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Using Misperceptions of Masculinity among Young Fathers to Improve Health Behavior

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Date of publication: October 21st, 2013

Edition period: October 2013-February 2014

To cite this article: Kellom, G.E., & Hammel, D. (2013). Using Misperceptions of Masculinity among Young Fathers to Improve Health Behavior. *Masculinities and Social Change*, 2(3), 266-289. doi: 10.447/MCS.2013.35

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.447/MCS.2013.35>

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Using Misperceptions of Masculinity among Young Fathers to Improve Health Behavior

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Abstract

Building upon previous research on social norms theory and masculinity theory, this article is an attempt to apply this research to an under-represented cohort of student fathers. The finding of a misperception of masculinity is consistent with a larger study of college men across years in school and at seven different colleges and universities. The original research can be found in the monograph entitled *Forging the Male Spirit*, edited by [Merle Longwood et al.](#) in 2012 with a brief synopsis of the Gender Role Conflict Survey created by James O'Neil. This article explains the opportunity this misperception presents to use the finding to create positive change in behavior in a cohort of young fathers that were studied. These student fathers are part of a larger group of participants in a grant funded program through the Minnesota Department of Health through the Office of Adolescent Health. The exciting implication of this finding is that the misperception of masculinity can be used to improve the health seeking behavior of student fathers for themselves and for their children.

Keywords: masculinity, social norms, health

Utilizando Interpretaciones Erróneas de la Masculinidad entre Padres Jóvenes para Mejorar los Hábitos de Salud

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Resumen

Basándose en investigaciones previas sobre las normas sociales y la teoría de la masculinidad, este artículo es un intento de aplicar este cuerpo de investigaciones en una cohorte no representativa de padres estudiantes. El resultado sobre una interpretación errónea de la masculinidad está en la línea de una larga tradición de investigaciones sobre hombres universitarios en la escuela y en siete diferentes universidades. La investigación original se puede encontrar en el monográfico llamado *Forging the Male Spirit*, editado por Merle Longwood et al. en 2012, incluido dentro de un breve resumen de la Encuesta sobre el Conflicto de Roles de Géneros creado por James O'Neil. Este artículo explica la oportunidad que esta interpretación errónea presenta para crear un cambio positivo en el comportamiento de la cohorte de padres jóvenes que fueron estudiados. Los padres estudiantes son parte de un equipo grande de participantes en un programa financiado por el Departamento de Salud de Minnesota a través de la Oficina de Salud Adolescente. La implicación de este resultado es que esta interpretación errónea de la masculinidad puede ser utilizada para mejorar la atención sanitaria en los hábitos de salud de los padres estudiantes y también de sus hijos/as.

Palabras clave: masculinidad, normas sociales, salud



This article describes recent research using social norms/masculinity theory administered to an under-represented and often over-looked college population of student fathers at several schools in Southeast Minnesota. The focus is on a relatively small cohort of young fathers in the Young Student Parent Support Initiative (YSPSI) of Winona State University (WSU) but the findings are significant for two important reasons. First, the results are consistent with a larger study of college men across several years in school and at seven different colleges and universities. Secondly, the results and the methodology used in the research provide an opportunity to expand the use of these findings to create positive change in health of this group of young fathers and positive change in the health of their children.

We will explain the young fathers program, how it was created and became Dedicated Academic Dads (DADs) at WSU and merged into the student parent program and student parent center of Southeast Minnesota. It is a part of a larger effort in Minnesota to create student parent centers state-wide; funded by the Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) through the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH).

We will also do a brief synopsis of the Gender Role Conflict Survey created by James O'Neil which has been proven to show positive correlations between high scores on the survey and poor health of men. We have combined the O'Neil survey with social norms theory to create a social norms masculinity survey measuring the misperceptions of masculinity among participants. This survey has been administered to a large number of college men and the results published in a monograph entitled *Forging the Male Spirit*, edited by Merle Longwood et al. in 2012. This article updates that research by applying it to the cohort of young fathers in 2013 showing that the findings with this group are consistent with other findings with male college students.

The exciting implication of these findings is that they can be used to improve the health of student fathers and through their role as care-givers to their children-the health of their sons and daughters. The National Social Norms Institute (NSNI) shows that this approach continues to be used successfully to decrease risk behaviors and increase protective and pro-social behaviors in many colleges, universities, schools and communities, nationally and internationally. The mission of the institute has expanded to

include research, evaluation, and dissemination of information on the social norms approach to the field (NSNI, 2013).

Social norms theory has been successfully applied to health problems such as binge drinking. Through small group interventions and larger scale social norms advertising campaigns, it is reported to have a positive impact on the reduction of student alcohol abuse. We see the opportunity here to use masculinity survey data collected on this cohort to change the health behaviors of college student fathers to encourage more use of preventative health services and health care services for themselves and their children.

