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Responding to the Critics: Answers to Common Questions and Concerns about the Social Norms Approach

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Editor's Note

I would like to share some reflections about responding to criticism. It seems to me that there are three possible responses to being criticized. The first is to get defensive, angry, and/or upset. Personally, I have experienced all of these emotions upon hearing the various criticisms of the social norms model. Hopefully, I have explored these emotions enough to leave them out of this working paper. A second response is to try and answer critics by clarifying any misunderstandings, misinformation, or differences in interpretation of the evidence. This working paper serves this purpose. In my opinion, most of the criticisms of the social norms approach are based on misunderstandings, misinformation, lack of familiarity with the research literature, or over-generalizations from failed interventions that were not faithful to the model. These can be easily clarified to show that the model and its effectiveness are not in question, just our understanding of it or its implementation.

There is yet another response to criticism, which is to ask the question: "What can we learn from our critics?" Is there something that I may be unaware of that is the "hook" for the criticism? Even if some of the criticism feels unfair, is there a way to go about the business of social norms that would address the criticism and teach me something at the same time, something that would make my work better? A consideration of this third dimension of criticism can lead to a generous response in which, having fully absorbed and digested the import of the criticism, we address it proactively and positively in our work. I hope that this paper contains enough of the second and third dimensions to be helpful to you, the reader.

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Thank you!

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As the social norms approach grows in popularity it has also met with criticisms and concerns. These criticisms deserve thoughtful consideration and much can be learned in the process of answering them. Anyone using the social norms approach should be aware of these criticisms and be able to respond appropriately. Theoretical, methodological, and philosophical concerns have been expressed, including whether the social norms approach is based on correct assumptions, if it is effective (both with particular populations and in general), if social norms is compatible with the underlying mission of higher education, ambivalence about funding sources, and a variety of methodological concerns relating to the validity of survey responses.

H. Wesley Perkins has pointed out that these criticisms have evolved as the field of social norms has evolved (Perkins, 2003). Initially, clinicians who were committed to an addictions/disease model of drinking expressed concern about social norms' focus on healthy behavior and viewed this as minimizing the problem of addiction. Wes and I have called this the "misperception of the misperception." A second generation of criticism has come from public policy advocates who may fear that social norms will detract from policy and other environmental initiatives. While there is ample evidence of policy initiatives that are implemented in a manner that is inconsistent and competitive with social norms, recently it has

been suggested that the two interventions can be combined in a way that is compatible and mutually reinforcing (DeJong, 2003). Finally, objections may come from individuals who gain media attention and funding from focusing on only the negative aspects of the problem. Jeff Linkenbach has thoughtfully analyzed the "cultural cataracts" that lead to our society's preoccupation and almost exclusive focus on the negative in grant writing, prevention programs, and the media (Linkenbach, 2001).

Table One contains a summary of criticisms of the social norms approach. The following sections of this working paper will address criticisms noted above regarding theory, methodology, effectiveness, and philosophical assumptions.

Theory Based Criticisms

The assumptions of social norms theory have been outlined by H. Wesley Perkins and myself in a number of articles (Berkowitz, forthcoming; Perkins 1997; Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986). These assumptions include the assertions that misperceptions exist for both group and campus norms, that these misperceptions can be corrected, and that norms correction will result in a strengthening of healthy behavior and a reduction in negative behavior. Critics have challenged a number of these basic assumptions of the theory.

Do misperceptions exist?

Misperceptions have been reported in over thirty studies published in peer-reviewed journal articles for alcohol,

Table 1. Common Questions About the Social Norms Approach

Theoretical Concerns

Do misperceptions exist?

Is there a “typical student?”

What if there is no underlying healthy norm?

Methodological Concerns

Is self-report data valid?

Don't students develop biased response sets after exposure to media campaigns?

Concerns about the Evidence

What if students don't believe the data?

Does social norms work with the most problematic drinkers?

Has social norms been scientifically proven?

Philosophical Concerns

Doesn't social norms minimize or ignore alcohol problems?

Do social norms campaigns promote conformity?

Shouldn't social norms works only be employed as part of a comprehensive prevention program?

