APPLYING SOCIOLOGY THROUGH SOCIAL MARKETING: STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON AN INTIMATE VIOLENCE AWARENESS PROJECT*

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INTRODUCING STUDENTS TO SENSITIVE social issues like intimate violence in lower level courses can spark their sociological imaginations motivating them to do further research in order to gain reflective knowledge about such topics (Scheel 2002). In order to promote two course objectives: (1) recognizing and applying sociological concepts and theories, and (2) understanding the practical uses of sociology, we required students in an Introduction to Sociology course to complete a multi-stage social marketing project. The assignment encouraged students to move beyond personal assumptions about intimate violence by collaboratively investigating empirical research. We then required groups to translate their newly acquired knowledge into posters with messages that might alter others' social attitudes about intimate violence. In this paper we will provide a brief review of the collaborative learning and social marketing concepts, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the assignment, including an overview of students' final reflections on the project.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Research has overwhelmingly indicated that collaborative learning activities are effective tools for teaching (Meyers 1997; Scheel 2002). Meyers suggests that task structure, student evaluation, and group structure are three specific components that make collaborative learning successful. Task structure is particularly important because it prevents one person from essentially doing everything, while a good group structure encourages all individuals within the group to be equal participants. Finally, previous research suggests students with common interests work better together than those just assigned to a group, as they tend to strive to reach the same goals (Slavin 1990).

SOCIAL MARKETING

Social marketing utilizes a blend of marketing and social science research strategies to approach contemporary social issues (see Andreasen 2004 for a review). The concept of social marketing has been attributed to the early works of sociologist G. D. Wiebe (Andreasen 2004). As Manoff (1985) points out, "most marketing theory was borrowed from anthropology, sociology, social psychology, communications theory, and their research techniques" (p. 6). The underlying goal of social marketing is instituting social change (Robinson 1998). Robinson asserts the ultimate goal is not just to help people "know more things" but "getting people to change what they do." For this reason, governmental agencies from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2003) to the U.S. Department of Education (Zimmerman 1997) advocate social marketing as a key strategy in awareness and prevention campaigns they fund.

Many social marketing campaigns revolve

around the "four Ps" of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (Zimmerman 1997). The *product* in social marketing is the attitude, behavior change, or service that is being promoted in the campaign, while the *price* involves giving up old attitudes or behaviors in order for change to occur. The *place* is how the "product" reaches the consumer, and *promotion* is the method used to convince the target audience that the "product" is worth the perceived "price" (see Kline Weinreich 2003 for specific examples).

In order for social marketing campaigns to be successful, they must focus both on a product and on a specific target audience. The effectiveness of a social marketing message rests on it being tailored to the values and beliefs of the specific audience (Andreasen 2004; Zimmerman 1997). For example, the national Men Can Stop Rape organization developed a social marketing poster campaign for young men that played on a common masculine trait, strength. Their campaign's catch phrase was "my strength is not for hurting..." followed by behavioral incentives such as "so when she said 'no,' I said 'ok'" (Men Can Stop Rape 2003). Finally, effective campaign designs involve conducting research at each step in the development process from understanding the initial culture of the target audience to getting feedback on initial messages and materials to evaluating outcomes of the end campaign itself.

PROJECT SUMMARY

We introduced the social marketing poster project, worth 24 percent of students' grades, during the first week of the course. Students received a detailed outline of each of the five project components. During the third week, students formed small groups after a lecture on applied research that incorporated the tenets of social marketing (e.g., the four Ps and Robinson's [1998] "Seven Doors" approach) and briefly introduced students to types of intimate violence. As suggested by Meyers (1997), groups consisted of three to four students sharing the same topical interest (e.g., students wanting to focus on child neglect were grouped together). In all, 13 groups focusing on nine different topics relating to intimate violence including physical abuse, stalking, cyber stalking, child abuse, rape, neglect, marital abuse, emotional violence, and sibling abuse were formed.

We asked each group to narrowly define their topic and to identify the target population that they wanted to reach. For instance, different groups chose college students, new parents, or married couples as their target populations. Identifying a specific population assisted students in the research process providing parameters (based on topic and sample) for choosing the one unique peer-reviewed article each group member needed to collect. Each group member typed a review of the selected article and submitted it to the instructor as well as to all group members at the end of the fifth week. After they had discussed their individual research as a group, we asked students to translate the research into message-driven posters promoting awareness of intimate violence in honor of Domestic Violence Awareness Month (October). During this process, groups brainstormed possible research-based slogans, messages, and/or statistics they wanted their target audience to learn. Each group member then developed a poster mock-up displaying a unique message from their group's list. We provided semi-structured class time to groups throughout the project development period. To ensure groups used class time constructively, we required them to complete goal and task outlines which one of us reviewed before the end of class.