A recent Minnesota Public Radio story on Major General Dana Pittard, who has served as the commander of Fort Bliss military base, illustrates the potential for this work¹. Major General Pittard, who has experienced some mental health issues of his own, was particularly sensitive to the rate of suicides in the military (doubling in 2004) and the link to depression. He looked at the data from his own base and noticed that the rate of suicide among soldiers who had sought counseling for symptoms of depression was lower. He further found that the “macho culture” of the military was an inhibitor to soldier’s willingness to seek counseling. He initiated a program to address the appeal to traditional masculinity as a barrier for seeking help. Soldiers who were interviewed said their drill sergeant told them it was a sign of weakness to go to counseling and to “man-up” if they were experiencing thoughts of depression or suicide.

Major General Pittard mounted a campaign to discourage that type of tough guy talk related to mental health symptoms. The rate of seeking counseling for depression increased and the number of suicides decreased for the last three years in a row. The numbers were small (decreased from 12-5) but the results significant. We see an opportunity to pilot an approach with student fathers similar to the approach at Fort Bliss to have a similarly positive impact on their willingness to seek health care services.

The Story of Dedicated Academic Dads

The Winona State University DADs program began in 2010 when students in our TRiO Student Support Services grant for first generation, low income students began signing up for services. The first three students who appeared in my office to join the program were young student fathers.

Having worked with college men for most of my career and having discovered that men's groups work well to engage college men, I invited the students to meet with me once a week for lunch. The lunches were successful once an atmosphere of trust was established and deep sharing began to occur on a wide range of issues. The original group of three quickly grew to over a dozen with no signs of diminishing.

At this point the MDH sent out a request for proposals, inviting colleges and universities in MN to apply for funds to start student parent centers. I asked the young fathers if they wanted to get some grant writing experience and submit an application. With about twenty days to complete the task, the young fathers pitched in to complete the application with a great sense of accomplishment and teamwork. For the team-building alone this would have been a successful experience but the application was accepted to found a student parent center for both student fathers and mothers in SE MN. The WSU Young Student Parent Support Initiative was born.

The YSPSI is located on three campuses: Winona State University in Winona, MN (WSUW) with programs in the student center as well as the Child Care Center, Southeast MN Technical College in Winona (SE Tech), Winona State University in Rochester (WSUR) and Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) in Rochester where programming happens in the student cafeteria and adjacent meeting rooms.

The target population for recruitment is 18-25 year old college student parents but all student parents are welcome. There is a special outreach initiative to high school teen parents who are involved in the Area Learning Centers (ALC) from the local area. Student task force members and staff conduct information sessions with them on how to prepare for college. The students are invited to campus to interact with college parents and experience college life. The heart of the program is the personal relationships created with staff members and student task force members through regular programs and activities. A close alliance with the Child Care Center at Winona State creates additional activities to serve student parents in Winona who have their children enrolled in child care.

Recruitment and retention begins with invitations sent to the list of student parents enrolled in the institutions to join luncheons designed around fathers and mothers issues. Gift cards of \$25 are used as incentives for sign up, evaluation and doing research surveys but a personal invitation

from a current group participant is often the most effective recruitment and retention strategy. A Facebook link, persistent email, posters, and flyers also help to attract new members and to keep them informed of activities. Student parents are interviewed about their need for resources and services and they are referred to campus resources and local agencies that can assist them in their parenting practices.

The grant aims to insure pregnant and parenting students are able to accomplish their higher education and post-secondary education goals and maintain positive health and well-being for themselves and their children.

The heart of the program is hosting regular weekly lunches and workshops located on our three campuses in Winona and Rochester with dinners in the Child Care Center once a month. We have discovered that having separate lunches for those interested in father's issues and mother's issues works well. We do not limit who attends the lunches but having begun as a dads' group, efforts have been made to preserve a forum for those discussions and relationships to grow among young fathers. A curriculum created by the Minnesota Fathers and Families Network that systematically addresses issues student fathers face guides the content of the luncheon meetings². Addressing financial management and tax form preparation in March and April is one example of a consistently successful program.

The focus on fathers in the YSPSI program has been so popular that it has been covered in local TV and newspaper stories. This has led to invitations to participate in several webinars with Academic Impressions and Magna Publications on working with student fathers as well as two national conference presentations for the American Men's Studies Association (AMSA), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and a state wide presentation at the Minnesota State College and University System Diversity Conference (See [Appendix](#) for the aforementioned organizations, conferences, and publications).

