Rape Prevention and Risk Reduction, an Interview with Kimberly Lonsway

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My name is Jennifer Grove and it is June 10th, 2010, and today we are talking to Kimberly Lonsway, Research Director for the non-profit organization End Violence Against Women International. Lonsway earned her PhD in the department of psychology at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign. She is the lead author on the VAWnet applied research paper: “Rape Prevention and Risk Reduction: Review of the Research literature for Practitioners.”

Dr. Lonsway What sparked your interest in the topic of rape prevention?

I originally began my career doing research in ...acceptance, exploring questions of structures and thought, functionality. The structures in our brain, wow do they work and ultimately focused on that question of why people are so persistent, why beliefs are so resistant to change. And so that flowed really naturally into exploring questions about education, first in terms of rape prevention education, which we’ll be talking about today, and then also in issues of police training for sexual assault investigations, which is where I spend most of my time now as the research director for EVAW international.

Great, thank you. What are some important things for people to consider when developing or conducting prevention programs?

I think the most important thing is to think of it ahead of time. The time to start thinking about evaluation questions is really at the same point that someone is beginning to design their program and think about what it is they are trying to change, and how are they going to know if they’ve been successful. Again, to encourage people to think about evaluation at the beginning of the process, and then thinking ahead to plan how to measure that.

So at that time some questions for people to ask ourselves as we’re designing a program... For example, what level of influence are we aiming for change for our prevention program? Are we aiming for change at the individual level, which is where it’s often conceptualized, or at the interpersonal level, the community level, the societal level? Ultimately, we’d like to have strategies that incorporate change on all of those levels, but for evaluation purposes, and in fact for program design purposes, we need to think pretty carefully about the level of change that we are currently targeting, to make sure that our program is aimed at change at that level, and that our evaluation measures are designed to measure change at that level as well.
A second question to ask ourselves is what is our specific goal for change? Are we trying to change beliefs for example? Attitudes? Conventions? Behaviors? And if so, which ones exactly? I think we are often tempted to try to change all kind of things, but we’re more likely to be successful if we narrow our scope as much as possible. We really need to choose a small number of variables or even a single variable really, that we want to change as a program and then make sure that everything else we do aligns itself with that goal. So if we focus one specific behavior change, we need to make sure our program is designed to target that specific change and that our evaluation research is designed to measure whether we’ve created change on that specific variable. That’s ultimately the only way to find out if we’ve really been successful.

And a third at the beginning to ask ourselves is: Who our audience is? Are we aiming for a general audience with universal goals for change? Or are we targeting a more selective audience, including people perhaps who are at a heightened risk for perpetrating or becoming victims of sexual victimization? Or alternatively we might have what is known as an Indicative strategy, where we target people who have already perpetrated sexual violence or have become victims themselves.

And while these kinds of questions might seem theoretical, they are in fact very concrete, because, as we’ve said, we can only design a prevention program and measure it to fact if we know who we are reaching, why, and what our specific goal is. And so at this point I think it’s really helpful to point out, and I will probably raise this again, the importance of researchers and practitioners teaming up. And doing so as soon as possible. Because ultimately addressing these questions involves addressing both questions of research and practice, and so there’s all kinds of opportunities there.

Thank you. Those are definitely some very important things for people who are doing programming to really consider. What would you say there are some promising future directions for evaluation research?

I think there are many promising directions for evaluation research in the field right now. It’s a very exciting time. Although I don’t intend to talk specifically about bystander intervention programs, I think that’s the topic of another podcast, I do just want to point to that as an example of what can happen when someone has a good idea that is well executed, and then documented with good research to show us that it has an impact. For me it’s so exciting to see how bystander intervention has swept the field and just caught fire because of how well it’s been done. So I think that’s a model for us in moving in new directions.

