



Could sexual violence prevention programs be having adverse effects?

In the past decade, colleges and universities have been introducing and expanding sexual violence prevention efforts. These efforts take many forms, including online courses, peer education, and educational presentations among others. In the article "Sexual assault interventions may be doing more harm than good with high-risk males," researchers Malamuth, Huppin, and Linz analyze how these programs can impact students in different ways, and how they can sometimes produce unintended consequences.

The Research

The boomerang effect is a social psychology theory that claims that in order to maintain a positive self-image, people exposed to information regarding their own biased behavior might be motivated to justify their actions in alternate ways and as a result also fortify their existing biased behavior. (Levy and Maaravi 2018)

The authors claim that this effect may be occurring in high risk men as a response to sexual violence prevention efforts on college campuses. They define high risk men as such:

These men are likely to possess a combination of general antisocial tendencies (e.g., a narcissistic personality, a high sense of entitlement) as well as specific characteristics (e.g., hostility towards women, attitudes accepting of violence against women, sexual arousal to force, an impersonal sexual orientation) pertaining to sexual violence (Malamuth & Hald, 2017). Such psychological characteristics make them especially resistant to attitudinal, emotional, or behavioral changes. (Malamuth et al. 2018)

Malamuth et al. cite evidence that prevention programming may result in an increased probability that relatively high risk males will endorse more sexually violent attitudes and be willing to behave more aggressively after the intervention compared to before.

The authors' position is that while there is a growing recognition of a need for a comprehensive prevention framework, prevention researchers have not adequately considered the effect that sexual assault prevention programs have on high risk males.

What this Means for Sexual Violence Prevention

Whether or not they are aware of the academic term, it's likely that most prevention practitioners will have seen the boomerang effect in practice when working with large groups. Participants who are resistant to interventions are often oppositional to the content (e.g., playing devil's advocate) or dismissive. At the end of the session, they can be more defensive of these oppositional beliefs than they were at the beginning.

The findings of Malamuth et al. reinforce the need for primary prevention programs to adhere to the [Nine Principles of Effective Prevention Programs](#). In efforts to address rampant sexual violence on college campuses and to adhere to Title IX guidance, many colleges and universities have developed or adopted sexual violence prevention programming that is designed to reach all students. This has resulted in many low dosage programs that are intended for an entire student body and that fail to comply with at least two of the Nine Principles of Effective Programs.

- **Socioculturally relevant:** "Programs should be tailored to fit within cultural beliefs and practices of specific groups as well as local community norms." (Nation et al. 2003)

College campuses and universities are often very diverse places. A program that is designed to reach every student without being modified for specific groups is not going to be socioculturally relevant to a lot of students.

Making a program socio-culturally relevant means going beyond making cosmetic changes like translating the language or changing audio-visuals. It includes deep structure modifications, i.e., making changes in the materials or curricula that acknowledge the social norms and cultural/religious beliefs and practices of the target population. – (Nation et al. 2003)

When working with people who are at a higher risk to perpetrate sexual violence, adapting material to be responsive to their social norms and beliefs is crucial. For example, it doesn't make sense to provide a bystander intervention program to a group of students who do not believe that sexual violence is a problem that needs to be stopped. Providing information about sexual assault and establishing it as an issue that needs to be addressed would likely be a more effective strategy in this instance. Failure to make these kinds of modifications, particularly when working with high risk individuals, can lead to the adverse effects highlighted by Malamuth et al.

- **Sufficient dosage:** "Participants need to be exposed to enough of the activity for it to have an effect." (Nation et al. 2003)

When prevention programming sets out to reach large populations, it becomes difficult to maintain proper dosage. Dosage can be measured by the number of contact hours, including the number of sessions, and the length of each session. Many college prevention programs, and all of the interventions studied by Malamuth et al. are one time interventions, and take place in under an hour. Maury Nation and colleagues found that effective prevention programs include follow-up or booster sessions to help sustain the effects of the original intervention, otherwise the effects of most strategies diminish over time. They also found that higher dosage is necessary when participants' level of risk is higher.

In Summary

Research conducted by Malamuth et al. found that there is a substantial likelihood of boomerang effects occurring in high risk males exposed to college sexual violence prevention programs. The authors propose two solutions to this problem – that a greater emphasis on both formative and qualitative evaluations be considered when crafting prevention programming, and that interventions that are administered to all participants are geared towards high risk males.

While there is a demonstrated need to build evaluation capacity when it comes to prevention programming, this recommendation does not address the root issue, which is that the programs studied were designed without adhering to the Nine Principles of Effective Prevention Programs. It is important to note that none of the programs they examined in this article were comprehensive or took place over more than an hour. Designing programs that include sufficient dosage and are relevant to participants' sociocultural contexts will go further in addressing the boomerang effect than altering the emphasis of short, one-off interventions.

While Malamuth et al.'s research analyzed prevention programming on college campuses, the lessons learned also apply to school and community based programming. It's relatively well known that large scale, one-time prevention efforts (such as giving a presentation to an entire school in an auditorium) do not lead to behavior change. When working with individuals who are high risk, it is critical to be aware of the boomerang effect and adapt programming to fit the audience while adhering to the 9 Principles of Effective Prevention Programs.

References

- Aharon Levy & Yossi Maaravi, The boomerang effect of psychological interventions (2018). *Social Influence*, 13:1, 39-51.
- Malamuth, Neil M., et al., Sexual Assault Interventions May Be Doing More Harm than Good with High-Risk Males. (2018). *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 41, pp. 20–24.
- Nation, M., Crusto, C., Wandersman, A., Kumpfer, K. L., Seybolt, D., Morrissey-Kane, E., & Davino, K., Applying the Principles of Prevention: What Do Prevention Practitioners Need to Know About What Works (2003). *American Psychologist*, 58, 449-456. Prepared for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Violence Prevention

Reading, Resources & Tools

- [Principles of Prevention](#)
- [Fact Sheet on Risk Factors for Perpetration of Violence Against Women – Futures Without Violence](#)