We have also developed some multi-media resources for working with student fathers such as a PowerPoint entitled *Young Student-Parent Support Initiative: A Professional's Guide to Effectively Working with Student Fathers*, an introductory video on the Young Student Parent Initiative and Student Task Force featuring photos of students on the task force and a training video entitled *Fatherhood, in the Heat of the Moment* designed to

offer suggestions for those working with student fathers and including interviews with student fathers to illustrate successful practices.³

Student-faculty research

To continue to engage this group of at-risk students, I invited the DADs to participate in the social norms masculinity research project we had been doing with colleges across the country previously funded by the Lilly Endowment. It seemed that doing research on this focused group of young fathers had the potential to not only discover if the findings from college men in different schools and age groups across the country would be consistent, but also provide the opportunity to impact their behavior. We were particularly interested to see if we could improve their behavior in terms of using preventative services as well as going to the doctor.

My own research has focused on engaging college men in work for the common good. It is basically taking gender theory from a male perspective (men's studies) and applying that theory in practice. I edited *Designing Effective Programs and Services for College Men*, 2004 and *Engaging College Men*, 2010. The last book was funded by the Lilly Endowment and offered fourteen colleges and universities the opportunity to run pilot programs to determine the best practices for engaging college men in work for the common good. The latest social norms research published is in *Forging the Male Spirit* by Merle Longwood, 2012.

We are engaging young fathers not only in small groups (see the work of Merle Longwood on the success of these groups) but engaging them in student-faculty research and career development. This is another way to retain and graduate the group of at risk students but also prepare them for further study in graduate school. Being involved in student-faculty research enhances students' learning as well as gives them an opportunity to contribute to the men's studies field. The Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) is committed to "inclusivity and diversity" and they aim to increase and encourage participation of students that have been traditionally underrepresented in undergraduate research (See [Appendix](#)).

This process worked well with Alvin Thomas, an exchange student from Morehouse College who worked with me at Saint John's on a research project interviewing Tibetan Monks in Dharamsala, India on why they

chose to become monks. Our Lilly project at Saint John's was to take a cohort of 15 college students on a service/research trip to India where they interacted with monks from the Dalai Lama's monastery through the research project but also had the benefit of reflection on their own vocational choices. Alvin played a major role in the data collection, analysis and preparing the interviews and findings for publication in the *Journal of Qualitative Research*⁴. He completed a Ph.D. in the spring of 2013 at the University of Michigan and is now a professional in the field.

Method

The core of my research has been to explore how a clearer understanding of men and masculinity can be used to improve the engagement of college men in programs and services that will benefit them and society. The tool we use to understand how college men identify with traditional masculinity is the survey developed by James O'Neil (1986) to measure the stresses of attempting to live up to traditional masculine gender roles. His Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) has been administered to a broad base of men of all ages and backgrounds over more than a decade and provided a rich data pool to compare with our population of college men. Over 230 studies and twenty-five years of research have provided substantial support for the study of gender role conflict.⁵ The wide use of the survey, as well as the many studies to support the validity of the findings, was attractive as we sought to use a well-respected tool to help us understand our small population of college-age men.

The GRCS is a survey of thirty-seven questions, divided into four subscales or psychological domains. The first domain, entitled Success, Power, and Competition (SPC), describes personal attitudes about success pursued through power and competition. The second domain, entitled Restrictive Emotionality (RE), describes difficulties and fears about expressing one's feelings and the problem of finding words to express basic emotions. The third domain, entitled Restrictive Affectionate Behavior between Men (RABBM), describes limited ways to express basic emotions. The fourth domain, entitled Conflict between Work and Family Relations (CBWFR), describes difficulties in balancing work, school, and family

relations, resulting in health problems, overwork, stress, and a lack of leisure and relaxation.

The overall results of the studies reviewed indicate that high scores on the GRCS are significantly correlated with numerous psychological problems for men. High scores are related to depression, low self-esteem, and stress. In the intrapersonal context, high scores on the GRCS have been associated with men's depression (RE subscale), male college students' lack of well-being, shame and alexithymia drive for muscularity and high-risk health behaviors, helplessness, self-destructiveness, and suicide probability (RE subscale). In addition to the intrapersonal context, in an interpersonal context, high scores on the GRCS have been related to dysfunctional patterns in interpersonal relationships, attachment problems, sexual harassment, rape myth acceptance, and hostile attitudes toward women⁶.

Taken together, the four domains on the GRCS describe traditional masculinity. We felt comfortable that it would help us identify where college men would rank themselves in terms of traditional masculinity.

In a comprehensive article by Will Courtenay (1998) men's socialization is discussed to provide an understanding as to why college men have developed unhealthy lifestyles. Courtenay states, "The importance of gender-specific interventions cannot be overstated."

My own personal contribution to this field is that college men consistently say they do not endorse this traditional view of what it is to be a man but think that their friends all do. This is social norms theory and a misperception of masculinity. I try to get fathers interested in this research on themselves and use it as another way to recruit them into the program and into research and publication activity. This approach came from attending several social norms conferences and some consultation with Alan Berkowitz, a researcher and counseling psychologist, who urged us to research social norms masculinity⁷.

