or larger social environments in a number of ways that influence their behavior. For example, the majority who engage in healthy behavior may incorrectly believe they are in the minority (*pluralistic ignorance*.) In contrast, the minority of people with unhealthy attitudes and/or behaviors may incorrectly think that they are in the majority (*false consensus*). Finally, an individual may enjoy thinking that her or his behavior is more unique than it really is (*false uniqueness*). Each of these misperceptions operates in a different way and may affect behavior differently. They are each described in more detail below along with evidence that social norms interventions can be effective in correcting them.

Pluralistic Ignorance. This is the most common misperception. It occurs when a majority of individuals falsely assume that most of their peers behave or think differently from them when in fact their attitudes and/or behavior are similar (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1996; Toch & Klofas, 1984). For example, most college students drink moderately or not at all but incorrectly assume that other college students drink more than themselves and also more than they do in reality. Pluralistic ignorance encourages individuals to suppress healthy attitudes and behaviors that are falsely thought to be non-conforming and to provide encouragement to engage in the unhealthy behaviors that are seen incorrectly as normative. Prentice and Miller (1996), two of the most influential theorists on pluralistic ignorance noted that:

The norm simply must be powerful enough to induce people to act in ways that do not correspond to their private thoughts and feelings...Individuals recognize that their own norm-congruent behavior is at variance with their true sentiments, but then do not assume a similar discrepancy in others. Instead, their social perception is guided by what they observe: They infer that the actions of others reflect accurately what they are thinking and feeling. (p.162)

Social norms interventions correct pluralistic ignorance by informing the majority that their behavior is actually more normative and healthy than they think. This normative feedback provides permission to act on values of moderation or non-use by bringing behavior more closely in line with

personal attitudes and removes the fear of embarrassment associated with acting in ways that are thought to be different.

False Consensus is the incorrect belief that others are like oneself when in fact they are not (Ross, Greene & House, 1977). For example, heavy drinkers may incorrectly think that most other students are heavy drinkers, or prejudiced individuals may incorrectly believe that they speak for their group. The false consensus misperception functions to maintain an individual's denial that his or her attitudes or behavior are problematic or unusual. Thus, heavy drinkers have a personal motivation for believing in exaggerated drinking norms because this misperception allows them to justify their abusive drinking and deny that there is a problem. For this reason, the false consensus misperception is described as a "self-serving bias." Studies have found that misperceptions have more influence on the drinking of alcohol abusers than on other drinkers (Kypri & Langley, 2003; Page, Scanlan & Gilbert, 1999; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996) and that abusers misperceive more than others in their group (Agostinelli & Miller, 1994; Pollard, et al, 2000). In one review of the literature, Borsari and Carey (2001) noted that "the more the student perceives others as drinking heavily, or approving of heavy use, the higher personal consumption will be" (p. 402).

Research has documented similar patterns for smoking, with smokers overestimating smoking prevalence more than non-smokers (Sherman et al, 1983; Sussman et al, 1988), and gamblers overestimating gambling and favorable attitudes towards gambling more than non-gamblers (Larimer & Neighbors, 2003). Social norms interventions correct false consensus misperceptions and have been successful in reducing heavy drinking in a number of studies (see later citations).

Toch & Klofas (1984) noted that the strongest and most vocally expressed views in a community are often held by those who engage in false consensus. For example, heavy-drinking individuals have a greater stake in believing in their misperceptions and view themselves as "subculture custodians" or guardians of the truth about their reference group. In this imagined role, they speak out actively against enforcement of policy and interventions to combat abuse. The combination of false consensus and pluralistic ignorance allows these heavy drinking "subculture custodians" to have an influence that is greatly disproportionate to their numbers by strengthening their voice and suppressing the voice of the "silent majority" who may favor policy initiatives and interventions to curb abuse. This creates a "spiral of silence" in which individuals who "perceive their position to be unsupported (even if they constitute the majority) will fall silent, thereby creating the appearance of even less support for the position" (Prentice & Miller, 1996, p.202).

This “spiral of silence” may occur in relation to student reactions to campus policy when the minority in opposition are outspoken because they believe themselves to represent the majority (false consensus) while the majority in support are silent because they believe themselves to be in the minority (pluralistic ignorance). Thus, the application of social norms to policy development can be useful in presenting a community with the true norm that exists in support of various policies and consequences for abuse so that a consensus for action can occur in spite of the denial and objections of those who abuse (DeJong, 2003a; Dunnagan et al, 2003). For example, Prentice and Miller (1996) documented student support for a keg ban at a time when most students perceived their peers as being unsupportive of this policy, and Suls and Green (2003) found that students underestimated other students’ concern about irresponsible alcohol use.

False Uniqueness. The phenomenon of *false uniqueness* occurs when individuals who are in the minority assume that the difference between themselves and others is greater than is actually the case (Suls & Wan, 1987). False uniqueness may occur among abstainers, who underestimate the prevalence of abstinence and falsely assume that they are more unique than they really are. When this occurs, abstainers may withdraw from participation in the larger community because they see it as more alcohol-oriented than it really is. Social norms interventions that provide information about the actual number of abstainers and responsible drinkers can provide a sense of community for non-drinkers and make it safe to participate more fully in campus life.

In summary, social norms interventions have been found to be effective in changing the behavior of the moderate or occasional-drinking majority (*pluralistic ignorance*) as well as confronting and changing the behavior of the heavy drinking minority (*false consensus*) while maintaining or increasing the number of those who abstain or use infrequently (*false uniqueness*.)