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**The Snowball Survey as a Component
of a High School Social Norms Marketing Intervention:
A Pilot Study**

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Introduction

In this, the second issue of *The Social Norms Review*, we present two articles that describe the use of “the snowball survey intervention,” one in a high school, and one in a college setting. Although she credits Mary Crozier (then at the College of William and Mary) with developing the basic concept, Linda Hancock was the first to adapt for use in a campus-wide social norms project a classroom activity in which students crumple their single-sheet responses to a brief survey and then throw them around, as if in a mock snowball fight, in order to preserve their anonymity. “I just decided,” she recently told me, “that it would be a great, anonymous way to do a fast social norms survey feedback. So I adapted the original use.” With Katherine Vatalaro, her colleague at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Linda first published a description of the snowball survey intervention as employed at VCU in *The Report on Social Norms* (2004, 3(7):54-6,8). Their findings suggested that the snowball survey was consistent with a goal of “trying to catalyze perception change while simultaneously using a broad-based social norms marketing campaign (*op. cit.*, 6).”

Since then, other practitioners have begun to employ this activity. Sara Christensen’s article is perhaps the first published description of the

development and preliminary findings from a pilot study investigating the use of the snowball survey to reduce misperceptions and increase the credibility of normative messages in the context of a social norms project in a high school setting. By contrast, Sam Gitchel and Lynnette Zelezny present detailed findings from a controlled pre and double posttest experiment to assess both the short and long-term (4-week) effect of the snowball survey in a college setting. Their study builds on Hancock and Vatalaro’s work, and provides further evidence that this activity can indeed help to reduce college students’ misperceptions across of range of issues.

Finally, given the current interest in *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell’s recent bestseller, we thought it appropriate to revisit an interview conducted with Gladwell on the topic of the social norms approach back in 2002. As you will see, some of his comments regarding young people’s increasing “immunity to information” are very pertinent for a discussion of strategies—such as the snowball survey—to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of normative messages.

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The Snowball Survey as a Component of a High School Social Norms Marketing Intervention: A Pilot Study

Sara Christensen

Evanston's Social Norms Marketing Campaign, *Strength in Numbers*, was launched in November 2001. In partnership with Evanston Township High School (ETHS), *Strength in Numbers* is sponsored by the Evanston Substance Abuse Prevention Council, a coalition that was founded in Evanston in 1984. The campaign was initially comprised of interventions for high school students (approximately 3,000), their parents and school staff (approximately 500). The stated goals of the campaign are to reduce parent, staff, and student overestimations of student alcohol and tobacco use, to increase the frequency with which parents and staff communicate true norm statements to students, and to reduce the prevalence of student alcohol and tobacco consumption. Given that, a comprehensive marketing strategy has been employed—including posters, postcards/mailers, newspaper and theatre ads, brochures, presentations, and promotional items—to communicate to students, parents, and teachers accurate information about ETHS student norms of non-use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. In addition, real-life strategies that have been gathered from the students themselves for protecting oneself from the pressure to use are routinely communicated to students.

Project Outcome Data

Students, parents and school staff are surveyed each spring. Student surveys

are administered during Homebase, an 18-minute class period that all students attend each school day. Students are questioned anonymously about their personal use and perception of peer ATOD use, sources of ATOD-related information, and the frequency with which respondents have heard a variety of ATOD-related statements from parents or teachers. In addition, ETHS parents are surveyed as a part of the optional parent/teacher conferences held at the school, and school staff members are surveyed via inter-office mail. The anonymous parent and staff surveys assess perceptions of student ATOD use, the frequency with which respondents made a variety of ATOD-related statements to their children/students, and exposure to social norms marketing information.

Since its inception in 2001, alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use among high school students has declined. Over the course of the project (from 2001 – 2005) there has been a 13% reduction in past month student tobacco use, an 11% reduction in past month student alcohol use and a 10% reduction in past month student marijuana use. While quantitative analysis has shown positive results, qualitative analyses have indicated areas for improvement. Although the intervention was successful in terms of both message dosage and retention, our target populations still seemed to have many questions that could not be answered through our marketing strategies. Skeptical students

frequently commented on the believability and credibility of the data utilized in the campaign.

Misperceptions such as “seniors didn’t take the survey,” or “everyone lied on the survey” were surfacing.