Social norms research started at Hobart and William Smith Colleges and focused in the early years on the perceptions and misperceptions that students had about the norms for drinking alcohol. A persistent and consistent misperception was discovered among college students about how much drinking was taking place on a campus. The number and amount that a student's peers were drinking was routinely overestimated, leading to

increased drinking behavior by the student, reinforced by the belief that “everyone was drinking.” Berkowitz charged us to see if there was a similar pattern with regard to masculinity and its resulting behaviors.

We devised the initial Social Norms Masculinity Survey (SNMS) by simply administering the O’Neil survey twice to participants, instructing them to first answer the questions for themselves and then a second time for the typical male college student. We wanted to know to what extent Saint John’s students resembled national samples of college men on the GRCS in the O’Neil database. We also wanted to know to what extent Saint John’s University students displayed differences in the way they answered the survey for themselves and for the typical SJU student. We were optimistic that sharing the results of the survey with students in presentations or groups discussions could impact SJU students and their behavior related to what they perceived to be the social norms of masculinity on campus.

We also added a few more questions on social norms masculinity and spirituality to the SNMS devised to measure whether men were interested in talking about deeper personal matters such as spirituality and particularly if they were interested in joining men’s groups or talking about such matters during one-on-one settings. The added questions were: “How important is spirituality to you and how interested would you say the typical college man is?” “How willing are you to share this interest and how interested is the typical college male?” “How willing are you to discuss this interest in some kind of group and how interested is the typical man?” “How interested are you in one-on-one interaction and how interested is the typical college man?”

There was another version of these questions administered to my college fraternity. The questions were changed slightly to determine how interested they would be in participating in small groups within the fraternity organized around the theme of “brotherhood.” What we attempted to measure was whether the responses of the individual members to questions regarding the importance of brotherhood and meeting in small groups would differ significantly from the responses they thought their brothers would give to these questions. The pattern of consistent misperceptions of masculinity held.

We began piloting this SNMS survey several years ago with small groups on the campuses of Morehouse College, the University of the West

Indies, and Saint John's University. We sought to discover whether there was a significant pattern of misperception with regard to sharing personal matters and masculinity. The preliminary findings indicated that, indeed, there was a misperception on both sharing personal matters and of masculinity. Where college men were ranking themselves as less committed to traditional masculinity than they thought their friends were. They also ranked themselves as more interested in sharing personal matters than they thought their friends were.

In 2010, we administered the SNMS survey to a group of six colleges in the Lilly Endowment project to engage college men. By expanding the study to other campuses, we saw that the patterns observed on the first three campuses were similar to those on other six campuses.

In 2012, we began to administer the survey to the DADs to simply compare and see if the results from our small cohort of student fathers would be consistent with the results from several years of data with Saint John's students and with the national sample of colleges.

Results

We administered the SNMS survey to 60% of the student fathers enrolled in the WSU YSPSI program. Males make up 18% of the 128 participants in the Winona YSPSI program. This is typical of the other student parent centers as there are a total of ten student parent centers funded by the MDH in Minnesota and the average male participation in those programs is 18%.

The Winona YSPSI has a lower than average participation of racially diverse students (15%) at the other student parent centers which is representative of the population in southeastern MN. State-wide, 43% of YSPSI participants are of a minority race (18% Black and African American, 11% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 6% Hispanic, 6% two or more races, 5% Asian, 4% other, 57% white). WSU statistics are, however, similar to the statistics in MN serving nontraditional students (pregnant/parenting, part-time older, and both male and female).

The age of WSU participants range from 18 to 35 years old with 33% of DADs between 18-24 years old. In Winona, 50% of the student dads are single, 15% are in a relationship or partnered, 30% are married and 0% are divorced or separated. In Minnesota, 42% of the YSPSI participants are

single, 24% are in a relationship or partnered, 25% are married and 9% divorced or separated.

Economically, the WSU statistics differ in that 96% of WSU DADs are employed either full-time or part-time and statewide only 78% of households have one or more employed adults and 22% have no employed adults in their households. Food security is an issue for students at WSU and statewide with 25% of DADs worried that they would run out of food and 42% of student participants in MN worried they would not have the resources to purchase food before they run out. Most of our students are facing financial difficulties and about 40% are on Medical Assistance.

Fathers' involvement in their children's health is a concern. It is significant that 42% of the WSU's young fathers did not have a primary care physician for their children or did not know if there was one. Also 42% did not have their children's immunizations up to date or did not know if they were up to date⁸.

What the demographics tell us, therefore, is that young fathers (and student parents in general at WSU and statewide) are financially stressed, have little time, and may have difficulty balancing time between family, work and school. Child care remains a need, as well as finding the time to actively participate in school activities. Their involvement in our program has provided them with additional knowledge regarding parenting, child development, self-care, enhancing their own health and that of their children; 80% found the student parent support groups extremely useful and 97% agree or strongly agree that the program has increased their sense of belonging to the school.

