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University Sexual Assault Prevention: A Social Norms Approach

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Introduction

Sexual assault on college campuses is one of the biggest issues students face (1/5 women and 1/16 men sexually assaulted while in college; Krebs, C. P., et al., 2007). While men are disproportionately the perpetrators in these cases, most programs employed on campuses target women by telling them how to reduce their risk of being assaulted. For this reason, there is a need for effective programming targeted at men. Previous research has found social norming, the correction of people's misperceptions of their social group's behavior, to be effective in reducing levels of substance abuse, smoking, and other maladaptive behaviors (Berkowitz, A. D., 2004). This study experimentally examined whether male undergraduate students' exposure to anti-sexual assault social norms resulted in the decrease of their rape conducive attitudes and their intentions to commit assault-related behaviors in the future.

Method

353 male participants completed a host of measures on their attitudes and behavior related to sexual assault. They were then presented with a video depicting a scene where a sexual assault was likely to take place. Following this, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (university-specific norms, general norms, and control). Those in the university-specific norms condition were presented with real anti-sexual assault statistics specific to male college students taken from a Sexual Assault Climate Survey conducted at a university in Indiana last year (e.g. 95.1% of undergraduate males on this campus agreed that when a person is drinking alcohol, they are not suggesting they're interested in sexual activity). Those in the general norms condition were presented with the same statistics but told that these statistics pertain to the views of men in general. Those in the control condition were given various general statistics about their institution (e.g. "Over the school's history, 22 students have gone on to play Major League Baseball"). Lastly, all participants completed outcome measures assessing their acceptance of sexual coercive behavior as well as their intentions to commit sexual assault and related behaviors in the future.

Results & Discussion

Data was examined using planned contrasts ANOVAs and regression analyses. We found that those in the university-specific norms condition had lower levels of rape myth acceptance, sexual assault intentions, self-perceived likelihood of future assaults, and appropriateness of sexual assault behaviors. In addition, past history of sexual assault perpetration moderated the effects of the condition. Specifically, the university-specific norms and general norms conditions had a larger effect of reducing the self-perceived likelihood of future sexual perpetration for those higher in past sexual perpetration.

This result provides a potential solution for reaching serial perpetrators of sexual assault who have been found to commit most sexual assaults (as many as 6 assaults each; Lisak & Miller, 2002). In sum, this study provides evidence for using university-specific social norms in sexual assault prevention and education efforts directed at men to help combat its prevalence on college campuses.