To assess the validity of the message and poster design, we required students to conduct pre-testing. Using the survey provided by the professor, each member sought feedback on their poster design and message from at least four members of their target population during the ninth week of class. The survey asked respondents to rate the appeal of the poster, the clarity of the mes-

sage, and whether the message would catch on amongst their peers, as well as for general suggestions they had about the poster. Based on the feedback received during pretesting, the group as a whole chose the most appealing poster to be revised and presented to the class. For example, one group developed a poster targeting romantic couples using the slogan, "Violence is universal, but it doesn't have to be. Abuse is never normal." The finished poster included pictures of opposite-sex and same-sex couples of various ages and ethnicities with the copy, "Almost 10% of murder victims in 2001 were killed by their spouse or intimate partner. 78% of these victims were female." The poster also included the phone number for the National Domestic Violence Crisis Line.

The final step in the project was the class presentation which occurred at the end of the tenth week. Group presentations often concentrated on defining the area of intimate violence, sharing prevalence statistics, providing risk factors, outlining possible outcomes of experiencing violence, and ended with the poster reveal. Following Meyers' (1997) suggestions that students be assessed at both individual and group levels, we graded students individually on article review papers, initial poster development, pretest poster feedback surveys, and project reflection papers. We then graded the group on their poster revisions and class presentation.

PROJECT EVALUATION RESULTS

We required each group member to reflect on the project by writing a three to four page paper forming the basis of this qualitative project evaluation.[1] Although 43 students were enrolled in the Introduction to Sociology course, only 32 completed the paper. Findings are based on 29 students who agreed to participate in the evaluation

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[1] We received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board prior to analyzing student reflection papers.

and turned in complete papers.[2] Of these, 19 were females and 10 were males. Because this course qualified as a General Education elective, students represented a variety of majors and class standings. At least two members of each group were included in the analysis except in one case.[3]

Target Population
We first asked students to *discuss why they chose the target population and what they hoped the target population would take away from being exposed to the poster*. One female student whose group focused on individuals from different social economic statuses reported the following rationale:

> We thought that by looking at people from different statuses in society we could get an insight into the causes of child abuse. We found that this area had been quite thoroughly studied, although different reports would conclude different things. This inconsistency of conclusions led us to believe that child abuse was prominent in every social class.

Several students began the project with the assumption that abuse only occurred in families of lower socioeconomic status (SES). As this group learned through research, SES may be a risk factor, but abuse is prevalent across all income levels. In terms of poster goals, most students reported that they hoped to increase aware-

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[2] The average grade for the social marketing project across all five components was a C. Participants received grades ranging from A to F on their papers, with close to 80 percent of students with completed papers receiving an A or B. Eight of the eleven students not writing a paper completed at least three of the other four components, with half completing all components except the reflection paper. Therefore, half of the 11 with missing papers received a passing final grade in the course, with the other half failing due to a semester-long pattern of not attending class or completing assigned work.

[3] The group represented by one member had three members in total. One member did not turn in the paper and one did not answer all questions, leaving only one member eligible for analysis.

ness about the topic of intimate violence being studied among their chosen target population (n=25).

Prior Knowledge

Next we asked students to reflect on *their prior knowledge* of the topic they chose and *how their understanding changed* after completing this project. About half the students reported that they had little to no general prior knowledge of intimate violence (n=15), with the majority of students reporting they were unaware of how common domestic violence actually was (n=25). One female student wrote:

> The prior knowledge I had on this topic was very general. I knew the basic facts that everyone knows about child neglect, but not much more. My research alarmed me the most when reading about the long term affects on neglected children, primarily in their adult relationships.

As this statement suggests, many students self-reported an increased knowledge of intimate violence at the conclusion of the project (n=20). Even students who had prior knowledge reported experiencing a more informed understanding of intimate violence. A male international student wrote:

> I had a good deal of knowledge about marital violence prior to this project, but after working on the project, the horizon of my knowledge broadened. I had in mind that marital violence occurs only in underdeveloped countries.... But after going through a journal on spousal violence, I realized that this issue has affected a huge number of women in the developed world too.

In addition to prior knowledge, almost 28 percent of students (n = 8: 6 females and 2 males) self-reported various levels of personal experience of intimate violence. For instance, one female student reflected the following on her own experience:

> I know a great deal about emotional abuse and how it affects individuals. I have experienced

it first-hand and I have gone through counseling for it. Though I have not had any emotional abuse inflicted on me in at least 8 months, there is not a day that goes by that I don't think about it.

