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Motivational Interviewing

Engaging College Men in Sexual Assault Prevention

by Daniel Oesterle, Lindsay
Orchowski, Brian Borsari, Alan
Berkowitz and Nancy Barnett

When engaging men in sexual assault prevention efforts, program facilitators often encourage men to critically evaluate, explore, and challenge longstanding and widely held beliefs about what it means to be “a man” in their peer group, community, and wider culture. In prevention programs with men, we hope to debunk the rape supportive beliefs, misperceived peer and community norms, and systems of sexism and misogyny that perpetuate violence against women, in part by showing that these beliefs are not held by most men. Through our work with boys and men in middle school, high school, military, and college settings, we recognize that conversations about men’s role in sexual violence can be sensitive in nature and can elicit defensiveness and resistance.

From 2012 to 2015, our research team—led by Dr. Lindsay Orchowski—embarked upon an NIAAA-funded treatment development project to work with heavy drinking college men to design and implement a sexual assault prevention that rigorously addressed the role of alcohol as a risk factor for

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sexual aggression. In this context, we collaborated with Drs. Nancy Barnett and Brian Borsari—experts in alcohol interventions for college students—along with Dr. Alan Berkowitz, an expert in sexual assault on college campuses, to understand how Motivational Interviewing could be used to facilitate discussions about violence prevention among college men. In their seminal text, William Miller and Stephen Rollnick (2012) describe Motivational Interviewing as “a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of

permission to explore personal feelings and values with a supportive practitioner. Miller and Rollnick (2012) describe the four key components of MI Spirit as follows:

1. Collaboration between the practitioner and the client;
2. Evoking an individual’s own ideas about how change occurs;
3. Autonomy in identifying personal needs and establishing plans for change; and
4. Compassion for respecting the meaning of others’ experiences.

When applying MI Spirit to sexual assault prevention, we are intentional about what we say, how we say it, and why. At the

values and goals. We believe that the tenets of MI, described above, are well aligned with this approach.

Facilitators may decrease resistance to program material by communicating that the participants are the experts of their own experience, and acknowledge that how they utilize the program content is ultimately up to them. Below, we provide an example of how such a conversation has occurred when discussing alcohol-related sexual experiences in the context of a group-based prevention program:

Facilitator: One of the reasons we are here today is to talk about how alcohol increases the likelihood that someone has a regretted sexual experience.

Participant: I get that, but I really don’t want to have sex without having a few drinks.

Facilitator: Certainly, no one can make that decision for you. It’s ultimately up to you how to use the information presented.

Participant: Yeah, that makes sense. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to hear some information to make sure my drinking doesn’t put me in a bad sexual situation.

Facilitator: Does anyone else have a suggestion for how to make sure that drinking does not create a problematic sexual situation?

As highlighted above, program facilitators may consider deliberately using language that acknowledges autonomy and highlights that individuals have control over whether or not they decide to change. We have found that taking such a “non-expert” stance that highlights men’s autonomy fosters an interest and ability to “look in the mirror” and identify how components of traditional masculine norms harm both women and men alike.

We establish a collaborative environment in the group-based workshop designed in collaboration with Dr. Alan Berkowitz by starting the program with the question: “What is difficult about being a man on this campus?” This conversation starter emphasizes men’s autonomy in the conversation. In the program introduction, we also highlight that we are not here to “tell them what to do” The program is framed as an interactive discussion, designed to create an

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change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person’s own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion” (p. 12). In this commentary, we discuss how we used a Motivational Interviewing style in a program to engage heavy drinking college men as allies in preventing sexual assault.

Foundations of Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a strategy for facilitating collaborative conversations about change, and has been applied in a range of health behavior interventions. With its emphasis on reinforcing autonomy, personal choice and control, MI can reduce the defensiveness and psychological reluctance commonly experienced when an individual feels pressured to change. This approach resolves one of the more difficult challenges in working with men to prevent violence against women; whereby defensiveness regarding men’s role in violence serves as a barrier to open dialogue and change.