Of the thirty-seven questions on the GRCS, ten make up the Restricted Emotionality (RE) subscale. Two sample questions from the subscale are: "Strong emotions are hard for me to understand" and "I have difficulty expressing my tender feelings." Students were asked to score their answers to all thirty-seven questions on the GRCS on a scale of 1 to 60, with agreement with the statement scoring the highest. They were instructed to answer the question for themselves and then the way they thought their peers would answer it.

What we observed on the RE scale (and on every scale for every year that the survey was administered) was a significant difference between the responses of the college men when they answered the survey for themselves

and when they answered the survey for the typical male on campus. While there were slight variations in the strength of the responses each year, a consistent and statistically significant gap existed each year between the responses that students gave for themselves and those they gave for each other. This is often described as “I am willing to share my emotions but my friends sure are not.” (See [Figure 1](#) – a comparison of results at SJU and other colleges).

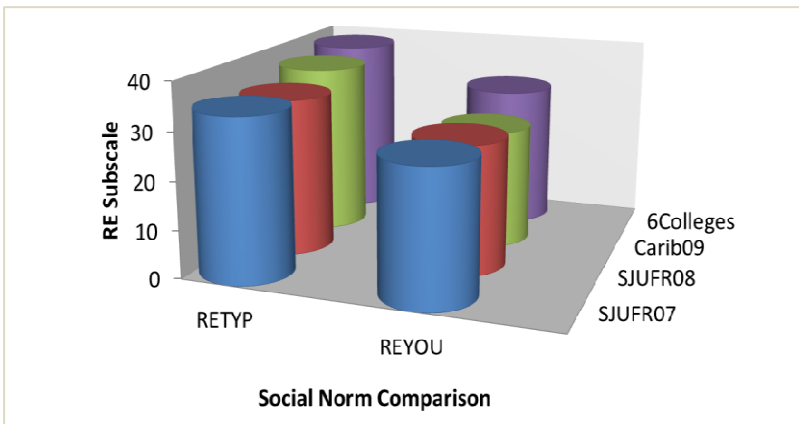


Figure 1. Restricted Emotionality- SJU and 6 Colleges

At first, we thought this might just be a phenomenon among first-year students and that sampling sophomores or seniors would show a gradual amelioration in the gaps, but we didn’t find that. Seniors scored themselves lower than their peers on the RE scale in 2009, but their scores were almost identical to the first-year students and they still ranked their peers in the mid-30s on the scale, showing little or no change. Due to space limitations in this article, we will discuss only the findings on the RE and RABBM scales although the results on the other two scales show the same misperception of masculinity.

On the Restricted Affectionate Behavior between Men subscale (RABBM), the pattern was the same. Eight of the thirty-seven questions make up this subscale and two of the questions were: “Hugging other men

is difficult for me,” and “Affection with other men makes me tense.” Again, students consistently ranked their agreement with these statements lower than they thought other men would answer.

Upon discussion of these findings with the students, one reaction that was fascinating was the process that the Caribbean men went through. As international students, they had the advantage of looking at their behavior and that of their peers in two cultural contexts. They recognized a significant difference between their behavior on campus and when they went home. In Trinidad or the Bahamas, they noted their extreme reluctance to express affection with other men, but when they returned to campus the same anxiety was not there, and there was a supportive environment to talk about it in class, in the men’s center, or in the dorms. The misperception of the norm thus became obvious to them and, through discussions and being in men’s groups with each other, they realized that sharing hugs and expressions of love and respect were welcomed and appreciated. Senior scores, by the way, were almost identical again to those cited above (30 for typical and 25 for self).

The schools included in this survey were Augustana College, Hope College, Luther College, Wabash College, Wagner College, and the University of Portland. While the overall scores of the schools on the RE scale are higher than those for Saint John’s University, the gap between the scores given by the students to themselves are still lower (and by about the same amount) than the scores they gave to typical men on their campuses. This again indicates a misperceived norm. The pattern is similar on the RABBM scale (and the other two scales as well), with students scoring themselves lower across the board than their peers (See [Figure 2](#)).