Strategies to Enhance the Credibility of Messages

When we talked with students in small group settings where they were able to ask questions, share their feelings about the campaign, and receive accurate information in response to their questions, students seemed to walk away with a much better understanding of the message. It seemed that these discussions allowed students to think more critically about both their perceptions and the campaign messages. As a result of the vast primary and secondary misperceptions (“most students use alcohol and other drugs”, and “the survey data in the campaign aren’t accurate”), and in order to more broadly capture the success of the small group discussions, additional strategies have been devised. The purpose of the new strategies is to support and strengthen the initial campaign interventions by providing students with accurate information about the survey, giving students the opportunity to think critically and discuss their perceptions in a supportive environment, and allowing students to more closely examine their peer group’s norms first-hand.

The new strategies include interventions for middle school students, parents and staff, and a broadening of the campaign message for all populations to include

additional normative messages and protective strategies. For example, the messages marketed to middle school students promote the fact that most Evanston high school students choose not to use alcohol or tobacco, and also reinforce information which all 6th and 7th graders receive in Project ALERT, an anti-drug curriculum (refusal skills, benefits of non-use and reasons to stay drug-free). Parents are provided with normative messages regarding teen behavior as well as parent norms (e.g. most parents have set clear rules for their children to not use alcohol). In addition, a review of the ETHS freshmen and sophomore health education curriculum was conducted by a team of teachers and prevention staff, who examined the current drug education units in both grade levels. The units were then revised and updated to meet current prevention standards, and they now include lessons that complement the *Strength in Numbers* campaign.

The Snowball Survey

The revised Evanston Township High School Freshmen Health Drug Prevention unit begins with a variation of Linda Hancock’s Snowball Survey, first used at Virginia Commonwealth University. All freshmen students complete this lesson as part of their freshmen health class. Teachers receive an in-depth lesson plan and training in order to prepare them to administer the lesson. Project staff members also assist in administering the lesson in select classes.

The lesson begins with a brief,

10-question survey (see Table 1). The anonymous survey asks students how serious they are about their schoolwork,

whether they have used alcohol, tobacco or marijuana in the past 30 days, whether they answered the above questions

Table 1. ETHS Snowball Survey

<u>ETHS SNOWBALL SURVEY</u>			
<i>Do not put your name or any stray marks on this form! This survey is optional and anonymous. If you choose to do this exercise, please use the pen/pencil you will be given to circle one response for each question. When you finish, crumple the paper into a ball and wait for further instructions.</i>			
1. How serious do you think MOST ETHS students are about their studies and schoolwork?			
a. not at all serious	b. a little serious	c. moderately serious	d. very serious
2. How serious are YOU about your studies and schoolwork?			
a. not at all serious	b. a little serious	c. moderately serious	d. very serious
3. What percentage of ETHS students do you think smoked at least one tobacco cigarette in the past month (30 days)?			
a. less than 25%	b. 25-50%	c. 51-75%	d. more than 75%
4. Did you smoke any tobacco cigarettes in the past month (30 days)?			
a. yes	b. no		
5. What percentage of ETHS students do you think drank alcohol in the past month (30 days)? (not including religious reasons)			
a. less than 25%	b. 25-50%	c. 51-75%	d. more than 75%
6. Did you drink alcohol in the past month (30 days)? (not including religious reasons)			
a. yes	b. no		
7. What percentage of ETHS students do you think used marijuana in the past month (30 days)?			
a. less than 25%	b. 25-50%	c. 51-75%	d. more than 75%
8. Did you use marijuana in the past month (30 days)?			
a. yes	b. no		
9. What percentage of students in this class do you think answered this survey truthfully?			
a. less than 25%	b. 25-50%	c. 51-75%	d. more than 75%
10. Did you answer this survey truthfully?			
a. yes	b. no		

truthfully, and their perceptions of their peers' behaviors regarding each of the questions. Once every student in the class has completed the survey, students are asked to crumple their survey and then engage in a "snowball fight" to disperse them throughout the room. After the "snowball fight" each student should have someone else's survey.

Snowball Survey Instructions

The snowball survey is a structured activity. In order for it to have the intended effect, once the "snowball fight" has ended students should be guided through a series of very specific steps. These steps are enumerated and briefly explained below.

1. The class discusses the concepts of norms and perceptions. It is important that students have the opportunity to think about and discuss how their perceptions are developed and how our perceptions might impact behavior. Key points include:

- The difference between a "norm" and "normal"
- A brief discussion of the bell curve, and
- A discussion about how we know whether information is true and accurate.

2. Students are given information about how the school-wide survey is conducted. Key points touched upon include:

- All students are given the opportunity to participate
- The survey is anonymous, and
- Both the size and representative quality of the survey sample are discussed.

3. Students discuss whether the results of the snowball survey will be valid and accurate. The discussion includes concepts such as anonymity and sample size. The class then discusses how to process surveys where the respondent answered that they did not answer the survey truthfully. The class will ultimately come to the conclusion that those surveys should be considered invalid. Students holding those surveys are asked either to help the instructor tally the results or to sit aside.