One of those new direction that I think that I see us moving in, which is so promising, is the inclusion of more diverse participants, both in our programs and in our evaluation studies. As you know, almost everything we’ve learned from evaluation research with rape prevention programming is based on College students, and there’s good reasons, good logistic practical reasons for that, but it really is time now to move beyond that. And fortunately some folks are leading the way in terms of including younger students, and expanding programs to community members with more diverse audience members and participants in there. And ultimately of course that needs to be our goal if we intend to create change beyond our campus communities, and also to test whether the knowledge that we’ve learned from college students actually generalizes to other populations. And here again, I have to say, another point
where researcher and practitioner partnerships are so critical because, as we know right now, most rape crisis centers and dual service agencies are out there doing prevention programming, and so to team up with research who have the social scientific expertise to evaluate, to see the impact of those programs is another critical direction for us to move.

Another promising direction is the analysis of change in subgroups among our training participants. Fortunately, one of the great resources we have in this field is a collection of excellent measurement tools. One example of course is the sexual experiences survey, which was developed and revised by Mary Coss and colleagues that helps us to screen for perpetration or victimization with sexual assault. But up until now, we’ve tended to use those tools and measure impact on an overall group level, so I think another promising direction then is to follow the lead of some researchers who are examining outcomes amongst smaller subgroups, and we can define those subgroups based on really any characteristic that is relevant, whether it’s gender, age, race or ethnicity, or prior involvement with sexual assault perpetration or victimization. And that type of research really has the potential to move us beyond the question of whether or not our programs are working, just in a general way, but perhaps more importantly for whom they are working? And equally important: are there some subgroups for whom the program is not only not working but actually doing harm? Are there groups that are experiencing negative effects from their involvement in our programs?

And in fact we can take that one step further, and begin to tease apart which components of the program are having an impact. One can imagine an evaluation strategy that would for example compare outcomes of a standard educational presentation versus the same standard education presentation plus some extra component, maybe it’s an interactive improvisational role-play like the kind of the sex-signals program. And that type of research then offers another promising direction in helping us sort out what is the additional impact of that second component. What aspects of our program are working and why?

I don’t want to go into too much detail. Another promising direction is to increase the range of variables that we include as outcome measures. We certainly expanded our thinking about what it is that we are trying to accomplish with our programs. And so we can see corresponding increases in the variables and measurement tools we are using.

And finally, I believe there is a great deal of potential for us to improve our evaluation design. At this point there is simply no excuse for anyone to design an evaluation that consists solely of a pre-test and a post-test, especially if that is given immediately after the program, and especially if it’s using a fairly simplistic variable, like rape-myth acceptance, as dear to my heart as that construct is. But it’s simply unacceptable at this point, and in fact I think almost a waste of resources for us, given what we know about how leaded that strategy is. Pre-test sensitization has often times as much of an effect as the program itself and potentially. And we know that we see rebound effects for programs with short term attitude change that bounces back over time.

So if we truly want to learn something from our evaluation research, we need to design studies that can tell us something meaningful. So that means expanding our toolbox to include strategies like random
assignments, to experimental v. control conditions, disguising our follow-up measures, extending the time between the program and the outcome evaluation. And giving other research designs that are more powerful than a simple pre-test or post-test, again especially if that post-test is given immediately after the program. That strategy is just so limited that may be better off saving the copy cost and investing in other sorts of resources.

That’s it!

Thank you! Those are some fantastic recommendations for future research on evaluation. So in conclusion, what are some steps that can be taken to bring us closer to our goal of preventing sexual violence?

As I said, I think we are at a really exciting time for rape prevention, especially because there are so many young researchers and activists who are pushing us in new directions in the field. And so I think some of the steps we can take are to improve our evaluation research, in some of the ways that we’ve talked about here today. But of course we can also expand our programs in ways that we just never dreamed possible, taking advantage of the new technologies and social networking strategies, because as many of us know, it makes it possible to reach a far wider, far more diverse audience than we ever imagined.

And ultimately I think we need to institute an agenda for action research. We need to be engaging in a constant cycle of implementing programs, and then evaluating them, and then incorporating what we’ve learned into revising those same programs. It’s only that kind of a cycle of action and research, then back to action that has the potential to move us forward in exciting new direction that we know and can document as successful.

THANK YOU!