A theoretical basis for public information programs concerning alcohol

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1. Introduction

Public information programs are broadly used as an activity to prevent alcohol abuse or to prevent traffic accidents such as caused by driving under the influence (DUI). The effects of public information programs are usually limited to being familiar with the campaign, increased knowledge and sometimes attitudinal change but rarely behavior change (Rooijers, 1986). An important reason for these minor effects is a lack of a theoretical basis. Many public information programs are developed with not enough consideration for theories of behavior change. Especially in the field of psychology there are useful concepts. More and adequate use of these insights will enhance the impact of public information programs.

2. A model of behavior change through information

A sound theoretical basis for the design of a public information program is Kok's model of behavior change through information (1987) which is based on Fishbein and Ajzen's model of behavior change (1975), McGuire's model of persuasive communication (1981) and Rogers' model of innovation-decision process (1983). Kok's model centralizes the individual and also integrates the following conditions of effective public information mentioned in literature (Blane, 1974; Mendelsohn, 1973; Milgram, 1987): credibility of action and teacher, attractive information, people must be aware of existing risks, clear and understandable standards, short term advantages must be shown, content must meet the needs of the target group.

The assumption of Kok's model is that maintainance of behavior change can be established through the following steps: attention, understanding, attitudinal change, behavior intention.
standards (and behavior norms), behavior possibilities, habit formation and feedback. Let us explain Kok's model (see figure 1) more in detail.

The left column contains the successive variables in the process of behavior change. The right column contains the influencing factors which are not limitative but indicates the most relevant factors. The outermost left line beginning at behavior permanence is a feedback-loop: experience with behavior could affect each variable in the process of behavior change.

![Figure 1. Kok's model of behavior change through information (Kok 1987).]

A short discussion of the variables:

1. **Attention.**

Public information must attract attention. People select information. If no one notices the brochures, posters or the television commercials there will not be an effect at all. For example, it is important to program a television commercial on the right time; prime time if possible. In the Netherlands we had a comedy serial ("Family Oudernij") about traffic safety which was programmed between 7 and 8 p.m. The same counts for our newest 'hit programs' about traffic, which are more like tv-shows or quizzes. Attractivity of the medium and repeating the message can enhance attention.
2. Understanding.
Once people do notice the material, the message and the rest of the information must be understandable. If not, there will be no effect. Pretesting of material and adjusting the material is very important in this matter. It does happen very often that the agent thinks to know the target group without any information of the group itself. This way one will be beside the mark.

3. Attitude change.
Through information (improvement of knowledge) or arguments one tries to influence people's weighing of pros and cons. It is important not to deviate strongly from pre-existing attitudes. Credibility, expertise, involvement of the agent enhances the impact on attitude change (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Discussion as an element of information programs is known to be effective in influencing attitudes and is part of a so called person-directed approach (Akved, 1988; Clark & Powell, 1984).

4. Intention change.
A negative attitude towards DWI does not necessarily mean that the concerned individual does not intend to DWI. Social standards of the environment or peer pressure can be a disruptive factor. This depends on someone's (a) idea of reference, meaning how important it is for someone to do what a significant other (friends, family, the neighborhood, sportsclub) wants him or her to do, and depends on someone's (b) motivation to conform, meaning how much he or she wants to do what significant others do (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Social support is of great importance in showing the desirable behavior. People must realize these environmental factors and learn how to resist social pressure.

5. Behavior change.
Even a positive behavior intention does not ensure positive actual behavior. It requires certain skills to perform the wanted behavior. People must know which behavior possibilities can be used in certain situations. Teaching skills to resist social influences are necessary. Refusal skills programs ("Saying No") are a good example (Goldstein, 1989; Kim et al., 1989). Of course, when there is an addiction problem therapeutic help is needed.

Once people perform the wanted behavior it is necessary to make a habit of it. Information about advantages (feedback) does reinforce the behavior. Problem with alcohol information is that short term advantages are hardly seen and that long term advantages are just maybe seen. However, in case of not drinking alcohol advantages could also be: no rejection of social environment when doing so, experiencing that alcohol is not necessary to have fun, a feeling of proudness and self-respect turning down an offer to drink alcohol. The social environment is a crucial factor because one is continuously evaluating one's behavior to other people's behavior. One is looking for confirmation of the new behavior or innovation (Rogers, 1983).
Not experiencing advantages or a strong experience of disadvantages can lead to relapse. Paying attention to relapse prevention is very important. Reminding people of the advantages of the desirable behavior can be a function of public information; campaigns as a reminder. Another possibility of relapse prevention is organizing booster sessions in which not only information can be given but also skills can be rehearsed.

