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Michael C. Fagen and Brian R. Flay
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Rebuttal

Comments on “Challenges in Sustaining Public Health Interventions”

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Keywords: sustainability; intervention design; systems-level approaches

Altman (2009) provides a cogent and thoughtful perspective on the many challenges inherent to sustaining public health interventions. In particular, his differentiation between first-order (technical) and second-order (systems-oriented) intervention approaches provides a promising framework for conceptualizing and studying sustainability. Though our parent-centered strategy for sustaining a school-based prevention program attempted to utilize both first-order (e.g., parent training) and second-order (e.g., health educator–parent educator relationship building) interventions, we did not fully achieve our desired results.

Nonetheless, we believe that any effort to sustain public health programs should utilize both first- and second-order interventions. As we learned in our sustainability project, achieving the right mix between these intervention types is critical. As Altman notes, “a few changes at the systems level, combined with an array of technical solutions, could in fact result in increased sustainability.” For example, more emphasis on changing school culture related to parent involvement (a second-order intervention) might have increased the efficacy of our parent-delivered prevention program (a first-order intervention). Thus, we advocate more and better sustainability research that tests for the most effective mix of intervention types.

Though Altman’s perspective should push our field to place more emphasis on second-order interventions, first-order interventions will likely continue as a predominant approach to sustainability in the near term. Given that reality, it is our hope that first-order interventionists will (at a minimum) place more emphasis on studying the contexts for their sustainability programs. In our sustainability example, we noted that this type of contextual study (via a community readiness assessment) would have yielded

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valuable insights on potential intervention designs and mixtures. Similarly, we believe that parallel contextual studies will provide valuable information on which system-level features might be the most promising intervention points in sustainability efforts.

We support Altman’s perspective on challenges in sustaining public health interventions, and hope that it will guide future advances in our field’s ability to conceptualize, research, and ultimately produce effective sustainability programs.

References