The “Spirit” of MI can be characterized as a “way of being,” rather than a sequence of specific technical procedures within a conversation. At its core, the Spirit of MI promotes equality and freedom within an interaction, thereby giving individuals

heart of this task is developing an attitude of sincere interest in others’ beliefs. In our work, we are also keenly aware that the way in which material is delivered is perhaps just as important as the material itself. An effective intervention will evoke comments that are difficult to hear and is a sign that the program has created an atmosphere where individuals feel that they can speak openly. Facilitating group discussions in an open, non-judgmental format allows other men to express beliefs and attitudes that are healthier and in conflict with those which are problematic.

Taking a Non-Expert Stance and Affirming Autonomy

In the context of group sexual assault prevention workshops, we have found that direct attempts at challenging widely held personal beliefs often incite defensiveness. One step toward avoiding this pitfall is to let go of an “expert/educator” stance, and create a space where program participants maintain personal autonomy within the intervention. An atmosphere that is neither critical nor moralizing can help men to feel safe enough to share their opinions, and explore how to incorporate new experiences and values into their own lives. It is also our hope to create an environment where participants can explore whether their actions are congruent with their internal

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opportunity for men to discuss the pressures that they face on campus when it comes to “being a man,” and the specific challenges they encounter within social and dating situations. Facilitators encourage a diversity of perspectives and opinions. The opportunity for participants to recognize that not all men support traditional masculine norms, and that most have attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with the goals of the workshop is a critical ingredient in the program’s success.

Language Matters: Identifying and Responding to Change Talk

Meeting individuals where they are is more than just asking for their thoughts, making suggestions, and providing solutions that seem to mirror where they may be when contemplating change. Hearing what someone has to say and responding appropriately in a way that respects and values an individual’s experiences and perspectives is fundamental to reflective listening. It can focus an individual on his *own* path towards change. When applying MI, skillful facilitators are able to instill the Spirit of MI and the fundamental skills to promote change through the individual’s explicit verbalization of change talk. Likewise, facilitators must remain adherent to the principles of MI, especially when individuals engage in “sustain talk,” which are arguments against change or for maintaining status quo. In these circumstances, change is more likely to occur when facilitators avoid responses that attempt to provide solutions or arguments in favor of change, which undermine the collaborative spirit of MI. Data suggests that those implementing MI can actively shape client language by reflecting/evoking change talk, and acknowledging but not extensively evoking or soliciting sustain talk (Magill et al., 2014; Romano & Peters, 2016).

Compassion and Creating Dissonance by Exposing Discrepancies

As human beings, when we encounter those whose beliefs differ from our own, we are often compelled to try to change their way of looking at things—to get them to see the situation the way we see it, or as we would like them to see it. Often, we might feel an urge to correct a problem, also known as the “righting reflex.” The righting reflex can manifest itself when we try to plead, resign, scold, encourage, insult, prod—anything to cause a change in the desired direction, that is,

the one we want them to travel. We seldom realize, however, that under these circumstances we are usually responding to our own needs to see the world in certain ways.

Passing judgment, whether critical or favorable, makes open communication difficult. Similarly, giving unsolicited advice and information may be seen as efforts to change a person, and this advice is not likely to be accepted. Moreover, persistent efforts to change others serve as barriers to self-change and hinder the development of an authentic relationship even when a legitimate goal exists.

Many engaging in sexual assault prevention efforts are deeply and emotionally committed to changing the culture that supports violence, and so it can be difficult to refrain from immediately “pouncing” to address expressions of misogyny, rape myth acceptance or victim blame that occur in program discussions. The more invested we are in a particular situation, the less we are willing or able to listen to others’ feelings and attitudes. Experiencing empathy can be difficult when listening to someone describe ideas or behaviors that conflict with personal or societal values or the purpose of the intervention. However, the most effective way to facilitate change in a belief is through a non-judgmental conversation which induces cognitive dissonance, rather than through a corrective reply.

As Miller and Rollnick (2002) note, “unless a current ‘problem’ behavior is in conflict with something that the person values more highly, there is no basis for MI to work” (p. 245). Exposing discrepancies between an individual’s core values and those of their peers serves to evoke personal motivation for changing problematic behaviors. In MI, this process is best achieved through emphasizing autonomy, personal choice, and control by providing feedback that participants are most likely to find personally relevant and important. In the context of sexual assault prevention, when facilitators face comments that endorse rape myths or promote toxic masculinity, they hope to skillfully evoke discrepancies between an individual’s personal beliefs/values and actions to create cognitive dissonance and produce change.

