

The impact of participation in a peer education sexual assault prevention program:

Research Report

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of this exploratory study is to examine the impact on peer educators of participation in a university sexual assault prevention program, Students Challenging Realities and Educating Against Myths (SCREAM) Theater. Previous research has not examined how peer educators who deliver prevention programs are affected by this work, and has not evaluated the impact peer educators' role in prevention has on their interactions with students outside of these programs. Additionally, under-explored is how changes in attitudes about rape effect behavioral change. Participants in this study were twenty-one peer educators responsible for delivering an innovative improvisational theater program designed to challenge students' attitudes about sexual victimization and to prevent rape. Qualitative data regarding the impact of the program on peer educators and on their interactions with students was collected using structured, in-depth interviews with this sample of peer educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparative evaluation of different types of rape prevention programs revealed that programs using an interactive format with facilitation conducted by peer educators achieved the most positive changes in students' attitudes about rape (Berkowitz, 1994; Earle, 1996; Lonsway, 1996). Emerging research indicates that use of visual aids such as films, dramatic performances, and role-plays may also be an important element of successful rape prevention programs. Sexual themes presented in film or using other visual stimuli may be effective as men are socialized to respond to sex in this manner (Malamuth & Check, 1981, as cited in Lenihan et al., 1992). Lonsway (1996) notes that some programs that combined dramatic performances depicting rape with discussion were successful in changing students' attitudes.

Lonsway (1996) further asserts that more information is needed regarding the process of how attitudes about rape change through education and prevention programs, in addition to research that explores the link between attitudinal and behavioral change. To date, no research has examined what effects, if any, facilitating rape prevention programs has on students who are peer educators. The impact peer educators may have on students' attitudes and behaviors in their regular interactions with peers occurring outside prevention program has also not been examined.

The need to answer questions such as those identified above informs the basis for this exploratory study of a university rape prevention program. Naturalistic inquiry and an inductive approach were employed to address questions regarding the effects of facilitating rape prevention programs on peer educators (Patton, 1990). Also examined is the link between peer educators' involvement in delivering prevention programs and subsequent changes in their attitudes and behavior, and the potential impacts peer educators have on their student peers outside of the formal program delivery.

METHODS

Setting

This study focused on a university-sponsored peer education program, SCREAM Theater, that uses improvisational theater to engage audiences in interactive discussion regarding the risk factors, attitudes, and myths associated with the occurrence of rape and other forms of interpersonal violence. The program consists of peer educators performing theater scenes of rape and other forms of interpersonal violence, and engaging with audience members in post-performance, in and out character discussion of interpersonal violence. Discussion is conducted

with the help of a staff facilitator, and programs run approximately one hour in length. Peer educators are undergraduate students hired by the University's Department of Sexual Assault Services, and they meet with staff bi-monthly for training on rape and other forms of interpersonal violence.

Sample

A purposeful, criterion sampling strategy was used to identify respondents who could provide the in-depth information needed (Patton, 1990). Current peer educators with one or more years of experience working in the program who were involved in a minimum of six performances in the six months prior to the commencement of the study were eligible for inclusion. Former members who had graduated from SCREAM within the past two years and had actively participated in the group for at least one year by attending ten of twelve training sessions and acting in at least ten performances were also eligible. Thirty-three potential respondents were invited to participate, and twenty-four were interviewed. Due to incomplete transcriptions of data for three respondents, the final sample included 21 peer educators who were current or recently graduated members of the program in spring, 1999.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected utilizing structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions. This format was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the research, and the authors' desire to obtain data on respondents' subjective experiences (Mertens, 1998). The interview guide was developed by one of the authors in conjunction with another member of the department, was pre-tested with two respondents, and modified accordingly. The guide

contained 36 questions designed to elicit respondents' descriptions of the various impacts of participating in the program as peer educators.

Eighteen interviews were conducted in a private, on-campus setting outside of the sponsoring university department. Three interviews were conducted over the phone as the interviewees lived out-of-state. All in-person interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the respondents, and detailed written notes were recorded for phone interviews. Interviews lasted one hour on average.

