Normative Expectations for Calling the Police

The experimental findings indicated that victims are likely to be affected by social influence. However, knowing that social influence is important is only the starting point, because this influence occurs in a larger social context. The kind of information, advice, and support or nonsupport that victims receive depends on how crimes are defined and what responses are deemed appropriate.

These questions of definition and appropriateness relate more generally to the concept of norm, "a patterned or commonly held behavior expectation" (Bates, 1956, p. 314). There is some question about the utility of norms in predicting behavior (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1970; but see Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), but our primary goal is more descriptive in nature. Our focus is on people's general beliefs about the appropriateness of reporting crimes to the police.

STUDY OF NORMATIVE INFLUENCE

In all groups, individuals have expectations about how members of the group should behave. These expectations, or normative standards, may be
explicit or implicit. At one extreme is the military, where the rules about appropriate dress and behavior are quite explicit. In other cases, the normative expectations are only implicit. For example, at a social gathering there are no written rules about what are appropriate topics of conversation. However, it is generally the case that some topics are considered unsuitable in such situations.

Regardless of whether the expectations are explicit or implicit, they are used by members to judge if a violation has occurred. Punishments follow a violation and range from a loss of status within the group to rejection by the group (Forsyth, 1983).

We assume that groups also have norms for defining crimes, how seriously they are viewed, and how the victim and others should respond, both affectively and behaviorally (Sparks et al., 1977). Normative influence can be exerted on a victim in one of two ways. First, others can apply pressure directly on the victim by telling him or her what they think is appropriate behavior and that the victim's failure to comply will result in their imposition of sanctions.

The second way that others can apply normative pressure is to remind the victim of the norms of a group important to the victim, so that violating the group's norms will lead the victim to anticipate rejection by the group. For example, others may remind a victim of the group norms for defining a crime. If a gang member is beaten up in a fight with a fellow gang member, the group would probably impose severe sanctions if the loser labeled himself a victim of a crime and decided to call the police.

There has been very little empirical research on the role of normative influence on victim decision making. In one of the few studies on the topic, Feldman-Summers and Ashworth (1981) found that normative factors played an important role in the decision of rape victims to call the police. In particular, normative expectations (i.e., approval-disapproval from important others) were better predictors of intentions to report the crime than were other perceived outcomes. Feldman-Summers and Ashworth concluded that rather than making the outcomes of reporting more attractive through such programs as medical care and psychological counseling, "It is more important to convince rape victims that a decision to report is supported by family, friends, and especially by close males, such as [a] husband, boyfriend, or lover" (p. 67).

Because normative factors appear to be potentially important influences on the reporting decision, our first goal in this research was to identify normative expectations for reporting crimes to the police and for dealing with the matter privately. There has been virtually no cross-cultural research on the topic, so it was worth examining how these normative expectations might vary in different countries. In addition, normative expectations might differ between groups within a community in the United States. Such cross-cultural comparisons between and within countries can give researchers an