Guiding Change: Facilitating Group Discussion to Challenge Social Norms

Peer language in group-based interventions is an influential mediator of change (D’Amico et al., 2015). Men’s motivation

to change is enhanced when they realize that other men, whose acceptance they desire, may hold healthy beliefs and attitudes (Simon, Paris & Ramsay, 1994). Accordingly, combining MI (and the style/language it fosters) with the Social Norms Approach (*i.e.*, providing normative feedback to the group about itself) can be a powerful strategy for approaching sexual assault prevention in all-male groups. Integrating these approaches creates an environment for revealing the groups’ healthy norms (Berkowitz, 2010, 2011). The most synergistic combination of these two approaches is likely achieved when most of the men know that other men feel the way that they do. In this case, the two motivations work together to produce change, rather than one inhibiting the other.

It is useful for program facilitators to first try engaging other group members to confront expressions of rape myth acceptance, victim blame or misogyny, rather than participate in a one-to-one conversation with the individuals (Orchowski et al., 2011). For example, a facilitator might ask “Is there anyone else here who has a different opinion?” when encountering the expression of victim blame. By integrating normative feedback into the workshop—either through eliciting the views of those present or by providing relevant data—we hope to reveal that most men have healthy norms related to violence issues, even when they think they are in the minority. Promoting group cohesion and fostering acceptance within this dynamic is essential and can be achieved when facilitators remain consistent to the Spirit of MI, while simultaneously allowing space for multiple perspectives to emerge in a productive discussion (Wagner & Ingersoll, 2012). When successfully applied, this approach fosters continued discussion within the group and provides a space where peers, rather than facilitators, provide corrective feedback.

Avoiding Gridlock: Strategies to Reduce Resistance

Certainly, there are situations where audience members are unable or unwilling to provide a response that counters the expression of misogyny, victim blame, or rape supportive attitudes. In these cases some of the following reflective listening skills can shift the conversation in a way that “rolls with the resistance,” thus attempting to change the problematic attitude without condoning the statement.

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1. Communicate Understanding With a Reflection. At times some will argue for continuing their problematic behaviors. In these instances, by deliberately focusing on communication and listening to an individual's reasons for maintaining the behavior, facilitators can help identify the values involved, and even motivate change. This approach can also favorably shift session dynamics where participants see program facilitators as "us" versus "them." Below is an example of a program facilitator subtly shifting the conversation's focus to healthy behavior after communicating understanding through reflection:

Participant: I hate when girls make me wear a condom during sex. I'll say anything to get out of having to wear one. I mean it's not a big deal whether or not I wear one.

Facilitator: For you it sounds like it's not even worth having sex if you have to wear one, and sometimes your partners just need a bit of persuading.

Participant: It's not! And I let girls know that, too. If they really want to have sex with me, they'll end up coming around. It's not like I'm dirty or anything.

Facilitator: Some of your partners tell you that they are concerned about

getting an STD, but you're able to convince them you're clean so you don't have to wear one. What concerns do you have about not wearing a condom?

Participant: Sometimes I feel like they just end up saying yes because of how insistent I am. There's also always a chance that I could get an STD, too, or even getting someone pregnant.

Facilitator: OK, so if I have this right, it feels better to have sex without a condom, but there are some potential consequences to not wearing one that you want to avoid—and your partners want to avoid too.

To reinforce this point, the facilitator could also solicit comments from the group by asking if there are any present who feel comfortable using a condom and concerned about the consequences of not doing so.

2. Agreement With a Twist. When using this strategy, we reflect agreement with someone's perspective, but also integrate it with a subtle reframe to shift focus. In this example, a student explains how he enjoys telling misogynistic jokes when with male friends:

Participant: I always tell sexual jokes to my friends. It's part of what brings us together. It's not like they don't like hearing it. If they didn't like it, they'd definitely tell me, right?

Facilitator: You're known within your group of friends for telling these jokes, and you're going to keep telling these jokes even though you're not quite sure if they want to hear them.

In the situation illustrated above, the facilitator now has the opportunity to ask if other members of the group agree.