Data Analysis

Each author analyzed data from the interviews she conducted. Cross-case analysis was conducted using content analysis to identify the major themes emerging from the data (Patton, 1990). The authors first reviewed the transcripts of each interview, using the three research questions as sensitizing concepts. Interview transcriptions were used for 19 of the interviews, and data from two interviews were analyzed using the author's written notes only because of problematic transcription. The authors then read responses to each question, to compare the data by question. Emerging themes were identified and categories of findings were created based on identified themes. The data were then coded according to theme, and frequencies for each theme were calculated. The authors engaged in peer debriefing with two colleagues during the data analysis process to ensure credibility of the data (Mertens, 1998).

RESULTS

The findings revealed that the respondents consistently perceived themselves as creating positive change in their peers' attitudes and behaviors around issues of sexual violence on

campus through their participation in SCREAM. They believed that participating in SCREAM allowed them to challenge their peers' attitudes and behaviors about sexual and interpersonal violence not only during the actual SCREAM performance, but also outside of the presentation in their other roles in the campus community. The respondents also felt that their participation in SCREAM permitted them to develop skills to deal with incidents of sexual and interpersonal violence that occurred in their own personal lives. The findings can best be grouped among three main themes: impact on the peer educators' awareness of issues of interpersonal violence; changes in their own attitudes and behavior; and identification by peers within the community as advocates and resources.

Theme 1: Impact on awareness of issues of interpersonal violence

All respondents (n=21) consistently reported that they gained increased knowledge about rape and related issues through their involvement in SCREAM. They felt that because of the knowledge they gained in SCREAM, they were more likely to notice issues of interpersonal violence in society at large, and were also better able recognize signs of interpersonal violence in their peers' relationships.

Respondents identified increased knowledge about rape and related issues and increased sensitivity to the way in which these issues are portrayed in the media as two effects resulting from their involvement in SCREAM. They cited what actually constitutes rape and dating violence, resources available for victims, how societal conditions influence rape, and factors that put women at risk for rape as some of the areas in which their knowledge grew. Respondents stated that they are now much more critical of media accounts of rape and related issues, and can relate what they see in the media to what is happening in society. A woman explained, "I mean,

I've learned a lot ...about what rape is, what dating violence is. How people get in that situation, how the situation can be avoided". Another woman commented,

I didn't really understand...that, you know, we live in a society that supports behavior that feeds into rape...that supports behavior that is victim-blaming. I'm starting to look at things around me and realizing, yeah, ...the stuff we watch on TV and the movies we watch and stuff, and advertising...it supports [rape]

The respondents all felt that their involvement in SCREAM not only impacted their view of the media and society at large, but had also given them the skills and sensitivity to recognize signs of interpersonal violence in relationships of their peers. Respondents spoke of an "increased awareness" of the "tell-tale signs of violence" in their friends' relationships. One male respondent said, "I learned what may happen behind closed doors and to look for tell tale signs. SCREAM helped me recognize situations that I might not have recognized as wrong".

Some of the respondents talked about seeing relationships differently after being in SCREAM. One man said: "Anyone who's been in SCREAM sees the signs. They look at things through different eyes; they are not glossed over but see things for what they are". Another woman said, "Because I am more aware, I look at situations of my friends' dating relationships differently".

Theme 2: Changes in personal attitudes and behavior

In addition to increasing their awareness and knowledge of interpersonal violence, respondents all felt that their participation in SCREAM had also positively impacted their behavior. First, they felt that because of their experiences in SCREAM, they were more likely to take action and intervene when they suspected interpersonal violence occurring in their peers'

relationships. Second, respondents believed that their participation in SCREAM made them more careful in their own dating relationships.

All of the respondents indicated that their participation in SCREAM made them more likely to intervene when they suspected the occurrence of violence in a peer's relationship. One female respondent commented:

I am much more likely to intervene with friends and family if I think something is going on. I feel that I know more about the issues and am more able to step in-I understand the urgency of the situation. Playing out the scenes in SCREAM has helped me develop these skills.