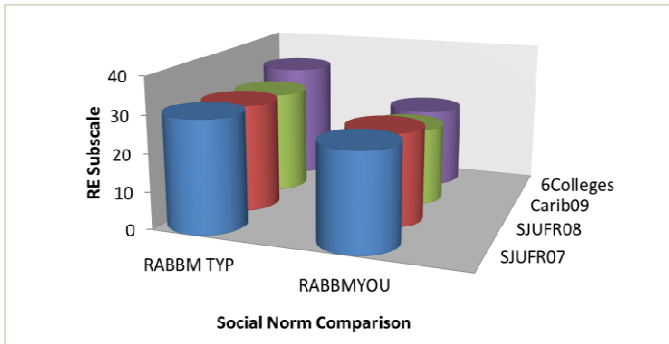


Figure 2. Restricted affectionate behavior between men

An opportunity also arose to sample students and alumni from my college fraternity, Delta Tau Delta, with the O’Neil masculinity social norms survey. The fraternity was struggling with how to organize its group formation activities. It is fascinating to me that the same pattern emerged from the fraternity brothers as we were seeing on our campus and other campuses. We used these results in conversations with actives and alumni to make creative change for a more cohesive brotherhood. We also administered the social norms spirituality survey to the fraternity and that pattern was also the same as that for other college men of every other group surveyed (See [Figure 3](#) which shows the results of the college men and fraternity men combined).

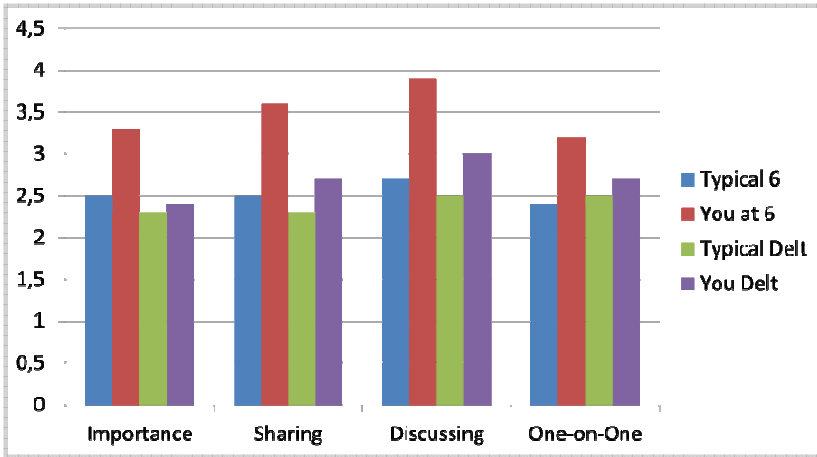


Figure 3. Social Norms Sharing Personal Matters. Four Question Survey of 6 Colleges and Delta Tau Delta Fraternity

As one can see the pattern of misperception holds. On every question from every group, there was a significant misperception, and in each case, the young men answering the survey rated themselves significantly higher in interest than the typical college men they knew. The greatest scores for those being surveyed and the greatest difference between “You” and “Typical” were related to the question of sharing and discussing spirituality.

Results of student fathers are also consistent with these findings. On every scale of the masculinity social norms scales the misperception of masculinity (or perception of gender role conflict) was greater for the typical dad than it was for the dad taking the survey. On the RE scale the young fathers thought that other dads would be higher than they were in the conflict they experience with feeling restricted about their emotions. Discussion of the findings with young fathers in our luncheon setting led to further agreement with those taking the survey. One father said “I thought I was probably unusual because it was not that important for me to show that I was a real man... it surprises me that other men feel the same as I do.” (See [Figure 4](#) on the RE scale showing the dads survey data compared to some of the groups from the surveys above).

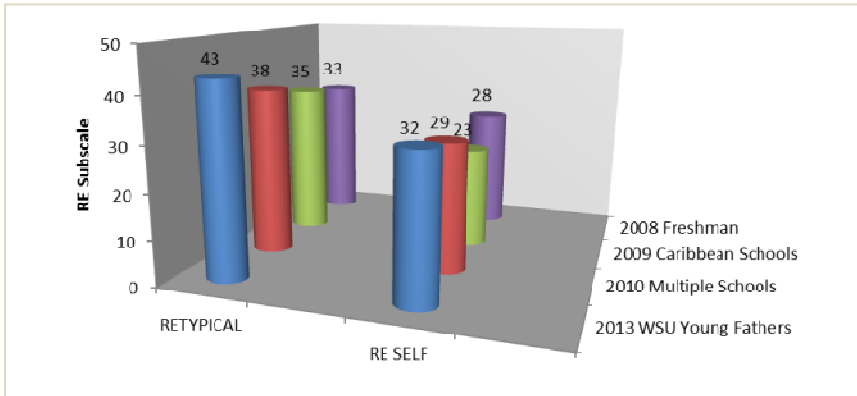


Figure 4. Restricted Emotionality-Young Fathers

On the RAABM scale the numbers were also similar with dads feeling less restricted or less conflict showing emotion toward other men than they thought the typical dad would feel. Discussion of this scale further revealed that dads were surprised that it was not unusual for there to be physical contact or even hugging among members of the group. “I didn’t think this would be the norm but it apparently is,” said one father (See [Figure 5](#) showing the father’s results compared to the multiple school study, Caribbean students and a group of SJU freshmen from 2008).

