

Which Norms Are Salient?

Individuals have friends, are members of groups, live in residence halls on college campuses, and are parts of a larger community. Each of these overlapping groups has norms that may be similar or different, and some or all of these norms may exert an influence on an individual's behavior. Borsari and Carey (2001) reviewed the literature on peer influences and reported that eighteen different targets have been used in social norms research ranging from "your best friend" to "an average student." Thus, one critical issue is to evaluate the saliency of these different norms when designing a social norms intervention. For example, on most campuses students have a general idea of the "average" student and are influenced by this campus norm (Perkins, 2003b) even when the norms of friends and more immediate groups are more influential. In other cases, group identity may supplant campus or community identity, especially if the community is very heterogeneous or diffuse (for example, on a commuter campus).

Among these different targets for norms, it is well-documented that misperceptions increase as social distance increases. Individuals perceive that friends drink more than they do and that students in general drink more than their friends (Baer, 1994; Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991; Beck & Treiman, 1996; Borsari & Carey, 2003; Carter & Kahnweiler, 2000; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Thombs, et. al., 1997; Thombs, 2000). Among college students, others in a living unit are thought to drink more than friends but less than students in general, and students who live together tend to develop similar patterns of misperceptions over time (Bourgeois & Bowen, 2001). Similarly, misperceptions are greater in larger high schools (Perkins & Craig, 2003b). Misperceptions thus tend to increase as social distance from the misperceiver increases, but social groups that are "closer" are more influential in shaping behavior. This was the conclusion of Borsari and Carey (2003) in a meta-analysis of social norms studies, in which they found that misperceptions were greater as social distance increased while the influence on behavior of closer or more salient social groups was stronger. A similar conclusion was reached in a study by Korcуска and Thombs (2003) and Lewis and Neighbors (forthcoming) in which perceived norms for close friends were a stronger predictor of alcohol use and/or consequences than drinking norms for "typical students."

One exception to this phenomenon appears to be fraternity members, who often think that the drinking of other Greeks is greater than it really is, but who correctly believe that Greeks drink more than non-Greeks (Baer, 1994; Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991; Carter & Kahnweiler, 2000; Larimer, et al, 1997).

Both “global” and “local” norms may predict behavior and exert simultaneous influence (Prentice & Miller, 1993) even when they may be of unequal strength. Which norms are “salient” may vary by group and setting. Thus, Thombs (2000) found that athletes on one campus were more influenced by non-athlete norms than athlete norms. In contrast, on campuses with very strong athletic cultures, athlete norms may be more salient than non-athlete norms. In another study on a large heterogeneous campus, Campo et al (2003) found that friends’ norms predicted behavior while general student norms did not. This finding is consistent with the observation of Borsari & Carey (2001) that campus norms may be weaker predictors of behavior on very large campuses.

The question of whether closer “local” norms of a group or more distant “global” community norms should be addressed in a particular norms correction initiative is a complex one, and must take into account the culture of the group in question and the context and social ecology of the community. Ideally both can be addressed together through a combination of primary and secondary prevention strategies such as small group norms interventions and community-wide social norms media campaigns. In most cases either general campus-wide campaigns or more local group norms challenging interventions can result in behavior change, although there may be some groups who are resistant to campus-wide interventions. Selecting the most relevant and salient norms for a particular intervention and the appropriate strategy for changing those norms is an important part of the planning process of a social norms intervention. (For a more extensive discussion of this issue see Borsari and Carey, 2003).