

Kathleen McMath

The Social Psychology of Underage Drinking

Underage drinking has been a serious problem in the United States for generations. As a senior in high school, I have been subject to watching the completely devastating effects that underage drinking can have on a young person's life. I have known people who participate in underage drinking for many different reasons, but as a future Psychology Major, I have explored some aspects of social psychology and how they relate to the pressure for underage individuals to drink alcohol. Not only do these aspects of social psychology explain the common behavior, but they also address just how unhealthy and damaging underage drinking can be.

By definition, social psychology is the study of how we think about, influence, and relate to others. In social psychology, stereotypes can affect the way that an individual views a group of people. A major stereotype that all teens face is, "Oh, all teenagers drink alcohol at some point before they are of age". When a child grows up hearing that type of generalization about teenagers and drinking alcohol, they are going to be more likely to be impacted by something known as normative social influence; this type of influence is a result of one's desire to gain approval. In early high school years, many teenagers are under the impression that underage drinking is simply a fact of life. Because of these preconceived ideas, many teenagers will fall into a terrible internal desire to conform. Conformity is incredibly dangerous when it comes to underage drinking because conformity is the point at which a person will change their behavior to match a group standard. Teenagers will start drinking alcohol with their friends simply because "everyone else is doing it". What comes next for many people is an internal fight. Teenagers may be drinking to feel like they "fit in", but if that teenager knows what they are doing is wrong, social psychologists theorize that the teenager will change their thoughts on underage drinking to match their actions. Having conflicting thoughts and actions is uncomfortable and the

cognitive dissonance theory says that these teenagers will then change their thoughts in order to be more comfortable while drinking alcohol.

These psychological changes can lead to very negative effects. When in a large group, deindividuation may occur which is characterized as the loss of self-awareness and self-restraint. These effects can be highly amplified by intoxication and lead to extremely out of control teenagers who may make incredibly poor decisions. As kids continue to drink, many do not know their limits, and may find themselves in very dangerous situations. For example, teenagers with alcohol poisoning or a severe injury as a result of intoxication are very dangerous scenarios. In my opinion, the most concerning component of underage drinking is the bystander effect. Social psychologists have observed that in emergency situations, people (when sober) have a tendency to be less likely to give aid if other bystanders are present. Imagine the intensification that intoxication would cause to the bystander effect. Intoxicated teenagers are typically fearful of accepting responsibility for their bad decisions to drink alcohol. Intoxicated teenagers are also in the same category as average people who experience the bystander effect, but in my opinion, are even more likely to respond to emergencies in an irresponsible way because of their state of mind.

The addressed dangers of underage drinking are not the only possible dangers. Underage drinking can lead to injury, crime, driving while intoxicated, and many more life threatening actions. When I was a junior in high school, I knew a peer who had many negative encounters with the law. He was involved in much more than underage drinking, but while on probation, he was pulled over and received a DWI. He then spent 30 days in a local jail where he continued to throw his life away. If this young man could have known that the idea of all teenagers drinking was simply a stereotype, maybe he would not have traveled down the path that he did. If during his first few years as a teenager, he knew that there were people who would abstain from alcohol and enjoy themselves in safer ways, maybe his

life would not be as negative as it is today. I believe that if we work to disprove the stereotypes about alcohol that face the young generations of today, we can prevent the poor decisions, injuries, and even deaths that underage alcohol use can lead to. The legal age of 21 exists in the United States for a very specific reason: Young people are not developed enough to accept the extreme responsibilities that are associated with drinking alcohol.