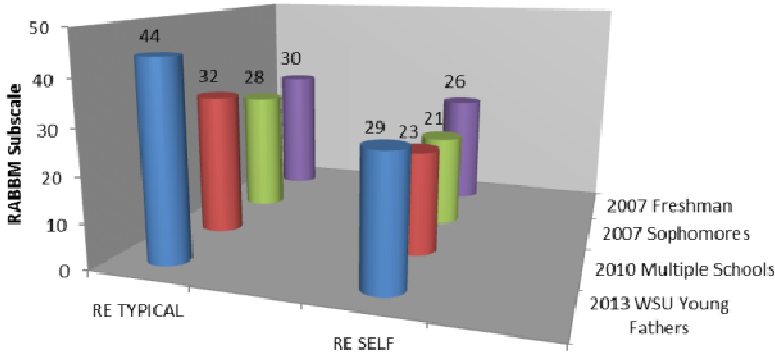


Figure 5. Restricted affectionate behavior between fathers

Note that the disparity between the self and typical reactions of the fathers is more extreme than any of the other groups. While student fathers rated themselves as around the norm with near 30% identifying with gender role conflict around restricted affection their estimation of the typical student father was almost at 45, over 10 points higher than the estimates of other groups.

Similarly the differences on the Sharing Personal Matters questions showed disparities consistent with other groups. While the dads did not think that typical student fathers valued personal matters like spirituality or wanted to discuss these topics in either a group setting or in a one-on-one setting they revealed that they themselves wanted to (Figure 6 is a graph of those results). One can see this in the consistent and significant attendance at the DADs group meetings.

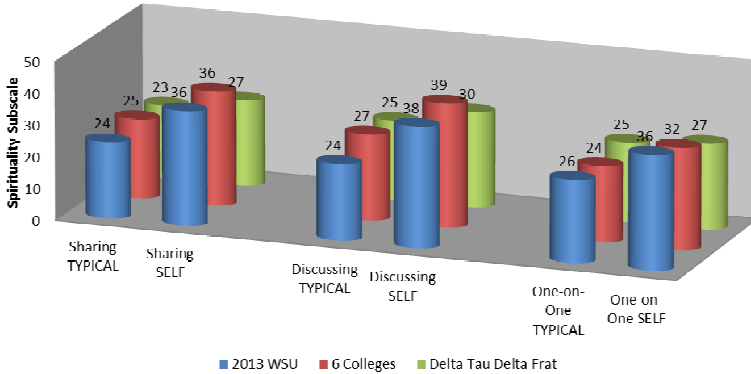


Figure 6. Young fathers-sharing personal Matters

The recent WSU YSPSI Student Questionnaire from 2012, shows that 78.9% of the participants had their program needs met. The top four needs were the following: a way to connect with other pregnant/parenting students, emotional support from YSPSI staff members, academic support/referrals from YSPSI staff members, and referrals for financial assistance. When participants in the program were asked if they felt that they had the resources or access to resources to be a successful student, 42% strongly agreed and 40% agreed.

Participant student retention was measured by their intent to persist and 94% committed to remaining in school which is one of the goals of the YSPSI grant program⁹.

Discussion

Working with Young Fathers to bring about Behavioral Change

There is the same consistent misperception of masculinity with student fathers on all the scales of the SNMS as the other groups researched. In one case (RABBM scale), the scale is higher than with any other group. In essence, the young fathers are saying: “I do not have as much conflict about

sharing my emotions as the typical young father does” and “I do not have as much conflict about showing affection to other men as the typical young father does.” The research on more health problems for young fathers related to higher scores on the masculinity scales should also hold.

There are two basic approaches we can use going forward with this social norms data to change behavior. First is to share the results in small group social norms interventions. We can see in the results of the questions related to sharing and discussing more personal matters that student fathers already show a greater willingness to share than they think their peers do. There are also the same consistent misperceptions of masculinity on the questions related to meeting in groups or in one-on-one situations. Dedicated Academic Dads is all about dads telling their stories of parenting and sharing on a deeper level, their values and beliefs. Sharing some of the data about young fathers and asking them what it means to see such a misperception of the norm of masculinity is an interesting addition to the discussions and workshop topics. This approach has been piloted with the student fathers in several sessions and each time has led to significant discussion of their parenting. A more intentional approach is needed and some additional research to measure the effectiveness of these interventions.

The training materials developed for student fathers have also enhanced the discussions. Using television commercials and using professional athletes like Dwyane Wade of the NBA, who is a role model and a father, have been inspirational. These activities are also suggestive of a second type of intervention.

The creation of social norms marketing campaigns have also been shown to have an impact on behavior. In essence, using successful advertising techniques to get the message out to students that the norm is not what they perceive it to be. This has been proven to be successful in reducing binge drinking behavior on college campuses. With binge drinking the social norms marketing message is often that while students perceive that “everyone is binge drinking” the data shows that students only drink “an average of four drinks per week.” Students are engaged in creating messages and posters and media materials that say things like “stop at buzzed.” This not only engages a core of students in positive action but also

ensures that the words and methods of delivery are directed at the audience in ways they will eagerly receive the message.

