

Student-see, Student-do: Perceptions of Conformity among Friends¹

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This study examined how college students perceive their same-sex friends', as well as their own, participation in activities as a result of peer pressure. Participants were undergraduate students between the ages of 18-22 in Psychology classes. A survey was handed out that gave students two different situations in which a character gave into peer pressure and conformed to a peer group despite the character's personal beliefs. Participants were asked to first rate on a scale how likely they would have given into peer pressure if put in the same situation. Then, they were asked to rate how likely they believed their closest same-sex friend would have given into peer pressure if they were put into the same situation. The area of comparison is the difference in ratings of self and friends.

Introduction

According to the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey (1997), college students' frequently participate in reckless and exploratory behavior. Through a survey of students aged 18-24, 41.5% reported current sporadic heavy drinking, 27.8% admit to driving after drinking alcohol, and only 37.7% reported using a condom during their last occurrence of sexual intercourse. Going away to college is a scary and exciting experience, and one of the biggest fears on students' minds is whether they will be accepted or rejected by others. A high level of pressure from peers paired with the strong desire to be accepted often leads to a college student's experimentation of dangerous drugs and alcohol, and participation in other risky behaviors.

Past research has identified peer pressure as being one of the strongest predictors of adolescent and young adults' decisions to participate in reckless substance abuse (Teese & Bradley, 2008), as well as risky sexual activity and delinquent school behavior (Santor, Messervey, & Kusumakar, 2000). To help decrease college students' participation in reckless activities, intervention and educational programs can be taught at colleges. In order for these programs to be successful, the underlying influences on a student's decision to take part in reckless behaviors need to be studied.

Santor et al., (2000) measured three influences on reckless behavior that all seemed to be interrelated: peer pressure, peer conformity, and popularity. All three can be considered social predictors. There were 145 adolescents participating, approximately 16-18 years old, who answered questionnaires measuring peer pressure, peer conformity, popularity, and substance use constructed exclusively for this study (Santor et al., 2000). The researchers concluded that peer pressure and peer conformity were stronger predictors than popularity of participation in reckless behaviors such as substance use, delinquency, and sexual behavior.

Rolison and Scherman (2003) took a different approach than Santor et al., (2000) and looked at other variables, such as genetics and cognition, as well as social factors. The researchers found that there are three sources of influence on college students' decisions to participate in risk taking behavior: a genetic sensation-seeking trait, perceived costs and benefits, and perceived peer participation. The researchers used questionnaires distributed to 196 college students to study the effects of personality, environmental, and cognitive influences on their decision making process.

The personality domain was studied by Rolison and Scherman (2003) by using Zuckerman's Sensation-Seeking Scale, which can be divided into four sections measuring the desire

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to participate to risky activities, seeking out new experiences, desire for less limitations in social situations, and aversion toward recurring experiences (Rolison & Scherman, 2003). The cognitive domain was studied by using a self-report questionnaire named the Risk Involvement and Perception Scale (RIPS) (Rolison & Scherman, 2003). The RIPS consists of questions assessing commonality of risk-taking, perceived benefits, and perceived risks (Rolison & Scherman, 2003)

The environmental domain was studied by Rolison and Scherman (2003) by using rating scales in the RIPS. To measure the variable of peer pressure, a rating scale from not at all influenced to greatly influenced, relating to the degree in which peers influence students decisions, was added to each of the 23 risky behaviors (Rolison & Scherman, 2003). To measure the variable of perceived peer participation, a rating scale from not at all to daily or more, relating to how often a college student believes peers are participating in reckless behavior, was added to each of the 23 reckless behaviors (Rolison & Scherman, 2003).

Rolison and Scherman (2003) found that all three factors, personality, cognitive, and environmental, had an influence on college student engagement in risky behavior. The higher the level of sensation-seeking, and the higher the perceived benefit, the more likely there will be participation in reckless behavior (Rolison & Scherman, 2003). Although peer pressure was not found to be an important predictor of participation in risk-taking behavior, perceived peer participation was (Rolison & Scherman, 2003). Even though peer pressure was not found to be a strong variable in a college student's decision making process, the findings of Rolison and Scherman (2003) are important because they illustrate that there is a strong desire among college students to be a part of the group by participating in activities they believe their peers are most likely doing,

Teese and Bradley (2008) came to a different conclusion than Rolison and Scherman (2003) relating to peer pressure in their study examining reckless behavior among college students. Similar to the study done by Rolison and Scherman (2003), Teese and Bradley (2008) outlined personality, cognitive, and social domains. The personality

domain studied was level of impulsivity, the cognitive domain was perceived risks and benefits, and the social domain was peer pressure.

Three variables of reckless behavior - reckless substance abuse, reckless driving, and reckless sexual behavior - were assessed using questionnaires, completed by 208 students, called the Reckless Behavior Questionnaire (RBQ) (Teese & Bradley, 2008). The RBQ required the students to respond to questions on how frequently they engaged in reckless behaviors over the past year (Teese & Bradely, 2008).

In order to assess peer pressure, Tesse and Bradley (2008) used the Emerging Adult Peer Pressure Inventory. This test consists of an eight item scale used to measure a young adult's view of the severity of pressure from friends to engage in various activities.

Teese and Bradely (2008) found that both impulsivity and perceived risks and benefits influenced college students' participation in reckless sexual activity and reckless driving. The researchers also found peer pressure to be the strongest predictor of substance use among college students. There is a similar theme in all three studies of a social/environmental variable influencing behavior. Peer conformity and influence, either in the form of peer pressure or just the desire to belong, have a strong influence on the decision for a college student to engage in reckless behavior.

