From Theory to Practice: Conversation and Implicit Argument

This occasional series looks at how the theoretical and research content of an academic article supports aspects of Men Can Stop Rape’s approach to mobilizing men and boys for the prevention of gender-based violence.

The academic article this edition of “From Theory to Practice” focuses on: “Norms and Beliefs: How Change Occurs” by Cristina Bicchieri and Hugo Mercier.

Access to Article PDF: 
https://www.academia.edu/1596868/Norms_and_Beliefs_How_Change_Occurs

In the comment section of a nationally live streamed YouTube conversation Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR) Men of Strength (MOST) Club facilitators had with six MOST Club members, one of the female viewers enthusiastically wrote about the need for more conversation. Certainly we at MCSR would agree. Conversation is central to much of the work that we do, from the check-ins at our MOST and Women Inspiring Strength and Empowerment (WISE) Club meetings to our Healthy Masculinity Action Project to MCSR’s National Healthy Masculinity Conversation Series and to our Healthy Masculinity Campus Conversations. We often join conversation with implicit argument in that there are MOST Club facilitators or Healthy Masculinity Campus Conversation facilitators who clearly have an argumentative position but instead of imposing it on people, collaborate with them to explore and investigate the topic together.

Cristina Bicchieri and Hugo Mercier argue that both conversation and implicit argument can be useful tools to change social norms. MCSR’s tag line – creating cultures free from violence – and our commitment to healthy masculinity indicate how heavily invested we are in the work of changing social norms. Although Bicchieri and Mercier acknowledge that both conversation and implicit argument have their limitations (for instance, when “a norm cannot be freely discussed by all the parties involved, trying to force people to talk about it anyway is likely to backfire” [p. 69]), both help to create conditions in which people are less likely to feel manipulated. From MCSR’s perspective, creating an environment for men and boys to both explore what kind of man they want to be and how they can play a positive role in the prevention of gender-based violence also create opportunities for them to feel invested in the issues and take action.

From Bicchieri and Mercier’s perspective, dialogue, or what I’m calling conversation, can challenge pluralistic ignorance as it relates to social norms (p. 68). Pluralistic ignorance can be described as a disparity between perceived and actual social norms. In the case of men and masculinity, for example, a man who experiences conflict in relation to an unhealthy masculine norm might assume that he is the only one experiencing the conflict; this perception could be based on the fact that no other men are sharing their own internal tensions. In actuality, though, many men could have the same internal friction and a masculine norm prohibits their expression of it. Conversation among groups of men in which numerous participants express the conflict chips away at the perceived conflict-free norm and builds in its place an actual norm: the recognition that many men are experiencing this conflict and that expressing it is of
value to them and others. Social norms cannot be created in isolation, and conversation offers men and boys the opportunity to collectively move in the direction of healthy masculinity’s prosocial norms.

Bicchieri and Mercier argue that telling people they should change their minds about a normative belief is ineffective; instead they have to be convinced (p. 69). They go on to claim that implicit argument can be more convincing than explicit argument because it is less threatening and antagonistic (p. 70). They explain that implicit argument, instead of making someone explicitly face her inconsistencies, can lead the person “to realize on her own that some of her beliefs are in fact conflicting with each other” (p. 70). The goal of MCSR when arguing a point in its MOST and WISE Club meetings, its workshops and trainings, and its campus conversations, is to connect the insights and experiences that participants have already shared to the point MCSR is making so that it is organic and integrated with the group. The point is coming from members of the group, including MCSR, then, rather than explicitly and only from MCSR.

Conversation and implicit argument can help to further shift the paradigm of educating men and boys about gender-based violence and its prevention away from what Paulo Freire calls the “banking model” of education. In this model, educators assume that they only need to deposit information about gender-based violence and prevention into men and boys for them to understand the issue and act accordingly. His conception of “problem-posing” education, on the other hand, involves educators and students creating knowledge collaboratively through “listening, dialogue, and action.” The problem-posing approach to mobilizing men and boys invites them to join with others in determining what kind of masculine social norms will best serve them and best serve others. Conversation and implicit argument are two valuable tools to advance using the problem-posing approach to mobilizing men and boys.

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Resources
