

Why Theory is Important

for the Evaluation of Prevention Activities

The premise underlying this article is that effective prevention campaigns need to be grounded in theory. “Theory” means a cohesive set of ideas about why a problem exists and/or how a change can be created. Having a theory that is based on research and the experience of other social movements can help us to justify our actions to others, including potential funders, legislators, media representatives, and neighbors. Our plans are strongest when they are based in the theories that set our overall direction as we move toward our goal. A theory can indicate where we’re going (the change we desire), why we believe we are moving in the right direction, and how we can get there.

Theory helps us to see how our actions build on one another. Because prevention of violence against women is a long-term process and because there are many contributing factors it is nearly impossible to “prove” that our actions have had an impact on that violence in the span of a few years. Therefore, defining theoretically sound milestones along the way can help us to see—and celebrate—our progress.

Following is an example of how theory impacts our choice of prevention activities:

In 1997 in Novato, California, a 15-year-old girl was raped at a post-prom party by three 18-year-old men. The victim knew her assailants, and both the victim and the perpetrators had been drinking. Here are three examples of how different theories (or analyses) about why rape occurs among teens can lead to different actions, all aimed toward the same desired change of preventing rape:

Theory 1: Girls are raped at parties because boys and men can’t control themselves, especially if they are drunk.

Solution: Keep the sexes separated, by force if necessary, to protect girls from rape. Keep kids away from alcohol. Help girls to understand that it is their responsibility to stay away from parties where there is alcohol.

Theory 2: Boys rape because they believe they can get away with it, as long as they can justify it or blame her (e.g., she’s drunk, she’s a flirt).

Solution: Public condemnation and punishment to hold boys accountable, regardless of the circumstances. Educate young boys that “no means no,” and that girls’ behavior is not an invitation to rape them.

Theory 3: Neither boys nor girls call it “rape” if alcohol or a dating relationship is present in the situation. If they recognized it as rape, that alone would deter most boys. It would also encourage girls to help protect one another and boys to challenge their male peers’ behaviors.

Solution: Awareness campaign for youth to change perceptions of relationship violence, acquaintance rape, and what boys and girls can do to prevent them.

While one would certainly want to obtain more information about this and other rape cases before articulating a theory, this example highlights the direct correlation between why we believe something happens and what we will do to prevent it. Most problems are complex, and we may end up having more than one theory. Even so, all theories are not equal—some have better evidence to support them, or may have more weight in a given situation. The key is being open to asking questions, and being informed so that we can validate our choice of prevention activities.

Not every organization is going to have the same theory about why domestic violence occurs and what a community can do to prevent it. Even within a single organization individuals may subscribe to different theories. Whatever theories or experiences inform your choice of campaign, it is important to think about how it will affect your plans and your evaluation.