4. With the help of the teacher and a project staff member, students tally the results of the snowball survey in class.

5. Students compare their class results to the freshmen class results from the most recent school-wide survey. For each question students can compare their perception with their health class's behavior and freshmen class data from the most recent survey. Results show the gap between perception and reality and generally show that the norms for the health class closely match those of the freshmen class as a whole.

6. Students are led through a reflection activity to process their thoughts. Discussion questions include:

- Were you surprised by the results of the snowball survey?
- Do you think the data obtained from the snowball survey accurately reflects the behavior of this class?
- What other types of behaviors besides substance use might we have misperceptions about?
- Why might it be important for us to have accurate perceptions about what happens around us?

Important Considerations

A number of important considerations should be borne in mind before utilizing the snowball survey in a high school setting. In our case, project staff took care to address each of the following issues:

- Passive parental consent was obtained for the snowball survey at that same time consent was obtained for the all-school student survey via a parent mailing from the school.
- Each health class was read an informed consent statement, and every student was provided with the opportunity to decline to take the survey.
- It is important that all students use the same type of writing implement (i.e. pencil, black pen etc.) during this activity so that no survey can be identified with any particular student. For this reason, project staff provided facilitators with enough pencils for each class.
- It is recommended that this activity be conducted with a minimum of 20 students. The smaller the group, the more difficult it is to generalize the

results to the larger population and the less likely it is that the results will closely match the larger population.

- We specifically conducted this activity with freshmen because we were confident that the class data would compare well with the aggregate school norm of non-use. We would caution against using this activity with older students since use rates often increase with age during high school. For instance, senior class norms may not reflect the school-wide majority norm of non-use.
- It is important that the facilitators be well trained and allow students to discuss their thoughts and beliefs in a non-threatening, neutral environment.

Results

Feedback about the snowball survey activity was obtained through a series of 3 focus groups approximately one month after students participated in the activity. A total of 28 freshmen took part in the focus groups. The participants closely mirrored the demographics of the school population. Forty-six percent of participants were female; fifty-four percent were male. Thirty-nine percent were African American; thirty-two percent were Caucasian; seven percent were Latino; four percent were Asian and eighteen percent identified as multi-racial or “other.”

Focus group participants were asked to complete an initial written ballot which included the following questions

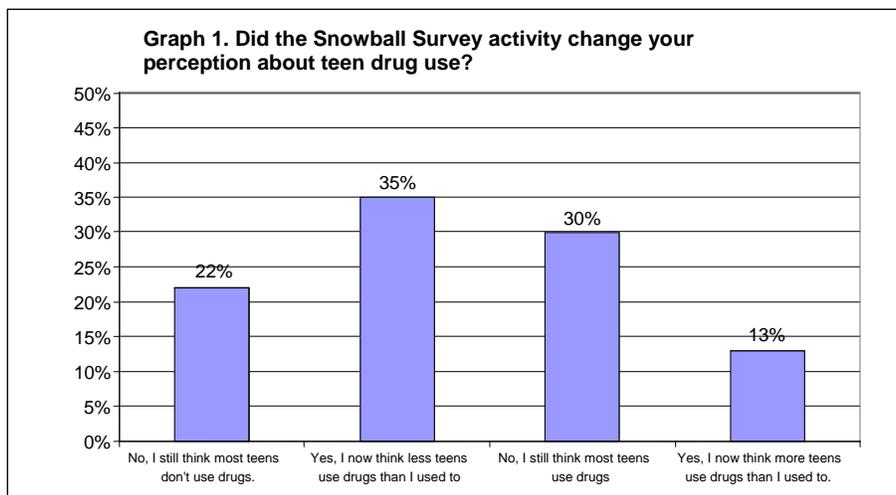
(students completed the ballot as they entered the room, prior to *any* discussion):