Is the beverage industry funding social norms and undermining its neutrality?

cigarette smoking and other drug use, driving while intoxicated and driving with someone who is intoxicated, and in populations of adults, college students, and high-school students. Among college students misperceptions have been documented among men and women, first-year students, fraternity and sorority members, and for individuals of all drinking styles on all sizes of campuses and in all regions of the country. In addition there are over fifteen published studies documenting misperceptions for topics such as white's attitudes towards desegregation, gang behavior, homophobia, and student radicalism. Both Berkowitz (2001A) and Perkins (2002) have reviewed this research.

In the only study that calls into question the existence of misperceptions, Wechsler & Kuo (2000) reported that students in their sample accurately perceived campus binge drinking norms. However, DeJong (2000) pointed to a number of methodological problems and confusions that call the results of this study into question. Finally, this

study contradicts the findings and recommendations reported by Wechsler in a different study (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996).

Is there a “typical” student? Some critics have argued that there is no such thing as an all-campus norm (Keeling, 1999, 2000). Rather, campus cultures are so heterogeneous and diverse that the only meaningful influence comes from microscopic or local group norms. Despite this assertion, the research has clearly demonstrated that both “global” and “local” norms exist and influence behavior, and that the relative strength of these norms may differ by group and by campus, with local norms being stronger in most cases (Berkowitz, 2001A; Prentice & Miller, 1993). While there may in fact be no such thing as a “typical student” from a statistical point of view, psychologically students do hold a picture of the “typical student” or social identity on most campuses (Perkins, 2003). Due to the greater strength of local group norms, it may be that some groups are more effectively

reached through tailored interventions focusing on in-group norms, but this does not mean that correcting misperceptions of campus norms is ineffective. In fact, the evaluation literature clearly indicates that correcting campus norms can be effective. Thus, the choice between intervening to change global or local norms on a particular campus should be a strategic one based on the campus environment and an analysis of which norms are salient for a particular target group. While some campuses are conceivably so heterogeneous that majority campus norms do not exist, multi-campus studies have not supported this assertion. Finally, social norms interventions directed at group norms have been found to be effective in a number of studies (Berkowitz, 2001B; Larimer & Cronce, 2002, Far & Miller, 2003).

What if there is no underlying healthy norm? There are groups of students whose drinking is unhealthy, otherwise there would be no need for drug prevention. On the surface it may seem logical to assert that social norms will not work in heavy drinking student cultures. However, what social norms theory argues and what the research demonstrates is that students misperceive the drinking norms of their peer groups no matter how unhealthy or extreme these group norms actually are, and that even in extreme drinking cultures protective behaviors exist that can be strengthened. Thus, correction of misperceived norms in a heavy drinking group can be expected to moderate the drinking of that group so that it is less unhealthy and strengthen protective behaviors, a claim supported by a number of recent studies. In addition, even when unhealthy drinking norms exist, there are healthy attitudes or values that are not being acted on because of misperceptions. Thus, social norms interventions can focus on either attitudinal or behavioral norms in correcting these

misperceptions, even when they occur in heavy drinking cultures, with the choice of message being based on a variety of strategic factors.

Criticisms of the Evidence

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that the social norms approach is effective as an alcohol prevention strategy. For example, the Final Report of the Panel on Prevention and Treatment of the Task Force of the National Advisory Council on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2002), composed of over twenty national experts convened by the NIAAA, recommended social norms interventions along with other drug prevention strategies and concluded that:

“Initial results from programs adopting an intensive social norms approach are promising.... Together these findings provide strong support for the potential impact of the social norms approach.

Although any case report in this literature could be challenged methodologically, the results of each study are remarkably consistent (p.13).”

