



## The myth of conformity: Adolescents and abstention from unhealthy drinking behaviors



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### ABSTRACT

Adolescent peer groups with pro-drinking group norms are a well-established source of influence for alcohol initiation and use. However, classic experimental studies of social influence, namely 'minority influence', clearly indicate social situations in which an individual can resist conforming to the group norm. Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health ("Add Health"), a nationally representative sample of adolescents, we find evidence that being a non-drinking adolescent does not unilaterally put youth at risk for drinking onset when faced with a friendship network where the majority of friends drink. Our results also show that a non-drinking adolescent with a majority of drinking friends is significantly less likely to initiate alcohol abuse if he or she has a minority of non-drinking friend(s). Furthermore, a drinking adolescent with a majority of friends who drink has a decreased probability of continuing to drink and has overall lower levels of consumption if he or she has a minority of friends who do not drink. Our findings recognize that adolescent in-group friendships are a mix of behavioral profiles and can perhaps help adolescents continue or begin to abstain alcohol use even when in a friendship group supportive of alcohol use.

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### Introduction

Adolescents may be the archetypal social animals, intentionally spending vast amounts of time together to fulfill the human need for social interaction. Friendships provide protection, knowledge, support, and behavioral guidance via in-group rules and norms. It is within these friendship groups that the 'I' becomes 'we' as adolescents become concerned with 'us' instead of 'me' (Kroger, 2004). Friendship groups wield enormous power to exact behavioral conformity. Friends can both accept and reject an adolescent, promote and restrict behavior, improve self-esteem and ridicule mercilessly (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). The social life of an adolescent is often better if he or she conforms because failure to do so risks ostracism from the group (Williams, Forgas, von Hippel, & Zadro, 2005).

Yet, it is within the friendship group that adolescents must also satisfy the compulsory drive for personal differentiation, but do so without becoming noxious to their friendship groups (see Snyder &

Fromkin, 1980). This creates a tension between individuality and group membership. Adolescents have the demonstrated ability rebel, push back, and dissent from the normative influence of parents and schools while remaining students and family members nonetheless. Discussions of this ability to resist conformity and influence have yet to be adequately extended to the adolescent friendship group.

We question the mechanistic view of the all powerful group behavioral norm and the passive adolescent in discussions of social influence. We draw upon established social psychological theories of resistance to social influence (e.g., Moscovici, 1980) to assess the extent to which an adolescent is a servile recipient of friends' influence, having his or her behavior dominated by majority rule. Or, if a small collective of individuals can resist the influence of established behavioral norms within the friendship group. Furthermore, we ask if a numerical minority can also significantly influence the established behavior of a member of the majority away from the dominant behavioral position.

Our study links the presence of an in-group behavioral minority to adolescent drinking, a behavior shown to be predominately influenced by peers. For example, does having two non-drinking friends decrease an adolescent's established drinking patterns if

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the friendship group also consists of four drinking friends? This encourages the discussion of social influence to include conformity to and resistance from in-group norms. This is important because research consistently references pro-drinking group norms of an adolescent's friends as a risk factor for the onset and continued use of alcohol (Balsa, Homer, French, & Norton, 2011; Donovan, 2004). Broadly, our goal is to advance theoretical and empirical research on interpersonal influence from a socio-psychological perspective. We examine the effect of drinking and non-drinking friends using the social network component of the Add Health data, a nationally representative sample of middle and high school adolescents in the United States.

### Alcohol use, adolescents, and peers

Alcohol consumption among adolescents continues to be an issue in the United States being associated with an assortment of other unhealthy behaviors such as illicit drug use, and sex (Donovan & Jessor, 1985; Kulbok & Cox, 2002; Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999). Adolescents who are drinkers are more likely to show signs of emotional distress (Crosnoe, Muller, & Frank, 2004). Risky drinking behavior during adolescence also leads to a variety of detrimental outcomes such as car accidents (Lang, Waller, & Shope, 1997), driving while under the influence (Farrow & Brissing, 1990), emergency room visits (Meropol, Moscatti, Lillis, Ballow, & Janicke, 1995), poor academic performance (Crosnoe et al., 2004), dropping out of high school (Chatterji & DeSimone, 2005), sexual victimization (Bachanas et al., 2002), and attempted suicide (Miller, Lippmann, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2007). Lastly, high risk drinking places an adolescent at greater risk for heavy drinking and alcohol dependence in adulthood (DeWit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborne, 2000).