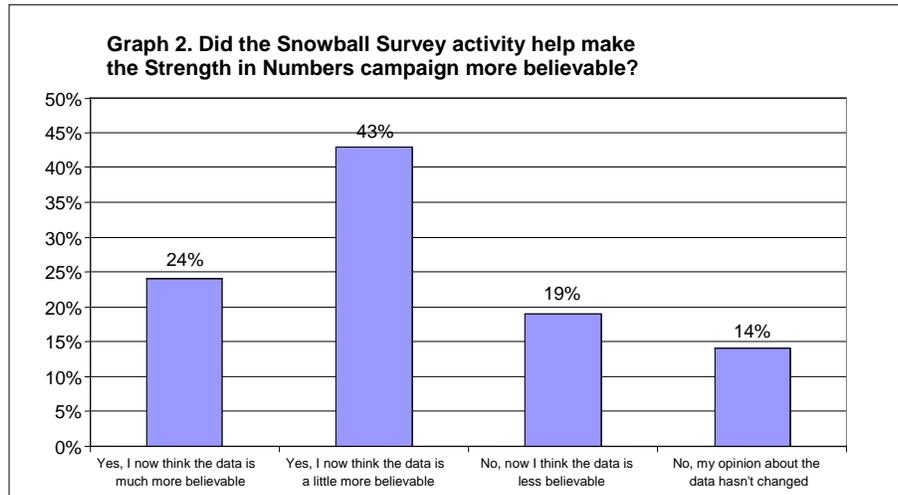
- “Did you participate in the Snowball Survey during your Health Class about a month ago (survey about drug use and perceptions, tallied results in class)?”
- “If you answered yes (to the previous question), did the activity change your perception about teen drug use (drugs = alcohol, tobacco and marijuana)?”

- “If you answered yes (to the first question), did the activity help make the *Strength in Numbers* posters/campaign more believable?”

The focus group results showed that 57% of students either maintained or increased accurate perceptions and 67% of students responded that the Snowball Survey activity increased believability of the campaign message (see Table 2 and Graphs 1 and 2).

Did you participate in the snowball survey?	Yes	No	Not Sure	
Number Responded	24	3	1	
Percent Responded	86%	11%	4%	
Did the activity change your perception about teen drug use?	No, I still think most teens <i>don't</i> use drugs.	Yes, I now think <i>less</i> teens use drugs than I used to	No, I still think most teens use drugs	Yes, I now think more teens use drugs than I used to.
Number Responded	5	8	7	3
Percent Responded	22%	35%	30%	13%
Did the activity help make the Strength in Numbers campaign more believable?	Yes, I now think the data is much more believable	Yes, I now think the data is a little more believable	No, now I think the data is less believable	No, my opinion about the data hasn't changed
Number Responded	5	9	4	3
Percent Responded	24%	43%	19%	14%





Discussion

The Snowball Survey activity can be a useful tool to provide students with accurate information about data collection and process evaluation for social norms marketing campaigns, give students the opportunity to think critically and discuss their perceptions in a supportive environment, and allow students to more closely examine their peer groups' norms first-hand. It seems clear that high school students benefit from guidance and structured discussion opportunities in order to help them process information that challenges their long-held beliefs about peer substance use. The Snowball Survey activity and similar opportunities can play a critical role in supporting social norms marketing campaigns by offering the normative message in an alternative setting and learning format.

For further information about the Evanston Township High School social norms project see The Peer Services, Inc. *Strength in Numbers* web site:

<http://www.peerservices.org/strengthinnnumbers.asp>

Contents of the site include:

- A description of the concept of social norms marketing
- Information about the Strength in Numbers campaign's objectives
- Marketing strategies
- Survey results
- Marketing materials, and
- Information about project funding

The Snowball Survey: A Social Norms Classroom Activity

By Sam Gitchel, M.A. and Lynnette Zelezny, Ph.D.

The Snowball Survey is an interactive learning activity that reduces students' misperceptions and stimulates discussion about social norms. We found it to be an effective enhancement of our social norms marketing project, with both short-term and long-term (4-week) effects on students' perceptions.

Background

California State University, Fresno's social norms marketing project was initiated in the fall of 2003. By the end of the 03-04 academic year most students indicated that they recognized project media and had a positive opinion of it. But many students' recall of message content was vague, and some were doubtful about the accuracy of its normative messages.

The Snowball Survey offered a way to address this doubt and stimulate discussion of our media. The activity uses data supplied by students to contrast their self-reported behavior with their perceptions of peer behavior. The activity was developed by Linda Hancock (Virginia Commonwealth University) and has been described elsewhere (Vatalaro and Hancock, *The Report on Social Norms* 2004, 3(7):54-6,8).

We conducted the activity in "University 1" first-year orientation courses. This class offered an opportune time to reach incoming students, who, as a group, are acutely interested in the normative

behavior of their newfound peers. It was also fitting in that the text, Gardner and Jewler's *Your College Experience*, takes a normative perspective on alcohol.

Classroom Implementation

Before taking the activity to the classroom, we:

- Made minor modifications in Hancock's survey questionnaire to better suit our student population and available data (see Table 1)
- Created transparency overheads
- Pilot tested the activity.