Kuntsche, Gmel, Wicki, Rehm, & Grichting (2006) studied the gender age differences among adolescent binge drinking. The researchers used a survey for students ages 13-17, which asked students how frequently they had a certain amount of alcoholic drinks in a day for the past 30 days. Kuntsche et al., (2006) found that there were two main effects: age and gender. Males and older adolescents were more likely to participate in frequent binge drinking.

Shomaker and Furman (2007) studied body image among female college students. The researchers separated the 82 female participants into two experimental conditions: the Pressure to be Thin Condition and the Positive Encouragement Condition. Each condition contained two confederate research assistants engaging in

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conversation. In the Pressure to be Thin Condition, Confederate 1 complained about her body and physical appearance, and Confederate 2 reinforced her concerns. In the Positive Encouragement Condition, Confederate 1 complained about her physical appearance, and Confederate 2 encouraged and convinced her to feel more satisfied with her body image (Shomaker & Furman, 2007).

Participants body images were assessed by Shomaker and Furman (2007) using pre and post test measures. The researchers found that same-sex peer pressure to be thin negatively affected young women's body image satisfaction (Shomaker & Furman, 2007).

According to the research discussed, it is known that there are many different factors influencing college students' decisions to engage in reckless activities. It is also known that there is a sex difference between participation in risky behaviors. However, less known is how students perceive their own participation in risky behaviors compared to their friends'.

Based on the research discussed, it is predicted that if college students accurately perceive their susceptibility to peer pressure and conformity, estimates of likely conformity behavior between self and friend should be equivalent.

Method

Participants

Participants in this experiment were 54 Psychology students at a university in western Pennsylvania. Ages of the students ranged from 18-26, ($M = 19.31$) and the study included 21 male and 33 female participants. A haphazard, or "convenience", sampling method was used for selecting participants. It was assumed that the sample included students from a variety of backgrounds and was a good representation of the overall college student population.

Design & Materials

This was a 2x2x2 mixed design study. The three independent variables were sex (male vs. female), situation (body image vs. alcohol use), and perspective (self vs. friend). The dependent variable was the students' estimates of likely conforming behavior.

Surveys contained two different scenarios: the first one dealt with problems of body image, and the second one dealt with alcohol use. Each student received one of the two scenarios, and the names in the scenario were different depending on the sex of the participant (see Appendix). Following the scenario, participants were asked two questions. First, they were asked to rate themselves on a Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 5 (very likely) on how likely they believed they would have given into the peer pressure and conformed if put in the same situation. For the second question, they were asked to rate their closest same-sex friend on the same scale on how likely they believed their friend, if put in the same situation, would have given into the peer pressure and conformed.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered to the participants during the beginning of their psychology class. Participants were told not to put their names on the questionnaires, assuring that the results would remain anonymous. However, they were asked to answer one biographical question of age. Participants were asked to answer each question carefully and honestly. Surveys were completed within two to four minutes of receiving them.

Results

The data were analyzed using a 2 (Sex of Participant: Male or Female) x 2 (Situation: Body Image of Alcohol Use) x 2 (Perspective: Self or Friend) mixed design Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). A significant main effect of Perspective was found, $F(1,64)=34.6$, $p < .01$, in which participants rated themselves as less likely to conform compared to their same-sex friend (Self: $M=1.68$, $SD=.87$; Friend: $M=2.67$, $SD=1.21$). However, this was rated on a 5 point scale, and participants still rated their same-sex friend as low or not very likely (i.e., below "3"). No other significant effects were found.

Discussion

Three important concepts were discovered through this research. It showed a self-serving bias, in which an individual believes that they will perform more favorable than others in situations which are important to their self-esteem. It also

showed that college students have an inaccurate perception of their performance in situations involving peer pressure and conformity when they are asked to perceive it compared to when they are actually involved in the situation. Past research has also shown a significant sex difference between the two different scenarios of risky behavior, while the present study found no significant sex difference.

I believe that future research would benefit by assessing students decision making when they are put in real life situations involving peer pressure and peer conformity. Have students, ideally two friends, do a task separately. Ask them after how likely they believe they could get their friend to follow their lead. Then, have the two friends do the task together and observe their meeting.

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Appendix

Survey (F1/M2)

Recently Natalie/Joey, a freshman in college, and her/his friends have made plans to go on their first spring break vacation. Natalie/Joey has discovered that her/his friends have been skipping meals and taking diet pills in order to stay thin and keep their bodies in shape for the beach. Her/His friends have been pressuring her/him to try their new diet because of the quick results (one friend lost 10 pounds in one week!). Natalie/Joey knows that this is not a healthy way to stay in shape, but she/he gives into the pressure anyway and adopts the same diet as her/his friends so she/he doesn't stand out in the group.

Survey (M1/F2)

Joey/Natalie, a freshman in college, has been slacking off his/her entire first semester. When it comes to finals week, Joey/Natalie knows that he/she needs to study hard in order to raise his/her grades, or his/her parents will stop helping him/her out with tuition. However, his/her friends are pressuring him/her to go out and party with them instead of studying for his/her finals. In fact, they keep coming into his/her dorm room and bothering him/her about going out. He/She knows his/her grades are important if he/she wants to come back next semester, but he/she decides to go out with his/her friends because he/she doesn't want the reputation of being a loser.