A vast body of literature establishes the importance of peer influence in adolescents' drinking behavior and substance abuse (Fujimoto & Valente, 2012a, 2012b). Adolescent exposure to substance abuse by friends is a strong, positive correlate of personal substance abuse (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Kobus & Henry, 2010). Recent studies used detailed social networking data to add clarity to how and why peers matter in the explanation of drinking during adolescence. For instance, adolescents tend to drink to earn social rewards from their friends (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005; Diego, Field, & Sanders, 2003). Different types of friends such as a best-, close- or regular friends have separate and significant influence on increasing and adolescent's drinking (Rees & Pogarsky, 2011; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, & Pilgrim, 1997). Reciprocal friendships amplify the effect of peer influence on adolescent alcohol (Fujimoto & Valente, 2012a), as do personal dispositions, school level factors, and relationship characteristics (Botticello, 2009; Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Vitaro, Brendgen, & Tremblay, 2000). In sum, health related research has empirically established peer influence and friendship network conditions as prerequisites for understanding the etiology of adolescent drinking.

Yet, focusing on the various ways peers influence and promote drinking behaviors only shows the "dark side of friendship" and ignores the "ways in which particular friendships contribute [in] both positive and negative ways to well-being and adjustment" (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; p. 165). Berndt & Murphy (2003) refer to this as the "myth [that] friends' influence is predominantly negative" (p. 278). Brechwald and Prinstein (2011) state "the majority of research examining peer influence effects...has focused on socialization of anti-social, deviant, and health-risk behaviors" (p. 167) but also acknowledges that the past 10 years have resulted in "sorely needed research" related to peer influence of healthy behaviors (see also Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). Integration of these two literatures is critical to recognizing adolescent friendship network may contain a mix of both pro-social

and anti-social peers and what this means for peer influences and adolescent drinking (see Haynie, 2002; Windle et al., 2008).

Friends disapprove of and discourage drinking (Keefe, 1994). Yet, little research engages these findings as possible ways in which adolescents can use in-group friendships as a means of resisting in-group norms favorable to alcohol consumption. Instead, research has envisioned adolescents in need of specialized training in resistance to social influence and conformity towards substance use through teacher, peer, or school led intervention programs (see Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). The ability to resist social influence and to rebel against group norms seems to be reserved for high-risk youth in their continuing personal attempts to resist conventional norms and their strong need for independence (see Jessor & Jessor, 1977; Paton & Kandel, 1978).

### Social influence: a bias towards conformity

Despite experimental evidence to the contrary, there is a tendency to regard the study of social influence and how it changes behavior as equating to the study of an individual always conforming to the group norm (Moscovici, 1976; see also Packer & Miners, 2012). For example, Asch's (1951, 1956) famous line studies on social influence provide the foundation for many contemporary studies of social influence and conformity (Friedkin & Johnsen, 2011). His work is regularly cited as evidence that the group majority is able to cause individuals to comply or conform to its position (Levine, 1999). Yet, the original intent of Asch's experiments was the examination of resistance to social influence and group suppression of non-conformity (Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972). Asch (1952) felt social influence research had "...taken slavish submission to group forces as the general fact and has neglected or implicitly denied the capacities of men for independence" (p. 451). That is, social influence is more than the individual behaviorally yielding to an established group norm. The findings of Asch's (1951, 1956) experiments demonstrate strong support for the capacity of individuals to resist the majority group's influence (Bond & Smith, 1996; Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994). Even having one supporter for an individual's dissenting opinion against the majority reduced conformity to the group's erroneous position from 32 percent to 5.5 percent, thereby almost eliminating conformity to the erroneous group norm (Asch, 1951). Asch (1956) concludes that there is a considerable effect of the majority group on the individual but "it was by no means complete or even the strongest force at work" (p. 10). That is, individuals can resist the influence of the majority group and this resistance is even more pronounced with a single partner sharing their opinion.

A focus solely on conformity to group norms and how the majority obtains conformity ignores the demonstrated ability of individuals to be non-conformists, actively and successfully promoting within group change. This emphasis suggests only the majority can exercise social influence because they have power in numbers or status; deviance from the majority position is an individual defect and not an impetus for behavioral or opinion change. Therefore, in keeping with the idea of conformity bias, an erroneous position held by the in-group majority is not correctable by a powerless in-group minority (Moscovici, 1985); resolution to in-group conflict will always be settled in favor of the majority by virtue of their implied position of overwhelming social influence.

The work of Moscovici (1976, 1980, 1985; see also Nemeth, 1986) challenges the assumption that individuals in the minority are only the targets of influence and not the source. Moscovici's (1980, 1985) *conversion theory* is a formal report on how and why 'minority influence' occurs and is supported by a large body of empirical

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