Our classroom sessions typically proceed in this way:

- We briefly introduce ourselves. To protect the anonymity of students' responses, we ask that they use a pencil to complete the survey, and not to write their name on it. We provide pencils.
- Students complete the snowball survey questionnaire (pretest), then are told to have a "snowball fight" with their crumpled questionnaires, throwing at least three "snowballs" to randomize their distribution. There is usually a perceptible rise in class energy during this part of the activity. We tell students not to say anything if, by chance, they end up with their own questionnaire.
- We present a brief lecture: Briefly flashing an image of a hand with an unapparent extra

Table 1. Snowball Survey

<p>SNOWBALL SURVEY</p> <p><i>Please do not put your name or any stray marks on this form! This survey is optional and anonymous. If you choose to do this exercise, please use a pencil, and circle one response for each question. When you finish, fold the paper in half and wait for instructions.</i></p> <p>1. What health issue do you think about the most? _____</p> <p>2. How serious do you think most Fresno State students are about their studies and schoolwork? a. Not at all serious b. A little serious c. Moderately serious d. Very serious</p> <p>3. How serious are <u>you</u> about your studies and schoolwork? a. Not at all serious b. A little serious c. Moderately serious d. Very serious</p> <p>4. How often do you think most Fresno State students wear a seatbelt when they ride in a car? a. Never b. Rarely c. Sometimes d. Most of the time e. Always</p> <p>5. How often do <u>you</u> wear seatbelt when you ride in a car? a. Never b. Rarely c. Sometimes d. Most of the time e. Always</p> <p>6. In the last 30 days, on <u>how many days</u> do you think most Fresno State students smoked a cigarette? _____ (insert a number 0-30)</p> <p>7. In the last 30 days, on how many days did <u>you</u> smoke a cigarette? _____ (insert a number 0- 30)</p> <p>8. How many drinks do you think the typical Fresno State student had the last time s/he partied/socialized? (One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 4-5 ounces of wine, or 1 shot of liquor) 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 or more</p> <p>9. How many drinks did <u>you</u> have the last time you partied/socialized? (One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 4-5 ounces of wine, or 1 shot of liquor) 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 or more</p> <p>10. What percentage of Fresno State students <u>do not</u> smoke marijuana in a typical month? (make your best estimate) a. 12% b. 22% c. 32% d. 42% e. 52% f. 62% g. 72% h. 82% i. 92% j. 98%</p> <p>11. How many sex partners do you think most Fresno State students have in a school year? a. 0 b. 1 c. 2 d. 3 e. 4 f. 5 or more</p>	
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finger, we ask students what they see. We make the point that “things are not always as they first appear,” and introduce key words: “Our *perceptions* may or may not be an accurate reflection of *reality*.”

We propose to use the class’s survey data to conduct an experiment to test the hypothesis “healthy behavior is underestimated.” Explain how we will use the transparency grid to compare students’ perceptions of peers with the actuality of their self-reported behavior (see Table 2).

Address sample size and the variability of small samples, i.e., note that smaller groups are more likely to vary from population norms. Count the number of participants in that day’s experiment.

Ask if there are any questions about how we will proceed.

We then go question-by-question, starting with question 2. (Question 1, “What health issue do you think about the most?” was not a part of the Snowball Survey activity.) With each question, we ask students to raise their hand or stand to indicate the response on the survey they are holding. We then count, calculate, and record the percentage in the grid. After each pair of questions, we ask: “Is perceived *under* or *over* actual?”

Questions 10 and 11, which ask about perceptions of marijuana use and number of sex partners, are not paired with questions about personal behavior due to the sensitivity of their content in a classroom setting. For these questions we compare the class’s responses to campus-wide survey norms, treating them as an interesting corroboration but not part of our “formal” experiment. By this point in the process, students can see the pattern of underestimation of healthy behaviors in the preceding questions.

Table 2. Transparency Grid for Comparison of Actual and Perceived Behaviors

Behavior	Perceived	Actual	Is perceived over or under actual?
Studying <i>very serious</i>			
Seatbelt use <i>usually or always</i>			
Cigarettes <i>don’t smoke</i>			
Alcohol <i>0 to 3 drinks</i>			

We then review the findings and encourage students to discuss factors that contribute to the pervasive underestimation of healthy behavior. Students generate more ideas about the sources of misperceptions when we refer to specific behaviors—studying, drinking, etc.—rather than asking global questions about misperceptions. During this discussion, we make it a point to distinguish between this speculation and the irrefutable fact, evident in the data just gathered, that healthy behavior was consistently underestimated.

Finally, for evaluative purposes, we ask students to complete the posttest-1.