Many of the respondents spoke about actually intervening in the relationships of their friends and families when they thought something was wrong. Many respondents have intervened in at least one relationship where they suspected violence was occurring. They felt that this ability to confront a friend or family member about the situation was due at least in part to their experiences in SCREAM. A female respondent stated, "SCREAM has made me more apt to say something. My sister had a boyfriend that was abusive. Without SCREAM, I don't know if I would have noticed the same things or been as well equipped to confront her about it."

The respondents also talked about being able to intervene in an effective way because they had "experienced" similar situations in the SCREAM scenes. In particular, many of the participants spoke about being able to be supportive and non-judgmental for the victim. One woman said, "After being in the shoes of the victims in SCREAM, I understand their situations better". Another woman who played the victim reported, "In SCREAM, I learned what it was like to be that individual. I was seeing what they were going through. I almost felt like it was my fault- and can understand why victims feel that way." Another woman talked about helping a friend who was in an abusive relationship:

I had a friend who was in an emotionally abusive relationship. It was breaking my heart, but I knew I couldn't be judgmental. At first I was more insensitive and told her to just get out of the relationship. But then my SCREAM skills kicked in and I have been able to be more supportive and non-judgmental. I was able to intervene in a smart way by bringing up the situation, giving her information, and planting a seed in her head.

Participation in the program also impacted men's ability to support victims. One male member shared that he dated a woman who disclosed to him that she was raped while at college. He felt that being in the program made him more sensitive and able to understand her situation. He said:

I think I took it extremely seriously, whereas, I might not have known how seriously to take it. You know, some people might look at it and go, oh well, it happened 4 years ago and it's not such a big deal anymore...but I realized from doing this [the program] that it doesn't matter when it happened, it will be an important thing, probably for the rest of your life.

In addition to an increased awareness of the occurrence of violence in their peers' relationships, the respondents all felt that participation in SCREAM had made them more "careful" in their own personal relationships. The women felt that they were more likely to recognize warning signs and avoid uncomfortable situations, and the men felt that they were more sensitive and aware of their behavior when they were becoming intimate with a partner.

The women indicated that their attitudes about what constituted interpersonal violence changed due to their involvement with SCREAM. Many women expressed being more aware of "warning signs" of interpersonal violence and less likely to accept such behavior in their own encounters and relationships. One woman told a story of recently being at a party and ending up alone in a room with a man she had just met. He got up from the couch to shut the door and she asked him to leave the door open. While he did the leave the door open for awhile as they talked, he again tried to close the door. At that point, the respondent got up and left, and when he confronted her later on in the party, she said "I was uncomfortable in that situation and you

didn't respect it--see you later". She said that SCREAM had given her the confidence to know that if she was uncomfortable she had the right to leave the situation. Another female student reported similar changes in her behavior; "In terms of meeting new people, I'm more careful. More leery, more wary of people...I hate when people say 'I know him, he wouldn't turn into this, this could never happen to me'. Anyone I know could do this."

Male respondents also cited a change in their own attitudes and behavior. All of them talked about how participation in SCREAM made them reflect upon the way that they behaved in their own intimate relationships. One male respondent explained, "It just put it in a different perspective, and it made me realize that, okay, drunken girls are funny sometimes, but...you have to be really careful about what's going on...like I tend to think about the repercussions a lot more now rather than like, okay she's a drunken hook-up and forget about it tomorrow."

Another said, "SCREAM put my own practices and activities to the test. I communicate better and have a better understanding of where my partner is coming from and wants. I couldn't be a hypocrite...I couldn't be different behind closed doors than I was in public in my SCREAM performances."

The men talked about being careful listeners to what their partners said and wanted. One man said, "SCREAM has made me sensitive to my partner's needs- and I really understand that no means no. I know that I need to listen carefully."