In addition, social norms programs have received highly competitive awards from the Department of Education and the Center on Substance Abuse Prevention based on evaluation data supporting the effectiveness of these programs. Despite these promising results, a number of criticisms have been made about

Some Notes on Methodological and Other Issues

by Richard Rice, National Social Norms Resource Center

Is self-report data valid? One of the most frequently asked questions that we receive at the National Social Norms Resource Center concerns the validity of self-report survey data. Social norm campaigns are often criticized for their reliance on such data, especially when self-report data is used to demonstrate effectiveness. This criticism of unvalidated self-report data is not a trivial one. As Perkins et al. (2002) note, “Estimates of the number of drinks consumed, the number of hours spent drinking, and body weight have unknown accuracy.” But, as they also point out, “This same criticism can be leveled against any self-report on alcohol consumption” — including, of course, data that are used to proclaim that “binge drinking” is rampant on college campuses. Thus, this criticism cuts both ways. For this reason, practitioners would do well to follow Wechsler et al.’s lead by acknowledging this methodological flaw and yet reiterating that “self-reports of alcohol use are considered to be reliable and valid” (Wechsler et al, 2002). Support for this contention can be found in the work of Cooper et al. (1981) and Midanik (1988). Although specific to the area of adolescent tobacco use, additional support for the validity of self-report data is provided by Frier et al. (1991).

A cautionary note is in order regarding the “objective measures” (such as property damage, arrests, and DWI) that may be used to aid in the evaluation of the effectiveness of a campaign. It is important to note that these measures are sensitive to other factors as well, such as increased police enforcement. Thus, it is quite conceivable that a campus could simultaneously experience a decrease in the self-reported level of harmful drinking and an increased incidence of arrests and DWI.

Don’t students develop biased response sets after exposure to media campaigns? As for the criticism that students may develop a biased response set to the same survey after repeated assessments, it should be noted that most, if not all, of the surveys referred to are either probability or truly random in administration. Thus, the chance that a significant number of students are responding to the same set of questions over repeated samples is unlikely. This possibility is made even more remote when one considers the fact that, in college populations, a significant percentage (perhaps as much as one-half) of potential respondents are eliminated from the pool from year to year due to the entry of new freshman and the graduation of the senior class. Another related criticism is that social norms messages that saturate the target population bias respondents. Thus, it is claimed, a normative message such as “Most students have four or fewer drinks when they party” essentially models this level of consumption as an “appropriate” survey response. While it is indeed possible that consumption-based, normative messages may influence responses to consumption-based questions, it is highly improbable that they have the same impact on the responses to questions that assess alcohol-related behavior, e.g., injury to self or others. Fluctuations in these measures, then, may be used either to bolster or challenge the other findings.

Do social norms campaigns promote conformity? Regarding Robinson’s (2001) claim that the social norms approach simply promotes conformity, Alan Berkowitz correctly points out that the actual norms of a campus are, in fact, often infused in the curriculum “to promote...critical thinking and a careful examination of personal assumptions.” But it should also be noted that even social norms marketing campaigns routinely engender a vigorous and open dialogue in a community about real vs. perceived norms. Witness the coverage by often dubious student reporters, letters to the editor from incredulous correspondents, and the derisive “true norm” campaigns that students sometimes launch in response. To suggest, then, that the social norms approach is anti-intellectual and essentially conformist is to misunderstand how it frequently works. Far from a subliminal ploy to sell a brand of group-think, it often actually promotes — only on a larger scale — the same kind of open, intellectual engagement that informs the Small Group Norms-Challenging Model developed by Far and Miller (2003).

the scientific evidence in support of social norms.

What if students don't believe the data? It is common for articles in the media to cite students who say that they don't believe the data or that students in general don't take social norms messages seriously. In addition to the fact that these types of comments are anecdotal and not obtained scientifically, it is to be expected that students will not initially believe in accurate normative data when it is initially presented. This rejection of social norms data is predicted both by social norms theory and a number of other social-psychological theories of human behavior (for example, cognitive dissonance theory). Thus, rather than serving as a criticism, this response is expected and predicted by the theory. One of the critical tasks of a social norms campaign is to address this skepticism by responding to student concerns and providing explanations of the data and how it was obtained. There are now a number of studies in the literature suggesting that social norms campaigns may fail when initial student criticisms are not adequately addressed (Clapp, et al. 2001; Granfield, 2001).

