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Pluralistic Ignorance Concerning Alcohol Usage Among Recent High School Graduates
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Abstract
Recent high school graduates in a midwestern community estimated their classmates' attitudes toward alcohol use in contrast to their own positions. Attitudes were assessed on three levels: subjective comfort with others' drinking, approval of peer drinking and actual drinking practices. Pluralistic ignorance was found to be a significant factor at all three levels, \( p < .0005 \). Respondents reported that they were less comfortable, less approving, and drank less than close friends, lesser still than friends, and far less than peers. These findings provide support for "normative education" prevention programs that attempt to correct erroneous perceptions about alcohol use and abuse.

As individuals learn to identify themselves as members of a group, they become more influenced by their perception of the acceptable behavioral norms of that group. In this process they become "ignorant" of their own beliefs that may be in conflict with group standards. Thus, even though outward behavior appears congruent with group norms, individual beliefs can remain remarkably disparate. Katz and Allport (1928) referred to this phenomenon as "pluralistic ignorance" and suggested that it explained many puzzling aspects of group conformity.

Bandura (1986) found that a person's expectation about a particular behavior, and not its known actual outcome, is the key factor in "predicting" whether or not that behavior will occur. In the early 1980's various studies (Christiansen & Goldman, 1983; Biddle, Bank, & Marlen, 1980) linked this theory with adolescent alcohol usage. Christiansen and Goldman (1983) found that expectations were more important in predicting an adolescent's drinking habits than either background or demographic variables.

Prentice and Miller (1993) conducted a study at Princeton University designed to test "pluralistic ignorance" in undergraduates' use of alcohol. They found pluralistic ignorance prevalent in the undergraduates' beliefs that they were less comfortable with drinking alcohol than the average student. Thus, alcohol use may play an integral role in campus life because everyone believes it to be the accepted norm, despite conflicting personal sentiments.

Our research broadens this study by using entering college freshmen who have only recently graduated from high school as subjects and testing for pluralistic ignorance on three levels: comfort, feelings, and behavior. Based on previous research, we hypothesize that recent secondary school graduates will perceive the average high school student as more comfortable with alcohol norms than they actually are.

Method

Subjects

During summer registration at a small midwestern university, 556 surveys were randomly distributed to incoming freshmen. Of the 510 surveys completed and returned (92% response rate), 299 were completed by females and 211 were completed by males. The experimenter asked subjects to participate on a purely volunteer basis. The subjects' ages ranged from 17 to 18 years.

Materials

Each entering freshman was given a six page pamphlet containing a cover letter with instructions, a consent form, and the survey itself. The survey consisted of both demographic and alcohol related questions. The demographic section included the following independent variables: social security number, sex, age, race, GPA, high school rank, size of senior class, location of high school and re-
quested housing for the coming freshman year. The alcohol related questions asked about their expectations, attitudes and current alcohol drinking practices in secondary school. Subjects responded to the questions on a 1–5 Likert scale.

**Procedure**

Surveys were randomly distributed to students who were participating in a two day freshmen-orientation weekend. The students were informed that the survey was to be used by the psychology department for research purposes. Generally, subjects completed the survey within 15 minutes.

**Results**

Figures 1–3 present the data obtained for reported comfort with, approval of, and actual behavior concerning alcohol usage among secondary school peers of recent male and female high school graduates. Figure 1 plots mean subjective comfort with peer alcohol usage for the respondent, the best friend, the friends and the average student.

These results were analyzed with a 2 x 4 mixed design ANOVA: a significant difference was obtained among social contiguity \( F(3, 1500) = 12.332, p < .0005 \), but no significant differences were obtained between males and females and the sex x contiguity interaction. Supplemental t-tests found no significant difference between respondent and best friend or between friends and average student; however, all other comparisons showed significant differences \( p < .001 \).

Figure 2 plots mean approval of peer drinking for the respondent, the other, the best friend and friends. These results were analyzed with a 2 x 4 mixed design ANOVA: significant differences were obtained for social contiguity \( F(3, 1026) = 43.551, p < .0005 \) and the sex x contiguity interaction \( F(3, 1026) = 13.987, p < .0005 \), but no significant difference was obtained between males and females. Supplemental t-tests found no significant difference between significant other and best friend; however, all other comparisons showed significant differences, \( p < .035 \).

Figure 3 plots mean actual alcohol drinking behavior for the respondent, the significant other, the best friend, and friends. These results were analyzed with a 2 x 4 mixed design ANOVA: significant differences were obtained for social contiguity \( F(3,1014) = 42.330, p < .0005 \) and the sex x contiguity interaction \( F(3,1014) = 8.204, p < .0005 \), but no significant difference was obtained between males and females. Supplemental t-
tests found no significant difference between the respondent and the significant other; however, all other comparisons showed significant differences, $p < .007$.

**Discussion**

This study clearly portrays the erroneous judgments of recent high school graduates' perceptions of peers' attitudes and practices about alcohol. In an increasing trend, both males and females rated one's own comfort less than their best friend's comfort, their friends' comfort and the average student's comfort. This same trend with contiguity is also apparent for approval level in regard to the respondent, the best friend and the friends. However, when asked about significant others' approval, males replied their girlfriends were less accepting of peer drinking practices, and females replied their boyfriends were more accepting of peer drinking practices.

This trend with contiguity continues to be apparent with alcohol drinking behavior in regard to the respondent, the best friend, and the friends. However, when asked about their significant others' drinking practices males replied their girlfriends were lighter drinkers, and females replied their boyfriends were heavier drinkers.

The obtained results were congruent with the findings of Prentice and Miller (1993). Their subjects assumed that peers were more accepting of drinking practices than themselves. Thus, they believed themselves to be deviant from the social norm, becoming victims of pluralistic ignorance. These students were victimized because they did not base their actions on their own intent. Rather, the fear of unintentional deviance resulted in a behavior pattern that was simply a reflection of their high school peer group's attitude.

This finding is consistent with previously studies which have shown that attitudes about alcohol and its assessibility within one's peer group to be accurate predictors of adolescent usage (Marks, Graham, & Hansen, 1992). In fact, peer group influence has been found to be more highly correlated with adolescent usage than either parental influence or the severity of legal sanctions against underage consumption (Newcomb and Bentler, 1986).

The implications of this pattern of pluralistic ignorance for alcohol use among high school graduates are evident. First, because the student assumes that alcohol is essential for the success of a social event, he/she is less likely to attend a non-alcoholic event for fear of not conforming. Therefore, construction of non-alcoholic social functions, which try to serve as a replacement of social functions that include alcohol, will probably not be useful in decreasing usage. Second, informational campaigns aimed at the individual are fruitless because they change only personal opinion and not behavior because the individual's perception of the status quo remains intact. As a result, these common types of school-based programs that seek to decrease adolescent drinking are ineffective (Hansen, 1990). Effective programs both educate the adolescent in peer resistive training and try to change the misconstrued perceptions about the "norms" of alcohol usage (Hansen and Graham, 1991).

**References**

PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE


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