3. Double-Sided Reflections. At times individuals appear to be unsure about their behavior and demonstrate this ambivalence with both positive and negative arguments about change. In these situations, a double-sided reflection, summarizing the underlying message of both sides of an individual's argument for change (or lack thereof) may provide a "light-bulb" realization. We've found that in these "ah-ha" moments, participants may even start to argue with the facilitator about how they *are* capable of changing. Double-sided reflections can reduce resistance and discord when "sustain talk" is acknowledged and then "change talk" is reflected. It is a way of saying "*I hear you*" but then keeping the focus on change rather than arguing or ignoring. Below are several examples of double-sided reflections which keep the focus and momentum of the session on changing behaviors, rather than on reasons not to change. To highlight the stylistic subtleties,

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for each commentary we have provided two possible facilitator reflections, with the italicized text representing statements that end on a positive note, acknowledge the change talk, and keep the momentum moving towards change:

Example 1A: "You never want to be in an uncomfortable sexual situation again, yet you have been in uncomfortable sexual situations before and not been caught."

Example 1B: "You have been in uncomfortable sexual situations before and not been caught, yet this is something that you never want to have happen again."

Example 2A: "There are strategies you could use to keep yourself safe in the future, yet it has been uncomfortable talking about your past sexual experiences today."

Example 2B: "It has been uncomfortable talking about your past sexual experiences today, yet there are strategies you could use to keep yourself safe in the future."

Example 3A: "Today you learned some new things about alcohol and sexual risk that you didn't know before, but this wasn't exactly how you would have liked to spend two hours on a weekend."

Example 3B: "This wasn't exactly how you would have liked to spend two hours on a weekend, but you learned some new things about alcohol and sexual risk that you didn't know before."

In each of the italicized reflections above (1B, 2B, 3B), an individual's ambivalence is first acknowledged, followed with a reflection on change talk. This sequence strategically downplays arguments to maintain the status quo, while emphasizing shifting the conversation's focus in the direction of change. When applied in group settings, garnering feedback from other members can provide powerful feedback in the direction of change by offering peer support and reinforcement for the positive.

4. Reframing. Sometimes an individual can focus on a single perspective, failing to acknowledge alternative interpretations. By reframing, facilitators hope to provide alternative perspectives to shift an individual from habitual thinking patterns. Below is

an example of a facilitator challenging a participant to address his perceived barriers in getting verbal consent with a new sexual partner through a subtle reframe:

Facilitator: You noted that you're never absolutely certain that you're on the same page with a sexual partner. How could you go about making sure you and your partner are on the same page, sexually?

Participant: It's awkward to ask if it's okay to do something with a sexual partner. I'm not sure what I would even say. I don't think I could do it.

Facilitator: So, it would be challenging for you to figure out how you'd go about doing that.

Participant: Yeah, it's tough, but I guess it would be good to try and figure it out. I really don't want to hurt anyone.

Facilitator: Does anyone else have a suggestion to make sure that you and your partner are on the same page sexually?

Summary

When approaching sexual assault prevention work with men, the program content does not take precedence over the interpersonal process of program facilitation. An MI framework, combined with the presentation of normative feedback, offers a promising style of conversation for allowing individual men to explore their role as allies in sexual assault prevention. By highlighting discrepancies between an individual's core values and behaviors, men are also encouraged to critically challenge the internalization of traditional masculine norms that may inhibit them from engaging as proactive bystanders among their peers.

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**Daniel Oesterle, B.S., is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts Boston, and is a Clinical Research Program Coordinator within the Department of Psychiatry at Rhode Island Hospital. Email: daniel.w.oesterle@gmail.com.*

Lindsay Orchowski, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor (Research) in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University. Dr. Orchowski is also a Staff Psychologist in the Adult Outpatient Division of the Department of Psychiatry at Rhode Island Hospital. Email: lindsay_orchowski@brown.edu.

Brian Borsari, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and Health Behavior Coordinator at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. Dr. Borsari is also Professor-in-Residence in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. Email: brian.borsari.sfva.ucsf@gmail.com.

Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D., is a subject-matter expert and consultant on sexual assault prevention, bystander intervention training, and Social Norms Theory. Email: alan@ftg.net.

Nancy Barnett, Ph.D., is a Professor (Research) in the Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences in the School of Public Health of Brown University. Email: nancy_barnett@brown.edu. ■