Theme 3: Identification by peers as advocates and resources in the community

A theme that consistently emerged from the interviews was that the SCREAM participants perceived themselves as positively impacting their peers on issues of sexual violence not only during the actual SCREAM performance, but also outside of the performance in their

other roles on campus such as roommates, teammates, and classmates. The respondents felt that they created a “ripple effect”, taking the message beyond the actual program to their roles outside of the performance. Respondents stated that their peers identified them as advocates around issues of interpersonal violence on campus. Specifically, the participants discussed the experience of being recognized as a SCREAM character outside of the performance on campus and their peer’s perception of them as resources, role models, and monitors in the field of sexual violence.

All of the respondents recalled being recognized on campus as their SCREAM character. One respondent referred to the “Recognition Log” which was a collective journal where they would each record and share their stories of being recognized on campus with the other members of SCREAM. They spoke of being approached at parties and in the dining hall by people who would say “Hey- you’re the rape victim” or “You were the rapist”. One woman even spoke about being on a trip in Paris and meeting some other students from Rutgers who recognized her as the rape victim.

A few respondents used the moment of recognition as an opportunity to reinforce the messages they had conveyed during the performance. One male respondent reported:

One time I was recognized on the campus bus. Some girl was looking at me as if she knew me and finally said, ‘I remember you- you were the rapist!’ Of course I was not very comfortable at that moment as everyone turned around to look at me but I quickly explained that it was a part of SCREAM. I ended up talking with the girl and a few other students about SCREAM and asked them what they had thought of the performance and the issues. It was a great opportunity to facilitate dialogue!

The respondents all enjoyed the recognition and felt that it meant that the audience members had paid attention and remembered the performance. Many of the respondents indicated that they felt that this recognition reflected the effectiveness of the program, and that SCREAM had

become a part of the Rutgers experience and culture. They felt that by being recognized as a part of SCREAM out of the performances, they were reinforcing that the issues were important. A female respondent stated, “On one hand, they see you in the performance. But on the other hand, they see you outside of the performance. They see that you take the time out to do this. Even if it is unconscious, they see that this is important.”

All of the respondents felt that by being in SCREAM, they were automatically regarded as a resource on issues of interpersonal violence by their peers. Some of the respondents talked about being recognized as their character outside of the performance and then having people tell them their own stories of violence or ask for resources. One woman reported, “ One time I was on campus at the bus stop and a girl came up to me and said- ‘Weren’t you the rape victim in SCREAM?’ She then said that she thought it was a good performance and that it had happened to her- and did I know where she could get help?”

Many of the participants relayed similar stories and recalled that peers that they either did or did not know would come up to them either immediately after a performance or on campus or in their dorms and to discuss their own situations that were similar to the scenes depicted in SCREAM. Sometimes they would ask for resources or help and other times they just wanted someone to talk to. One woman said, “After [a SCREAM performance], this girl came up to me and she was like, you know really upset...she was like, that [rape] happened to me. And she went through this whole thing, and I tried to talk with her and then some other people talked to her”. Another woman said, “People come to me and they just feel more comfortable, I think. And I think a lot of times if they didn’t come to me, I don’t really think they’d be going to anyone else.”

In addition to being perceived as a resource for issues of sexual violence, the male respondents felt that they were regarded as role models for their peers. This role was not necessarily one that the men had anticipated when they joined SCREAM, but they found that it was an automatic assumption by their peers. The male respondents said that they felt that their presence made their friends and peers more careful about what they said about women and how they acted about dating relationships. In addition to using the label "role models", two of the men also described their role as "monitors". One man said, "My male cohort would have conversations about girls, and I became the monitor of what others said, simply because I was in SCREAM... I would hear things like, 'Here comes D.; better make sure you're treating your woman right..'" Another male felt that he was much more sensitive to how his male peers discussed women, stating, "Just in the way my friends talk about when they are hooking up with girls and stuff like that...I guess I'm more sensitive to- because a lot of the time they talk about people like they're pieces of meat, and...it rubs me the wrong way". Many of the men expressed ambivalence about assuming this role because it sometimes created a tension between "being one of the guys" and standing up for the issues they spoke about in SCREAM.