Method

In this study, the intervention group consisted of students in 18 sections of University 1 who participated in the activity (n=443). At the beginning and end of these sessions students completed the pretest and posttest-1, respectively. Four weeks later students completed posttest-2.

The two sections of the course that we were unable to schedule served as a convenience control group (n=43). They completed the pretest and, about four weeks later, completed posttest-2. They did not participate in the Snowball Survey activity.

Students in both groups were presumably exposed to the campus-wide social norms marketing campaign, as well as textbook material and class discussion of alcohol and other health topics. Thus, our findings pertain to the

snowball survey as an *augmentation* of a social norms marketing campaign.

The design of the study is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Study Design

Intervention Group (n = 443)	Pretest	Snowball Survey + campus campaign + curriculum	Posttest-1 (end of class period)	Posttest-2 ~ 4 weeks later
Control group (n = 43)	Pretest	Campus campaign + curriculum	--	Posttest-2 ~ 4 weeks later

The survey

Our survey included a series of eight paired questions addressing (a) students’ own attitudes and behaviors and (b) perceptions of peer attitudes and behavior in four domains: seriousness about studies, seatbelt use, tobacco use, and alcohol use (see Table 1). These eight questions served as the basis for our evaluation.

The survey also asked about perceived prevalence of marijuana use and perceived number of sexual partners. In keeping with Hancock’s approach, our questionnaire did not ask students to disclose their personal behavior in these areas, given the sensitivity of these behaviors and concern about privacy in the classroom. Question 1, “What health issue do you think about the most?” was included for other purposes; it was not part of the Snowball Survey activity.

Results

Did it demonstrate misperceived norms?
As the data in Table 4 indicate, students consistently underestimated their peers' healthy behavior/attitude in all four domains.

Table 4: Reported and perceived norms (based on pretest data from intervention and control groups)

	Self-reported	Perceived	Significance*
Studies -- very serious	50%	15%	p<.05
Seat belt use -- usually or always	96%	74%	p<.05
Cigarettes -- 0 days in the last 30	87%	2%	p<.05
Alcohol -- 0-3 drinks	73%	34%	p<.05

*t-tests

Furthermore, healthy behavior/attitude was underestimated in *every* comparison in *every* class (i.e. four paired-question comparisons in each of 18 classes). While we expected most classes to fall into this pattern, we were surprised that there was *never* an exception.

Incidentally, both the self-reported and perceived figures for use of seat belts, cigarettes, and tobacco obtained in this sample are within 3% of our campus-wide survey findings using the National College Health Assessment (NCHA).

Did it increase the accuracy of students' perceptions?

As the data in Table 5 indicate, the activity reduced misperceptions in all four domains. The effect was greatest immediately after the activity, but persisted several weeks later at posttest-2.

Table 5: Percentage of students accurately perceiving norms at pretest, posttest-1 and posttest-2 (intervention group)

	Pretest	Posttest-1	Posttest-2	Significance*
Studies -- very serious	15%	43%	25%	p<.001
Seat belt use -- usually or always	74%	94%	89%	p<.001
Cigarettes -- 0 days in last 30	2%	20%	7%	p<.001
Alcohol -- 0-3 drinks	34%	69%	62%	p<.001

*Tukey's HSD test

How did the intervention and control groups compare?

The accuracy of students' perceptions improved in both groups, with greater change in the intervention group for three of the four measures. Interestingly, the control group showed slightly more improvement than the intervention group in the accurate perception of cigarette use, though this was not statistically significant (see Table 6). However, this question seems to have had validity problems. It would appear that many students responded by giving an estimated prevalence of cigarette use rather than the number of days students

smoked. For example, a student who perceived that half the students smoked responded with a “15” (i.e., 50% of 30 days). Therefore, this question may not have measured what it was intended to measure. This question has since been changed to match the wording of the question (#10) on marijuana.

Table 6: Increase in percentage of students accurately perceiving norm, from pretest to posttest-2 (posttest minus pretest = percent increase)

	Intervention group	Control group	Significance*
Studies	10%	0%	p<.005
Seat belt	15%	5%	p<.005
Cigarettes	5%	7%	NS
Alcohol	28%	7%	p<.005

* ANOVA

How did students like the activity?

The posttest-2 questionnaire asked students to rate the activity on two seven-point scales, the results of which are noted in Table 7. Most students found the activity fun and interesting.

Table 7: Student ratings of the snowball survey

	<i>It was fun</i>	<i>It was interesting</i>
1- Strongly disagree	4%	4%
2	3%	2%
3	6%	3%
4	23%	17%
5	21%	20%
6	22%	31%
7 - Strongly agree	22%	23%
Total Positive	65%	74%

Speaking subjectively, the presenters found the activity to be an effective way to engage students in a discussion of social norms and the prevalence of misperceptions.