Does social norms work with the most problematic drinkers? The evidence is growing that social norms interventions can impact the drinking of abusers in both campus-wide media campaigns and small group or individual norms challenging interventions. For example, Perkins and Craig (2002) reported four-fold reductions in the typical increase in high risk drinking among first year students and a 21% reduction in weekly heavy drinking among students in general in a campus-wide social norms media campaign. Pryor (2001) reported a decrease from 20% to 13% from 1999-2000 in the number of students drinking ten or more drinks at a sitting. Fabiano (2002) reported significant decreases in a variety of measures of high-risk drinking when social norms

information was incorporated into personalized feedback profiles, combined with significant decreases in the experience of negative consequences. Larimer et al (2001) used a similar approach with Greeks, combining individual and group intervention strategies in fraternities and sororities with the outcome of reduced intoxication levels and negative consequences among male participants in comparison with controls. Finally, Haines (2003) reports reductions in the drinking of every student group and every category of drinker over the course of a highly successful social norms media campaign, including reductions in the number of students who drank 6-9 and over 10 drinks at a sitting.

These results suggest that the social norms approach can be effective with high-risk drinkers and is consistent with the finding that misperceptions predict the behavior of heavy drinkers more than they do for more moderate drinkers (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). The question is thus *how* to make high-risk interventions effective and not if they can be effective. Even though all such efforts may not be successful, the claim that social norms is not effective with high-risk drinkers is not supported by the research. However, since many high-risk drinkers belong to tight-knit social networks, it is possible that in some cases more targeted campaigns may be more effective than all-campus media campaigns.

Has social norms been "scientifically" proven? The ultimate scientific standard of proof is to conduct studies that are randomized with control groups. This is extremely difficult to accomplish in population studies, as is the case for social norms media campaigns. To provide for such evidence, the NIAAA is funding three different experimental, longitudinal studies of campus social norms media campaigns (these campaigns are based at the University of Washington, the Higher Education Center, and the

Prevention Research Center) and an additional number of high school studies. The fact that these studies have been funded through extremely competitive peer-review processes indicates that experts in the field see the social norms approach as very promising.

In the absence of such studies of social norms some researchers have concluded that:

"No rigorous research trials utilizing randomized control designs are yet available. Research of this nature is needed to justify allocation of limited campus resources to the approach and to explore more fully intervention characteristics and campus conditions that affect success." (Boyd & Faden, 2002)

This conclusion seems to suggest that campus prevention experts should not invest in any strategies until the strongest scientific evidence is available. In fact, similar criticisms of other drug prevention strategies can be made on the same basis. For example, while there is considerable evidence from controlled population studies that environmental interventions, including policy and legal initiatives, are effective in high-school and younger populations, support for such interventions among college students is either equivocal or lacking, as was concluded in three separate literature reviews of a variety of different environmental interventions (Hingson & Howland, 2002; Toomey & Wagenaar, 2002; Wagenaar & Toomey, 2002). Does this mean that we have to wait for the results of college population studies before using environmental management in higher education? If we adhere to this standard, most of the current practices employed in collegiate prevention programs would have to be abandoned. Rather, the intelligent practitioner will evaluate the literature to find the best combination of practices and interventions that have the most promise for effectiveness on her or his campus while awaiting the results of more definitive

research. In doing so, he or she will find that the evidence for the effectiveness of social norms interventions among college students is extremely strong in comparison with other approaches.

While we wait, the evidence in support of social norms is growing. The literature is full of comprehensive case studies of social norms interventions with impressive results (Fabiano, 2003; Haines, 1996; Johannessen et al, 1999; Perkins & Craig, 2002) along with studies showing large decreases in cigarette smoking as a result of social norms campaigns on campuses when these reductions did not occur in control campuses not receiving a social norms intervention (Hancock, et al 2002)). There are at least six published studies in which misperceptions either positively correlate with drinking behavior or predict how individuals drink (Clapp & McDonnell, 2000; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Scher et al, 2001; Thombs, 1999; Thombs et al, 1997) and other studies of multi-faceted interventions in which the social norms component predicted the success of the intervention. These studies are summarized in Table Two.

Finally, while it is difficult to conduct scientifically controlled research in population studies, it is much easier to do so with small groups, and a number of studies have provided positive support for social norms when it is conducted under such conditions (Berkowitz, 2001A; Larimer & Cronce, 2002).