3. A person-directed approach

In our opinion a person-directed approach is most effective in changing attitude and behavior. This approach is adapting the program to the specific needs, problems and social standards of the target group and excludes presenting values and moral judgement. Thus we strictly exclude a moralistic approach. Discussion is an essential element of the person-directed approach. Discussion is giving people the opportunity to use the information just presented to them and to speak out their own experience and knowledge. They may see that there are more people thinking the same way. A study of Clark and Powell (1984) illustrates the important role of discussion. A group of subjects of 18-25 years old of which all were involved in serious car accidents, changed their attitudes towards the law, other drivers and social pressure to take risks after participation in group discussion.

Another assumed effective element of a person-directed approach is learning to resist social pressure. People must be aware of the influence of the social environment and misunderstandings about alcohol must be corrected. Especially in the field of prevention of smoking, drinking and drugs it seems effective to learn people to resist social pressure, mostly peer pressure (Botvin, 1986; Tobler, 1986). It is recommended to use peers as discussion leaders (peer-led system, Perry & Grant, 1988).

4. Attitude-behavior

Although Kok's model is very useful in developing a public information program some comments must be made. First, the relationship between attitude and behavior is reversible. Attitude change may change behavior and behavior change may change attitude. We will illustrate this using the concepts of Bem (1972), Kiesler (1971) and Festinger (1957) in relation to drinking and driving. Bem's self-perception theory (1972) assumes that people derive their attitudes from observation of their own behavior and from the circumstances in which they perform that behavior. Drinking alcohol before driving can develop itself as habit behavior, without being
aware of it and without an explicit negative attitude towards driving while under the influence. Once performing this behavior of drinking and driving there could occur, to justify the behavior, a positive attitude towards DUI "Oh well, a few beers cannot be that bad". Kiesler (1971) states that former behavior is of influence on later attitudes. People commit themselves by performing behavior. An example is a Dutch campaign "Zero promille" which goal is to prevent DUI by obtaining people's signature under a contract stating they will not drive after drinking alcohol, even after one glass of alcohol. Without having a positive attitude towards DUI before signing the contract (a commitment) he or she will tend to develop a positive attitude after the commitment. It is of importance that the environment knows about the commitment.

Festinger's concept of cognitive dissonance (1957) refers to a dissonance between cognitions such as ideas, opinions, attitudes. According do this concept someone could reject DUI but at the same time likes drinking alcohol very much; two things which do not mix assuming he or she also have to drive. After making the decision not to drink before driving the dissonance can lead to drinking after all. As a consequence positive attitudes can change into negative attitudes.

As told, positive attitude does not guarantee positive behavior but to establish a solid behavior change a change of attitude is necessary. Moreover, some attitudes are more easy to change than other. The concept ego involvement (Sheriff, 1979) weighs attitudes; the more attitudes relate to someone's experience the greater the influence on behavior will be and the more difficult it will be to change attitudes. A football fan will attach more importance to the results of his favorite club than to e.g. politics. So it is important to be aware of how much someone is involved with your message.

Direct experience with the concerned behavior is of importance to establish a solid attitude and behavior change (Fazio & Zanna, 1981). For example, being involved in a alcoholrelated accident is a direct experience which can establish a desirable attitude, more than a public information program could do. Indirect experience is coming from information of people or media.

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) are stating that a solid attitude is established based on arguments.

It is said that certain skills (know how to resist social pressure) are required to perform the wanted behavior. Someone's belief in using the skills and performing the wanted behavior is called self-efficacy ("Will I succeed in not drinking alcohol?") and is an important element in the process of behavior change. Public information programs can try to stimulate self-confidence to show that the desirable behavior really is possible to perform.
5. Discussion

Kok's model of behavior change through information is a practical model which means that it has to be "consumer friendly"; it must be easy for people working in practice to use it in developing a public information program. A theoretical model tries to present an integral relation between constructs which can be evaluated by means of scientific research. Our conclusion is that Kok's model is very useful indeed for people in practice who wants to develop a public information program, but one should also try to take in account other relevant concepts in the process of behavior change such as mentioned; the reversible relation between attitude and behavior, ego-involvement, direct experience, arguments, self-efficacy. The best prospects of succeeding in behavior change is provided by a person-directed approach which is seeking to link up with the values and norms of the target group. Important elements in this approach are group discussion, peers functioning as group leaders and teaching skills for resisting social pressure.

References