The locker room talk was quieted when I was around. They saw me as the challenger. This made me uncomfortable, too; I didn't want to be seen as a traitor. I didn't want to be perceived as a police officer. I wanted people to feel comfortable around me. The challenger role is the most difficult--even in acting. We're all so comfortable being the follower.

However, the men all felt that this that the tension that they created was a part of making people think about their attitudes. One man said, "If my presence was going to make them think about what they said, then the discomfort was worth it."

DISCUSSION

While the conclusions reached are clearly context-bound and cannot be generalized beyond the sample from SCREAM Theater, this study provides a starting point for examining the role of peer educators in the effort to prevent sexual violence. The overarching research question for this study, "Do sexual assault peer educators contribute to the effort to prevent sexual violence on campus?" was answered with an overwhelming "yes" by the respondents who participated in SCREAM Theater. The peer educators involved in this study all felt that they positively impacted their peers' attitudes and behaviors around issues of sexual violence, both during the actual SCREAM performance but also outside of the presentation in their other roles in the campus community.

The importance of peer status was a consistent, solid theme that was intertwined throughout the study. The effectiveness of having peers convey the message of sexual violence prevention was evident in several areas. Peers are able to craft scenes in the skits that reflect the reality of the audience because they are from the audience; they know how issues of sexual violence actually play out in the lives of college students. Even though it is only "acting", the power of seeing one's peers in situations of sexual violence allows the audience to relate and "buy in" to the performance. Peer status was also important outside of the performance. All of the respondents recalled incidents of being recognized on campus as their characters from SCREAM, a sign that the performance had in some way become a part of the Rutgers' student culture. Because the performers were also peers, other students on campus identified them as resources on issues of interpersonal violence and would come to them for help or advice. This is a finding that can potentially be applied to designing effective prevention programs for other

communities. The results from this study suggest that it is critical to involve community members in the design and implementation of programs, whether college students or members of a different target group. It adds authenticity to the program and perhaps even more importantly, has a “ripple effect” by having educators out in the community serving as role models and resources.

An especially important finding was that the male respondents believed that their peers regarded them as role models and even "monitors" of their behavior. To have men educating other men about the issues of sexual and interpersonal violence is a method that appears to be extremely powerful and should be examined in other communities with further research. To have a fellow male teammate, roommate, or classmate who has taken the time to join a program like SCREAM Theater seems to automatically impact students because they realize that the issue is important to that person. This finding can also be applied outside the example of college students to other communities, where male neighbors, organization members, or acquaintances can serve as a powerful tool for enacting social change.

At a basic level, SCREAM Theater urges audience members to start talking about issues of sexual and interpersonal violence. Many of the respondents referred to the goal of the program being "to initiate dialogue" about these issues. In addition to the actual performance, the respondents' role out of the performance also initiated discussion. As revealed by their recognition on campus and the conversations they had with friends, roommates and teammates, SCREAM propelled discussion about these issues. The respondents were able to recognize the general lack of discussion of these issues in our culture and they realized the importance of initiating dialogue. One performer said, “Issues of sexual violence are so pervasive and people are scared to talk about it. This provided a forum for discussion”. This important point has been

neglected by the literature thus far. Instead, many programs and approaches attempt to end sexual violence as a whole, which is unrealistic. The approach offered by SCREAM provides a model for incremental, effective change by starting conversations and encouraging them to be continued after the performance.

This study was obviously limited by a very small sample size, so this type of study needs to be conducted with a larger group of peer educators. Additionally, the perspective of the peer educators needs to be complemented by the perspective of audience members. Is the program as realistic and effective as the peer educators perceived, or is their view biased because of their role?

Further research needs to be conducted on programs like SCREAM Theater to assess their impact on changing attitudes and behaviors about sexual violence on campuses. SCREAM offers a potentially powerful model for peer educational sexual assault prevention programs that can be translated and adapted to fit the needs of other settings and communities. Results of this study suggest that using peers is an effective tool, and that the impact is far-reaching beyond the actual intervention or program. Perhaps practitioners could use this model in schools, residential or partial care programs, corrections facilities or other communities where peers interact. Further research should examine whether this model is indeed effective in other communities.