Philosophical Criticisms

Doesn't social norms minimize or ignore alcohol problems? This criticism implies the "either/or" proposition that to focus on the positive implies that we must ignore the negative. Instead, social norms promotes the "both/and" proposition that we can at the same time acknowledge problems and promote the healthy behaviors that inhibit these problems. Much of this criticism has come as

Table 2 Studies Reporting that Norms Correction Predicts or is Associated with Behavior Change

- ➔ Perkins and Wechsler (1996) found that the perception of campus drinking climate explained more of the variance in drinking behavior than any other variable, concluding that *"This research, based on nationwide data, suggests that alcohol prevention efforts on college and university campuses may be more effective in reducing problem drinking by including a proactive strategy that addresses perceived norms in campus initiatives."*
- ➔ Scher et al (2001), in a longitudinal study of fraternity drinking patterns, found that misperceptions accounted for all differences in Greek drinking behavior across class years: *"the current findings... strongly indicate that all college students, but particularly fraternity members, would benefit from educational programs designed to counter faulty beliefs about normative drinking levels on campus."*
- ➔ Thombs (1999) tested four different models of driving while intoxicated (DWI) or driving with someone else who was intoxicated (RWID), and found that misperceptions in DWI and RWID had the greatest predictive value in explaining both DWI and RWID.
- ➔ Clapp and McDonnell (2000) found that misperceptions predicted both drinking behavior and drinking-related problems.
- ➔ Thombs, Wolcott and Farkash (1997) found that the best predictors of alcohol use were misperceptions of alcohol use and social climate.
- ➔ Prentice and Miller (1993) conducted a study of college freshmen in which men were found to adjust their drinking over time to fit the misperceived norm.
- ➔ In a longitudinal study of over 1500 high school students, only perceived intensity of student alcohol use predicted behavior change so that *"higher perceptions of student alcohol use were associated with subsequent escalation of personal drinking."* The authors concluded that *"One means of deterring escalation or encouraging de-escalation of alcohol use is to provide accurate normative feedback on intensity of student alcohol use."* (D'Amico et al, 2001)
- ➔ Two years after a multi-component controlled school-based intervention to reduce binge drinking, accurate perception of peer drinking norms was the only outcome variable associated with continuing reductions in binge drinking. (Botvin et. al., 2001)

a result of controversies over the use of the term "binge drinking" to describe high-risk student drinking behaviors. Numerous researchers, prevention experts, academic journals, professional organizations and student affairs professionals have recommended the use of another term, including the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, the Inter-Association Task Force on Alcohol and Other Substance Issues (2000), and the editor and authors of scientific studies in the

recent special issue on binge drinking of *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* (Bosari, et al, 2001; Carey, 2001; Lange & Voas, 2001; Perkins et al, 2001). In response, critics have asked: "Do they truly believe that calling it by another name will make it go away?" (Wechsler, 2000). This comment illustrates a misunderstanding of both the terminology issue and of the social norms approach. Correctly describing the problem does not deny it, but rather provides an

opportunity to create effective intervention strategies to correct it. Recent research on the term “binge-drinking” suggests the measure is in fact problematic and may lead to an inaccurate profile of drinking on campus, numerous false-positives, and problematic reactions from students that weaken prevention programs ((Bosari, et al, 2001; DeJong, 2001; Lange & Voas, 2001; Perkins et al, 2001).

Do social norms campaigns promote conformity? Some critics have argued that the social norms approach promotes conformity, is anti-intellectual, and is thus antithetical to the mission of higher education and student development theory. One critic claimed that “an appeal to peer norms is an appeal to conformity” and that “the majoritarian thinking inherent in these efforts is alien to an education that fosters students’ ability to read critically, write clearly, and think rationally” (Robinson, 2001). In a recent article in the *Social Norms Quarterly* (2002), a panel of experts addressed this concern, commenting that:

- 1) the social norms approach in fact stimulates dialogue and critical examination of claims
- 2) to the extent that students do behave out of conformity motivations, it makes sense to conform to accurate and healthy norms
- 3) sensitivity to and interest in the experience of others is not necessarily negative
- 4) social norms promotes behavior that is consistent with underlying values and beliefs regardless of whether they conform to an external norm

Information about the true norm in fact provides permission to act on underlying values and beliefs. Thus, when norms correction campaigns are effective in changing perceptions and behavior, these changes occur without corresponding changes in personal attitudes (Perkins & Craig, 2002). Contrary

to the conformity hypothesis, the research suggests that it is the misperception itself which promotes conformity (not its correction), because misperceptions encourage people to “act in opposition to their convictions” and give undue influence to the vocal minority who hold more strongly held-beliefs (Toch & Klofas, 1984). Thus, both research and theory suggest the exact opposite of the conformity claim, indicating that social norms campaigns enhance the likelihood that individuals will act in concert with their convictions and that campus discussions will be more democratic and representative of the true range of opinions.