Because we anticipated that some students would have been directly affected by intimate violence, we repeatedly encouraged students to talk with us about any difficulties they experienced with the project and we were prepared to offer an alternative assignment if necessary. We also gave all students a list of available campus and community resources providing professional assistance.

Group Process

We then asked students to comment on *the process their group followed in approaching the project*. Group members reported they tried to make the most of class time (n=15), divided tasks for individual responsibility (n=27), and occasionally met outside of class to put their final project together during "crunch time" (n=7). One male student wrote the following:

> For our presentation, we all had separate jobs to do. Mine was to do an interview with an SRS worker. X's job was to bring the poster and find quotes about physical abuse. Y's job was to gather background information and make the overheads. In the end, our group came together very well and our project turned out great.

We were not surprised that so many groups divided their tasks, given the individual nature of the early parts of this assignment and the work-life challenges many of our students faced. On the other hand, we were surprised that few groups utilized the group discussion pages developed for them on Blackboard (n=3). A few group members did report relying on email (n=5) or phone calls (n=5) to stay in contact with one another.

In line with project goals, several students reflected on the collaborative learning process in their papers (n=15). For instance,

one female student reported:

> ...we all brought facts from our own findings to the table and we all shared in the learning.... We had a great time sharing with each other. The reward came to me when the posters were complete and presented within the group to see what we all gained and wanted to share with an audience. We had a strong devotion to the topic, and were able to get into it and make it our own.

As this statement illustrates, the project encouraged active learning by sharing findings and building on one another's ideas. As can be expected, not all groups experienced such a smooth working environment. Some reported difficulties related to lack of consistent communication (n=4) and persistent group member absenteeism (n=5). Nonetheless, members of these groups reported that they were able to effectively complete their projects and presentations in the end.

Application of Course Concepts
In order to demonstrate knowledge of sociological concepts, we asked students *to apply three concepts from the course* that were either helpful in *developing their poster* or *were demonstrated through the process of doing the social marketing campaign*. Students applied a wide variety of concepts in their papers. Some students referenced the sociological imagination (n=5). For instance:

> I think the sociological perspective is a key concept in trying to understand emotional abuse. The sociological perspective is understanding human behavior by placing it within its broader social context. The damage that is done by emotional abuse not only affects the victim, it also affects anyone the victim associates with.

Similarly, other students made macro-level connections between intimate violence and various social locations, such as socioeconomic status and gender (n=18). One male student reflected:

> Throughout history, women have been seen as

a minority and therefore, with fewer rights than that of men. With fewer rights came more injustices, similar to that of the in and out groups. Women were seen as inferior and men treated them as mere property, and therefore took every liberty that they desired with the women.

Like this student's perception, most groups focusing on marital violence, rape, or stalking acknowledged that women were at higher risk of being victims of these forms of intimate violence (n=8). A few male students also pointed out that women can be physically violent or stalk their ex-boyfriends and there is less social discourse or support in these instances (n=2). However, no groups specifically targeted women's violence against men.

Another area students focused on was aspects of the research process (n=15). One student wrote:

> During the pre-testing process, each participant was given the poster and a clean survey sheet to ensure that he or she would not be influenced by the responses of other participants.

In addition, students discussed the research model, the process of random sampling, applied versus basic research, and the role of values in the research process.

Given the nature of intimate violence, we were not surprised that many students focused on the family as a "primary group" (n=6) responsible for "socializing" members into society (n=15). One male student stated, "If a child grows up thinking abuse is a normal part of life, then they will do the same thing that they saw when they grow up." As illustrated in this statement, students often discussed the intergenerational transmission of violence (n=10), a natural extension of social modeling theories of socialization.

Student Perceptions
Finally, we asked students to reflect on their overall impressions of the project. In response to the question "*What did you per-*

sonally like about the project?" the majority of students reported a positive reaction (n=23). A few students reported being initially skeptical, but self-reported a shift in their thinking over the semester (n=5). For instance, one female student replied:

> To be honest, I thought that having our biggest sociology assignment be a poster was weird because after all, this is sociology and not marketing. However, through doing the assignment, I feel that I got to act like a sociologist and take my knowledge of how society is in certain aspects and apply it.

Like the previous student, most seemed to appreciate the applied nature of the project (n=16):

> I really enjoyed this project. I do not often get the opportunity to apply what I learn in class, so I liked the fact that we had that chance to bring our knowledge outside of class....It would also have been neat to have a more full-blown project, like to have an actual advertising campaign to distribute posters and ads throughout the city and have a way to monitor whether we were having an impact on the community.