Applying social norms marketing to young fathers, we could see a process of sharing the data with young dads and asking them to help design materials and a campaign to reach other young fathers with the message. While the traditional masculinity messages of risk taking are dominant in the culture and pressure (like in the Major General Pittard/Fort Bliss case) is intense on young men not to seek medical help, we know now that young fathers are less likely to agree with those messages than they think the typical young father does.

We would hope to spur the students to utilize medical services for preventive care through regular physicals and changing eating and other health behaviors. Also, it is important for them to participate in their children's pre-natal care, early childhood care and regular check-ups and other care.

We can envision a campaign with posters and flyers distributed to programs working with young fathers correcting their misperceptions of masculinity with such messages as: "most young fathers think that having a primary care physician is an essential part of fatherhood" or "fathers are as concerned as mothers about the importance of pre-natal care – make that appointment today." We do not foresee these to be the exact wording, but student fathers devising "targeted" messages that they know would reach their peers is the key to a successful social marketing campaign. It is typical for a core of students to take great pride and ownership in the design and distribution of these materials. Presenting the material at social norms conferences and submitting them for awards adds to the excitement and can help promote students in the field of marketing and advertising.

While the social norms approach is best known for its effectiveness in reducing heavy episodic alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm among college students, it has also been used effectively in interventions targeting tobacco use, DUI prevention, seat-belt use, and tax compliance. Interestingly, effective interventions have not been limited to colleges and universities, but have also been reported in high school and community-wide settings as well.

New areas of interest in the application of the social norms approach are also emerging, such as sexual assault prevention, the improvement of

academic performance, and delaying sexual debut among students. The application of social norms methodology to masculinity and men's health would be an addition to the field of social norms research as well as to work with student parents.

We plan to investigate the development of this kind of approach in our next grant cycle. We see the possibility to expand our work and materials to other campuses; and perhaps, could be shared with other states. It is the kind of activity that students eagerly get involved in, they know how to do (posters, ads, marketing) and can involve their marketing classes, student work positions and internships. We have just received notification from the MDH that they are offering four more years of funding to the YSPSI programs. Thanks to this generous funding, the work will continue.

Acknowledgements

This article utilizes data funded in part by Grant Number 5 SP1AH000005-03-00 of the United States Department of Health & Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health.

Notes

¹ A recent Minnesota Public Radio story on Major Pittard illustrates the impact of traditional masculinity on the lives of soldiers

(See: www.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/npr.php?id=192827902).

² Minnesota Fathers and Families Network serve fathers, professionals, social service workers, educators, and advocates across Minnesota. They promote practices and policies for positive father-child relationships and family relationships.

³ Principal Developer of the multi-media resource is DeShawn Woods, a member of the Student Parent Task Force, WSU YSPSI program. DeShawn Woods graduated from WSU in May, 2013.

⁴ Findings from a research project with Dr. Gar Kellom and Alvin Thomas, "Vocational Discernment Among Tibetan Buddhist Monks in Dharamsala, India," in the Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research with Alvin Thomas (Morehouse College), Michael W. Firmin, Editor. 2010.

⁵ O'Neil has summarized this research in James O'Neil, Barbara Helms, Robert Gable, Lawrence David and Lawrence Wrightsman, "Gender-Role Conflict Scale: College Men's Fear of Femininity," *Sex Roles* 14 (Nov. 5–6, 1986): 335–58.

⁶ From a PowerPoint entitled *The Men's Center* presented by Steven M. Hoover, PhD Chair and Professor, Counselor Education and Educational Psychology, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN.

⁷ Alan D. Berkowitz visited Saint John's University as a consultant on several occasions for the Center for Men's Leadership and Service. He was invaluable in steering us in the direction of social norms masculinity research. He had been at Hobart and William Smith College and helped to develop a social norms methodology.

⁸ With permission from the Minnesota Department of Health, statistical information was used from the Collective Fall Data 2012 from the ten schools which were all a part of the Young Student Parent Support Initiative 2011-2013.

⁹ With permission from the Minnesota Department of Health WSU YSPSI Student Questionnaire Fall 2012 Data Tables.

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Websites

National Social Norms Institute (2013) Retrieved from: <http://www.socialnorms.org>

Appendix

Direct links to the organizations and resources mentioned in the article:

Academic Impressions - <http://www.academicimpressions.com>

American Men's Studies Association - <http://mensstudies.org/>

Council on Undergraduate Research - <http://www.cur.org>

Magna Publications - <http://www.magnapubs.com>

Minnesota Fathers and Family Network - <http://www.mnfathers.org>

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators -

<http://www.napsa.org/>

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