There is a danger, however, that sloppy implementation can result in social norms media that appeal to a conformity motivation. This kind of media is in fact inconsistent with the premises of the theory and with the evaluation research. Thus, it is important that prevention programmers exercise care to select neutral, factual and non-judgmental messages and avoid language that urges students to behave in a certain way based on what others do.

Shouldn't social norms only be employed as part of a comprehensive prevention program? Social norms campaigns have been effectively employed on some campuses without other program components (Haines, 1996; Perkins & Craig, 2002). Nonetheless, comprehensive programs utilizing a variety of strategies can also be highly effective if program elements are compatible and mutually reinforcing, as was recommended by the recent NIAAA panel. Thus, social norms strategies can be combined with other strategies such as environmental management and policy development. At the same time, the emphasis of social norms on positive behavior, accurate data, and norms correction can be the central theme and guiding philosophy that ties different program elements together. Whether used in combination with other strate-

gies or alone, social norms is an effective prevention strategy and it is not necessary to *only* use it in combination with other approaches.

Is the beverage industry funding social norms and undermining its neutrality? Historically the overwhelming majority of social norms programs have been funded by institutions of higher education, federal agencies, and local and state governmental agencies. Table 3 contains a partial listing of funding sources. Recently, beer companies have funded social norms campaigns on some campuses, leading critics to claim that the social norms approach is a tool of the beverage industry and that their interest in it is a sign that it is either morally suspect or ineffective (Wechsler & Wuethrich, 2002). This statement does not represent the range and majority reality of funding sources, or the evaluation literature.

Proactive Responses to Criticism

The best way to respond to criticisms of the social norms approach may be to anticipate them. Information that corrects or answers misinformation and criticism can be incorporated into presentations, media and materials that describe social norms interventions. Thus, common concerns and reactions can be proactively addressed rather than responded to reactively after the fact. Examples include:

- State clearly that one of the reasons you have selected social norms as an appropriate strategy for your campus or community is that it is strongly supported by the research and has received numerous highly-competitive model program awards.
- Always mention your funding source. For example, “This program is funded by...” or a more inclusive statement such as: “Our social norms program, like almost all others, is funded by a federal, state or local agency, in our case...”

Table 3. A Partial Listing of Funding Sources for Social Norms Campaigns and Research

Federal Agencies

Centers for Disease Control
 Department of Education
 Department of Justice
 Department of Health and Human Services
 Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
 National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse
 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
 National Science Foundation

State Agencies Funding Individual Programs or Regional Consortia

California State University System
 Illinois Department of Human Services
 Iowa Governor's Traffic Safety Bureau and Department of Criminal and Juvenile Justice
 Massachusetts Governor's Highway Safety Bureau
 Montana Department of Transportation
 New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
 New York Department of Health (OASAS)
 North Carolina Governor's Highway Safety Program
 Pennsylvania Alcohol Beverage Control
 Virginia Alcohol Beverage Control Board and Department of Health
 Wisconsin Tobacco Control Board

Private Foundations

Anheuser-Busch Foundation Inc.
 Chicago Community Trust
 Kansas Health Foundation
 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

- Mention that social norms interventions have been found to reduce the drinking of abusers.
- While it is important to notice and reinforce healthy behavior, also mention on a regular basis that you are aware that a serious problem exists and that you have chosen this strategy to address it.

Conclusion

Criticism can serve a useful function. In the case of the social norms

approach, it can help us to clarify the theory, examine to what extent our programs are being implemented with fidelity to the model, and raise neglected issues that proponents may not have considered. Dialogue is essential for the advancement of science and the evidence for the social norms approach should be able to bear sustained and critical scrutiny. Hopefully, this working paper has contributed somewhat to this process.

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