A few others also expressed the desire to take the project a step further by displaying posters around campus or in the community (n=3) while acknowledging the added work that might entail.

We also asked students to express struggles they experienced and/or ways to change the project. Reflections in this area did not seem to converge on a specific theme. For some students, their primary struggle was choosing a peer reviewed research article (n=7). For instance, one student responded:

> In researching emotional abuse, I found the most difficult aspect was trying to find a peer-reviewed journal. I literally spent 5 hours trying to find something on the topic that had "meat." I have never done research before, so I really didn't have a clue as to what I was looking for.

Similarly, other students specifically re-

ported little or no previous experience with research prior to this assignment, which is not surprising since it was a 100-level course. A related issue a few students encountered was lack of research in their area of interest (n=4); such was the case for sibling violence. Regardless of whether students were unclear about how to distinguish "peer reviewed" from non-peer reviewed research or whether they had difficulty finding the most effective search terms, they were all eventually able to find scholarly research with the assistance of the instructor, the teaching assistant, or other group members.

A minority of students mentioned that they would change the number of writing assignments (n=3), but most reported that they would not change the project at all (n=15) or did not comment on any specific changes (n=5). A small number of students mentioned a preference for making the project either all individual work or all group work. For instance, one female student wrote the following:

> I don't like group projects. I'd rather work on my own because it is easier for me. I am an independent person and I really dislike relying on others to help me do anything. I liked the fact that the project was broken down into small sections so it was feasible for us to complete in a decent amount of time.

Overall, the desire for a shift to all individual work was reflected by very few students (n = 5) and was countered by a larger number of students who were happy with their group's interaction (n=15).

DISCUSSION

In order to facilitate student understanding of sociological concepts and the practical uses of sociology, we required students in an Introduction to Sociology course to develop a social marketing campaign. The structure of the project required students to think sociologically by utilizing major course concepts, such as the sociological perspective, group dynamics, and the re-

search model, to market social ideas about intimate violence (e.g., students learned about group process through the text and lecture, and also gained first-hand experience). The qualitative evaluation revealed participation in the project increased students' self-reported awareness of intimate violence, and the level of their application of course concepts indicated they began to think more sociologically. In addition, the project allowed introductory students to link the application of sociological concepts to other fields such as marketing and health promotion.

As previous research suggests, providing task structure and multiple levels of student evaluation were important factors in creating an effective learning environment (Meyers 1997). Student evaluations suggested active learning occurred in the majority of groups as students shared research findings, built off each other's ideas, revised their approaches as necessary, and presented their posters to the class. Building multiple levels of evaluation into the project encouraged individual students to take responsibility for the group project. As the student reflection papers suggested, most students appreciated receiving both individual and group grades overall.

This evaluation study has a number of limitations. Many of the participants were first-time or returning students. Since this was their first exposure to a college-level group or research project, they had more difficulty with basic research tasks, such as finding a peer reviewed research article, than more advanced students might have had. Thus they required more time than we initially anticipated to gain necessary library skills. Therefore, we suggest either building more specific library training time into the course or providing students with a list of pre-approved articles from which to choose.

Another limitation is the lack of a "control" class with which to compare actual knowledge attainment. Therefore, the qualitative results have to be taken at face value, limiting generalizations. Naturally, this evaluation would have been stronger if it was possible to triangulate the qualitative results with another data source such as a pre- and post-test. However, the goal of qualitative evaluation is to provide readers enough information to assess the transferability of the findings to other contexts. We acknowledge that student reflection papers were likely subject to issues of social desirability in their responses, especially regarding critiques of the project. We did attempt to minimize social desirability effects by waiting to recruit students for the evaluation study of their papers until after they had received final grades for the project.

Nonetheless, from our perspective, the social marketing project was useful in assisting introductory students to obtain several critical thinking skills (Geertsen 2003; Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop 2003) important to developing a sociological perspective. We required students to interpret research through article reviews, synthesize information across studies in their groups, explain their logic for marketing a particular message through class presentations, and apply course concepts throughout the entire process (Geertsen 2003). The basic premise for this project could be easily adapted to other sociology classes including medical sociology, gender, violence, and social problems. It could also be expanded into a service-learning project by partnering with a local agency or campus health or student service department. As Scheel (2002) asserts, including such projects across the curriculum can help to illuminate course concepts and stimulate student interest in pursuing other avenues of sociological research.

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