Discussion

We found that the Snowball Survey activity:

- Demonstrated the prevalence of students’ misperceptions
- Increased the accuracy of students’ perceptions, and
- Stimulated discussion about health behavior and our social norms marketing project.

In addition, most students found the activity interesting and fun.

The activity reduced misperceptions across a range of issues. The reduction was greatest with alcohol. We can only speculate about the reasons. There may have been a synergistic effect with our ongoing social norms campaign, which focuses on alcohol consumption, and with the textbook’s emphasis on normative behavior with regard to alcohol. Also, in the discussion phase of these presentations we often emphasized alcohol.

The data we collected in the course of this activity have turned out to be useful as corroboration of campus-wide survey findings. A common challenge to our media is couched in terms such as “the survey must be biased – big parties don’t return their surveys”. In these classes, the response rate was nearly 100%. (Students were given the choice of opting out of the activity, but only a

handful—those arriving late to class—did so.)

When we began planning this activity, we were concerned we would encounter occasional groups that would not go as we predicted, i.e., the level of their self-reported healthy behavior would be less than the perceived level. To our surprise, however, we did not encounter a single such instance in these 18 classes. We *did* encounter groups with higher-than-average tobacco and alcohol consumption (which, as Hancock points out, often go hand-in-hand), but their perceptions of peer use were always higher than their self-reported use.

Since conducting these classes, we have continued using the activity with other groups, and we have, in two instances, had groups where a particular unhealthy behavior exceeded perceived levels. In both instances the group size was less than 15, and our explanation of sample size and the high variability of small samples adequately prepared us.

Limitations

Practically, the intervention would not be feasible as population-level intervention on large campuses, due to the staff time required. Also, as pointed out by Vatalaro and Hancock, the activity is most effective if the presenters are conversant in their campus survey data, and are able to “think on their feet.” It is not a cookie-cutter, scripted presentation.

Methodologically, there were several limitations. Our survey was self-

designed and was not validated. (Several questions resembled, but were not identical to, questions on the NCHA.)

We tested the snowball survey as an augmentation of a campus-wide social norms marketing campaign and a norms-oriented textbook. The results may not generalize to use as a stand-alone intervention. Even working in concert with other social norms messages, the activity reduced, but did not eliminate, misperceptions.

Implementation Tips

Seek to model an attitude of open-mindedness. Encourage critical thinking.

Always count healthy behavior (thus the wording of question 10). Doing so keeps the process clearer to students (and presenters), and keeps the focus on positive norms.

Be familiar with relevant campus-wide survey data, and bring it into the discussion. We carry overheads with these data, which we use as appropriate.

Provide bits of relevant health information while reviewing the surveys, such as:

- The effectiveness of seat belts in reducing vehicular injuries
- Campus smoking policy
- Why we call 0-3 drinks the “safer zone,” and
- The relationship of blood alcohol content to negative consequences.

The activity is well suited for groups of 20-30 students. Smaller groups are more likely to vary from population norms. With larger groups, it’s helpful to have an assistant or two to help with the counting, in order to keep the activity moving. (Hancock has avoided this problem by simply asking students to stand, creating a visual demonstration of their number.)

Practice! Pilot testing was invaluable.

Materials

Questionnaires, pencils, calculator, transparencies, transparency pen.

An Interview with Malcolm Gladwell



Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, *Blink*, has been on many best-seller lists of late. In Gladwell's own words, it is "a book about rapid cognition, about the kind of thinking that happens in a blink of an eye...when ...your mind takes about two seconds to jump to a series of conclusions." In *Blink*, Gladwell strives to understand those two seconds. "What is going on inside our heads when we engage in rapid cognition?" he asks. "When are snap judgments good and when are they not? What kinds of things can we do to make our powers of rapid cognition better?"

Gladwell's previous book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, first published in 2000, was a compelling examination of how and why social change happens so rapidly. In 2002, Mr. Gladwell presented the keynote address at the National Conference on the Social Norms Model that was held in Philadelphia. After his address, he sat down with Michael Haines and Rich Rice of the National Social Norms Resource Center to discuss the implications of his concept of "social epidemics" for the field of social norms. What follows is a slightly edited transcript of that conversation.

