

How Accurate Is Teens' Insistence That "Everyone Else Is Doing It"? ☆☆☆☆



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Is Everyone Doing It?

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One of the curious phenomena of adolescence is the way teens compare what risky behavior they're getting away with against what their friends are getting away with. This should be a straightforward process; to the extent they drink together at parties, and text-message throughout the day and night, they should be accurately aware what the pack is up to.

Unfortunately, this is not how it works, according to Dr. Christopher Daddis of Ohio State University. Be they jock or goth, teens might know every detail of their best friend's life, but when they contemplate their peer group, they key off the traits of their clique leader – and these leaders usually are engaging in more risk behavior. In addition, adolescents boast to each other about what they've done, how crazy it was – but they're mostly mute about what they don't do. Hearing only the wild stories, teens derive a very skewed picture of what their friends are enjoying.

The extent of this misperception – called pluralistic ignorance – has been measured in dozens of studies. From middle school through college, students wildly overestimate how many of their classmates are drinking, smoking, and hooking up. In many surveys, they perceive almost twice as much debauchery as really exists. In the mind of a teenager, everyone else really is having more fun.

This distortion ends up having a very real effect on a teen's behavior. Adolescents are especially concerned with social comparisons. If they believe they are failing to measure up, they often change their attitudes and behaviors to be consistent with the peer group. Wanting to fit in, they migrate to the norm, or more accurately, to the false norm they intuit. In studies on peer substance use, scholars have repeatedly found that kids' perception of how much their friends are smoking or using drugs and alcohol is a better predictor of the kids' future use than their friends' actual use. In essence, the majority of teens are chasing an illusion.

During high school, parents are the ones standing in the way of this mass migration. When a teen screams to her parents, "But my friends get to go to the concert!" she's not just saying that to be argumentative. She really believes it, albeit mistakenly. According to Daddis, the more an adolescent believes her friends get to make their own decisions, the more she will reject her parents' control.

Daddis recently measured this perception-bias not just schoolwide, but clique-by-clique, in Ohio middle schools and high schools. He found that for boys, they overestimate peer autonomy the most in sixth and seventh grade. For girls, in eighth and ninth grade. Daddis also found interesting differences among the cliques. He found that HipHoppers (in his sample, mostly white boys who listen to rap and wear baggy jeans) don't mind it when their parents butt in over what clothes they wear, but it was none of their parents' damn business if they'd gotten into a fight after school, or had been drinking. The Preps were the opposite. The Toughs objected the most to the rules imposed upon them, but their objections didn't win them any more freedom than the Normals. Daddis found that Goths start out in sixth grade with the most freedom, but they don't gain any additional freedom after that, and by twelfth grade, they have among the least amount of freedom. Nobody gains more freedom over the years than the Jocks.

In theory, if teens could learn that their perception was so off base, they would realize they don't need to drink more and have more sex to fit the norm. This idea has taken off among college administrators, which have been trying to curb alcohol abuse by marketing the truth to students. At the University of New Hampshire, brochures and websites (<http://www.unh.edu/reality-check/media.htm>) loudly proclaim that "5/6 of UNH students drink only 1/3 of all alcohol." That means the remaining 1/6th of students are drinking 2/3 of all alcohol on campus, which is nothing to be proud of. The idea is that some students will feel less pressure to get drunk if they learn it's normal to not be. At Northern Illinois University, one of the first adopters, alcohol consumption dropped 44% over nine years.

This type of intervention is known informally as "social norms marketing." Hundreds of campuses are now trying it, and the creation of the programs has become a small commercial industry. By 2001, The New York Times proclaimed it "an idea of the year."

Despite its increasing popularity, results since then have been mixed. A 2003 Harvard review of 57 universities determined that social norm campaigns hadn't succeeded in reducing alcohol use on any of the campuses. Some colleges had seen a significant increase in alcohol use. Why? Because the binge drinkers have turned the campaigns into a rallying cry, making up t-shirts and extolling pride at being the drunkest on campus. When posters at one college said, "Most students drink zero to three drinks when they party," students turned it into a drinking game ("I can drink zero to three in one minute.") Perhaps even worse of all, some of those who had previously drank very little increased their drinking to match the advertised norm.

The campaigns suffer from legitimacy problems – students simply regard it as propaganda. The University of North Carolina went to great lengths to collect data so that it had credibility when presented to students. Researchers patrolled dorms and fraternities every night for three weeks, giving thousands of breathalyzer tests. They saturated the campus with a public-awareness campaign built on their results – two out of three UNC students came home on Thursday, Friday or Saturday night with a blood alcohol content of 0.00. Nevertheless only one out of three students believed the statistic. The breathalyzer tests continued, very visibly, and hundreds of students studied the methodology in class, but after three years, still only 45% believed the stat was real. As a result, drinking barely went down. (UNH has faced almost the identical problem.)

Of course, perhaps the most salient reason that social norm campaigns haven't worked is that they are based on in fiction that there is an actual "norm" – that there is a single campus culture everyone will want to be a part of. The reality is that larger the campus, the less cohesion exists.

Sure, when over the past weekend, USC Trojans took on their crosstown rival UCLA, the SC campus turned into an endless sea of cardinal and gold. But most of the time, like most other institutions, its students are fractured into much smaller peer groups – each with their own codes of what is and what isn't acceptable behavior.

What goes on Fraternity Row isn't necessarily representative of what's going on in the film school or pre-med, and each set of students might be offended at the idea that you'd lump them in all together. It is through exploring their differences that they are learning to define who they are.

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