

Role-taking As An Advocacy Strategy For Policy Reform: A Comparative Analysis of Presentation Modes In Evoking Empathy and a Willingness to Act

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In major U.S. cities and in many nations globally, sex work is a criminal activity and the active status of the condoms as evidence of prostitution policy allows law enforcement to treat condoms as contraband (Shields, 2012). Advocacy groups internationally are actively petitioning to repeal the condoms-as-evidence policy. Using this international issue as the subject matter, this study evaluates the effectiveness of using games as an advocacy tool for policy reform in comparison to written reports and addresses the need for more quantitative research supporting the use of advocacy games.

Cops and Rubbers (Tran, 2012) is a tabletop game that simulates the systemic consequences the police practice of using condoms as evidence of prostitution has on sex-workers' lives internationally. By taking on the role of a sex worker met with unconscionable adversity, players experience the emotional struggle this population endures because of a policy that violates their health and human rights. This serious game serves as a captivating alternative advocacy tool and interactive demonstration of these policing practices and aims to elicit heartfelt reactions and independent conclusions about the policy.

In 2011, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS estimated 34 million people were living with AIDS (UNAIDS, 2012). While the infection rate is steadily declining, 2.5 million people were newly infected with HIV in 2011. Condoms have been proven to significantly reduce the risk of HIV transmission through sexual exposure, and global health organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UNAIDS continue to request the accelerated promotion of condoms in AIDS prevention and care programs (WHO, 2009). However, in countries around the world police carry out legal and illegal searches of sex workers and confiscate or destroy condoms found in their possession even when they are not engaging in sex work. A female sex worker in New York reported, "[The police] locked me up.... because I had a condom. I wasn't even prostituting. They took the condom" (Shields, 2012). In many cases, prosecutors then used the possession of condoms as evidence of prostitution. This treatment of condoms as contraband forces sex workers to make a choice between safeguarding their health and avoiding police harassment or arrest. In 2012 Open Society Foundations (OSF) released its report *Criminalizing Condoms*, which documents these practices in six countries and identifies their consequences on sex workers' lives, including their vulnerability to HIV. The report launched at the 2012 International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C., alongside *Cops and Rubbers*, a simulation game based on the report, in which players take on the role of sex workers trying to survive.

The use of games as a communication platform for social change is a growing movement with the prolific use of the term serious games to describe games that are not just for entertainment (Ritterfeld, Cody, & Vorderer, 2009). Much game studies research focuses on player engagement, narrative, and violence in commercial video games or learning outcomes of education games. Little formal research addresses the impact games have on people's perceptions of or prosocial behavior towards real-world issues. As a result, humanitarian organizations and their partners may be hesitant to use games as advocacy tools. This is in spite of the fact that games provide unique experiential learning opportunities whereby players take on someone else's perspective via role-taking (when an individual temporarily pretends that he or she is another person in order to gain insight into that person's thoughts, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in a given situation) and to internalize in-game cause and effect to draw independent conclusions leading to a call to action in real life (Gee, 2008; Peng, Lee, & Heeter, 2010).

Serious Games and Role-Taking

In this serious game, participants play as one of six sex worker personas and share individual game-end goals: earn \$25 for a personal need and avoid a sexual transmitted infection. In each of the six rounds, an outreach worker may provide each player with a condom that he or she must then hide from the police. If a player is caught in possession of a condom by the non-player police character (based on the spin of a wheel), he or she must face a consequence like police damaging the condom or extorting money or sex to avoid arrest. The police cards' narrative is not only inspired by accounts from real sex workers but also includes a related quote from a sex worker, reinforcing the reality. These personas provide players the opportunity to role-take, a theoretical concept dating back to Mead (1934), who defined role-taking as being empathetic toward a character and adopting the character's point of view. This cognitive activity requires the participant to see oneself as similar to the character and as having similar values and goals. In *Cops and Rubbers*, it is critical for players to take on the perspective of a sex

worker, reducing the influence of stigma, and therefore allow them to connect the negative effects of the condoms as evidence policy on one's health and human rights. Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) further developed Mead's concept and applied it to television characters. Their definition of role-taking is merging with the character and adopting the character's goals is particularly important for application of this concept to gaming. Tal-Or & Cohen's (2010) identification scale assesses the perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and motivational outcomes of role-taking and can also be applied to game characters.

Method

This study used a quasi-experimental design with two groups in a post-test only setting. Nonrandom assignment was utilized in this study to maintain external validity: participants who were friends were assigned to the same condition, as people generally play games with friends. Assignment to the treatment (*Cops and Rubbers*) or control (OSF's *Criminalizing Condoms* report) condition was based on the number of participants at each session and the availability of game facilitators. The game-playing group was divided into smaller sub-groups in order to have an appropriate number of participants for each game set. The principal investigators as well as research assistants served as game facilitators and answered any questions regarding the gameplay. While participants in the gaming condition (group 2) played the board game, participants in the written report condition (group 1) read the 32-page illustrated booklet report. After completion, participants answered a questionnaire. This preliminary data was analyzed using *t*-tests to compare group means on intentions to oppose the condoms as evidence policy. This measure included six items – sign a petition, donate to raise awareness, discuss the policy with family and friends, join an email listserv, find more information online, and forward a link about the condoms as evidence policy – and demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

Preliminary results ($N = 60$) suggest that the treatment condition (*Cops and Rubbers*; $M = 4.00$; $SD = 1.34$; $n = 35$) resulted in higher intentions to oppose the condoms as evidence policy, $t(58) = 3.35$; $p = .001$, than the control condition (report; $M = 2.81$; $SD = 1.37$; $n = 25$). Further, there were no significant differences in knowledge between the two conditions, suggesting that the *Cops and Rubbers* game offers an acceptable alternative to a written report for informing people on the condoms as evidence policy.

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