

Social Norms and Stereotypes

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Abstract

The following paper focuses on the prevalence of social norms and stereotypes among college students. More specifically it will discuss the sources of influences for the development of norms and stereotypes about alcohol consumption as well as how it is communicated within families, peers and group's students belong to such as Greek organizations. Various research mentioned in this paper will elaborate and provide explanation as of to why this occurs and how as well as the different types of factors that are apparent in the connections between social norms and how they're communicated.

Keywords: Social norms, stereotypes, alcohol consumption, college students.

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The concept of whether social norms and stereotypes are a simultaneous cycle of influencing the other is something that can be observed among all aspects of society. Which one comes first is not exactly easy to determine, however one cannot exist without the other. Stereotypes and social norms encourage people to have preconceived ideas on how to behave and who to interact with as well as promote self-fulfilling prophecies. This idea about these influences is certainly recognized in college students and can be seen through their behaviors and interactions with each other. Social norms and stereotypes are learned through various forms of communication via family, and friends and groups a person belongs to. Influences from these sources provide the very platform that society continues to build on that keep social norms and stereotypes thriving.

Norms and stereotypes are not just developed on their own without the help of society “creating” them. They’re developed through different assumptions applied to various groups and types of people then communicated through families and peers. How these are communicated within these specific sources of learning depends on the perceptions they hold. If a student’s family approves of drinking or even encourages it, that student is more than likely going to withhold this perception of alcohol consumption and relay it to others through various interactions. Researchers view this constant relay as a moderator of descriptive norms and behavior. This was elaborated in a study that recognized how counterproductive putting intense focuses on alcohol problems caused students to develop exaggerated perceptions about the alcohol use on college campuses (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin & Presley, 1999). More research on this idea provided information that recognized that students are instrumentally influenced more by their close social groups than a group that did not closely interact with (Ajzen

& Fishbein 1980). These are pivotal “discoveries” in realizing that social norm influence is not just a one sided transfer of communication and can come from almost any source of information.

College students begin college with preconceived ideas about what is expected of them in terms of drinking and social behaviors. With the knowledge of these social norms, students tend to catalyze self-fulfilling prophecies which by definition occur when “a person’s expectations of an event make the event more likely to occur than would otherwise have been” (Looking Out, Looking In, (2014). For example, if a student has the idea that drinking excessive amounts is what they’re supposed to do (due to the stereotype that this is the accepted behavior) then that student will participate in this type of behavior. This concept is based on the Theory of Normative Social Behaviors which illustrates that descriptive norms directly correlate with behaviors with normative mechanisms such as social approval and outcome expectations incorporated into the connection between the two. This theory has been tested in research that studied excessive alcohol consumption in college students and exercises the fact that college is “a new experience where they learn new rituals and modes of conduct and that this ambiguity enhances normative influences” (Rimal & Real, 2005, p. 170). Students rely on each other to learn what is acceptable and also how to behave not only with alcohol but with their decision making as well. If students around them are drinking excessive amounts then, naturally, other students will conform to this behavior as well. This is a perfect example of how subjective norms are applied to how students use their perceptions about the importance of others beliefs as motivation to comply with those beliefs (Rimal & Real, 2005).

While family and peers are both incredibly contributory to how social norms are developed and perceived, specific groups a student belongs to can heavily introduce new ideas and perceptions regardless of what was understood before. At the college student level of

friendship development is the participation in Greek organizations (fraternities and sororities). Ideas of how these groups of students behave in terms of alcohol consumption is routinely preconceived upon joining and the vicious cycle of reinforcing the idea of how these groups behave begins again. Elaborating on the idea mentioned earlier of self-fulfilling prophecies, students join these organizations with specific expectations such as excessive drinking and base their behavior on these expectations therefore making it more likely to happen. This is the explanation as of to why norms and stereotypes continue to flourish since it is a constant “cycle” of communication between students and those they interact with. A study done to research the biases in drinking norms in college students reported that biases were “particularly evident within organized social groups (i.e. fraternities and sororities)” (Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1990). Also discovered in this research was that students perceive this as normative since it occurred so often around them in their close social groups. When compared to other social groups such as those who lived in dorms together or close friends the amount they drank were considered “normal” among them as well. This emphasizes that normative perceptions vary among groups but stay consistent in the theory of how people are influenced.

Social norms and stereotypes are inescapable and influence decisions and perceptions in every day society. There are vast amounts of research on this topic that provide countless explanations as of to why there is a constant exchange of influence about norms and stereotypes and will hopefully continue to be a heavily researched topic. Norms can influence negatively as seen throughout this paper. Alcohol consumption and the knowledge of why this type of behavior occurs can be explained and possibly even prevented if more awareness of the information of norms is expanded. While norms and stereotypes are pivotal factors in our decision making, knowing how important they are can assist in *better* decision making and influence on others.

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