In The Tipping Point and in your talk today you discussed the important role that two kinds of people have in affecting social change: mavens, who are repositories of specialized knowledge, and connectors, who are "people specialists" and circulate in many different worlds. How does one identify the mavens and connectors in a community?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, for people on the local level, like teachers in schools, I think they *know*, because they know the kids and they can watch the interactions. It's harder to identify mavens and connectors in a larger context. I've been very impressed recently with some tools that have been developed for use in the corporate world by anthropologists, where they survey a group, asking about its communication patterns, and then construct social maps of those institutions. It can be a very easy and an extremely useful way of getting a handle on how communication is flowing in a particular community.

A fundamental tenet of the social norms approach is that the essential wellness and goodness of people is under-appreciated and underestimated. This gives rise to a false norm, particularly among young people. One comment that you made near the end of your talk—that young people are "looking for truth"—suggests that you share this notion that

young people are essentially good folks...

Malcolm Gladwell: One of the reasons that I'm enthusiastic about the application of some of the ideas I describe in my book to the social norms movement is that I think there's a very good fit. I'm particularly interested in the roles that mavens play because, as I see it, they're the guardians of truth. We rely on them because they know more and they have more expertise, and they are closer to the truth than we are. In my talk I used the example of how people use mavens as specialized information resources when they want to buy laptops, say, or choose a restaurant in Manhattan to go to... But it's really no different when you're a kid and you're trying to figure out much more global questions, like: How ought I live my life? I don't think that teens are predisposed toward negative behaviors; rather, I think they engage in them because they lack someone in their life who is in a position to give them a more accurate answer to that question. And that's where mavens can really come in.

In your talk you also discussed the issue of "immunity to information," and not just among young people, where it's perhaps more pronounced, but in the larger community as well. This "immunity" is especially troubling for a social norm campaign that, in a sense, is trying to "inoculate" a population with a message that's intended to protect it...

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, this immunity question is something that has consumed me a great deal, because I don't think you can endlessly multiply the amount

of information that you throw at people without there being some kind of consequence. You know, at a certain point the sponge becomes saturated, and I think the sponge is saturated now. We're all searching for ways around this particular problem. It is the first and most serious impediment to anyone who is trying to spread a corrective message. The window for new messages is a lot smaller now than it was, because the cost of competing for attention is so much greater now. And that's why I think it's so critical for people who are interested in this movement to learn more sophisticated social strategies of reaching kids.

But there's a second part to this, which is that immunity is striking the more traditional sources of information. I don't think that mass media is nearly as important, as powerful today as it was ten or fifteen years ago. That is, we're also becoming immune to the messages on the television. When you have 200 channels, the notion that television as a medium is a trustworthy source begins to be undercut, because right in front of you is evidence of how extraordinarily, almost absurdly diverse it is. There's no way that you can grant the medium some kind of special status because the medium is preposterous: it's kids doing stupid stunts on MTV, it's not just Walter Cronkite. So that process will also effect those who are purveying the orthodoxy.

One of the things that is central to the social norms approach stems from marketing, and that is: going to the target population and asking them questions about where they're getting

information, how they're getting it, who they're getting it from, and who they deem to be credible sources. What you seemed to suggest in your comments today is that we need to redouble those efforts and ask those questions again and again in order to determine if there are shifts in where people are getting information...

Malcolm Gladwell: You're absolutely right. One of the things that marketers are realizing is that you need to have a constant, almost real-time sense of the direction in which communities are moving and people and ideas are flowing.

Couple that with your observation about the isolation of adolescents from the moderating influence of beneficial adults in the culture, and how the cell phone, among other electronic media, just increases that isolation. If you could comment on that...

Malcolm Gladwell: I talk about immunity to information, and isolation, to me, is the second profound social change that is affecting our community and our world at the moment. What I mean is, our kids are replacing more and more adult time with peer time, and they're using all the things we would expect them to use: the internet, cell phones in particular—cell phones to me

are the really big issue here. They effectively crowd out alternate, mature voices from their world. I mean, kids construct their reality from all kinds of different sources, and what we're doing is just narrowing the range of sources that they're using, and that's problematic. It's not terminal, and it doesn't mean that they're all going to go off and do crazy things, but it just means that we have to find another way to bring moderating voices into their lives.

Your general comments and impressions of the social norms field now that you've looked into it...

Malcolm Gladwell: Actually, when *The Tipping Point* was published there was a review of it in *The New Republic* by Cass Sunstein, and he talked extensively about social norms. That was my first exposure to it. He pointed out how sympathetic a lot of what I was writing was to this very, very powerful social idea. I think you guys are right. I mean, this is an extremely powerful social tool. And this larger perspective that there's not something terribly wrong with kids, but that they just need to have better access to information to form their perspective on who they are and how they ought to behave is something that I'm fundamentally in sympathy with.

Contributors

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Malcolm Gladwell is the author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*.