

## 10 Commentary

# Adolescent Drinking as Collective Behavior and Performance

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Dr. Johnstone has given us a thoughtful and very useful review of aggregate-level variations in adolescent drinking behavior and has pointed more generally to the importance of group- and cultural-level processes in the patterning of drinking behavior. I have no disagreement with his well-considered summarization of the relevant literature and nothing to add concerning variations in drinking by major social differentiations. These comments simply supplement his discussion of environmental and cultural influences on adolescent drinking behavior.

As Sower noted in his seminal study, adolescent drinking, even more than adult drinking, is a form of collective behavior: "Teenage drinking is not only culturally patterned and socially controlled behavior, it is almost entirely a group act . . . . The drinking of teenagers is almost exclusively 'partyng action'" (Sower 1959, p. 656). A teenager's drinking is thus not only a matter of personal experimentation and preference, it is also a performance for others.

Indeed, how the behavior is likely to be viewed by others may be a more important motivation for behavior than any personal preference.

The performance is first of all given by the individual drinker for those in the drinking group. It has long been noted (Mass Observation 1987, pp. 169-170) how closely adults in a drinking group watch and match each other's drinking, down to the sip. We may expect American teenagers, given the comparative novelty and the edge of illicitness associated with underage drinking, to keep an even closer watch on each other's drinking and associated behavior. The correlation between the drinking behavior of friends is not just a matter of birds of a feather flocking together but also often of shared behavior in a common normative circumstance (Harford and Speigler 1982).

The performance—the individual's drinking, or for that matter abstention, and associated behavior—also contributes to the individual's reputation among a wider circle of peers, as the

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events of a party or other drinking occasion are recounted to others by participants. Reputation in turn becomes something to live up to or live down, motivating further wild or timid behavior. The causal arrow between drinking and various delinquencies, for instance, thus points in both directions.

As well as these individual-level aspects, adolescent drinking as a performance has strong collective aspects. Ethnographic studies of drinking have long noted the solidarity of drinking groups. Drinking itself, as Partanen (1991) has recently argued, is a "medium of sociability"; often, indeed, it is "a form of communion, a commensal sharing in which persons who participate are stripped of the capacities in terms of which they interact in [non-drinking] contexts" (Karp 1980, p. 104). The rituals of sharing, reciprocity, and turn-taking that are frequently part of the drinking occasion are a collective performance with which the participants construct and symbolize at least a temporary solidarity (Gusfield 1987).

For adolescents, the solidarity of the drinking group has some extra reinforcements. Drinking is primarily part of the sphere of sociability, as opposed to the spheres of school and home. The latter spheres are adult-controlled, while adult attempts to control the sphere of sociability frequently fall short of full success. Control of the sphere of sociability is, indeed, a matter for contest between adolescents and their parents and other adults. Adults fear for the effects of present behavior on the adoles-

cent's future and fight a long rearguard action against what are seen as premature claims to adult status. Adolescents, on the other hand, fight for the authenticity of their existential present, against adult definitions of them in terms of their future, and stake escalating claims for adult status (Hollingshead 1949; Friedenberg 1962). Drinking forms a wonderful symbolic arena for these contests: Not only is it a potentially hazardous behavior, but it also constitutes by legal definition a claim of adulthood. The solidarity of the adolescent drinking group is thus reinforced by its status as a collective offensive action in the struggle of the generations. In that American adolescent drinking is usually illegal, solidarity is also increased by the need for collective planning and boundary maintenance against police and other legal intervention.

The location of adolescent drinking in the sphere of sociability, and its character as a collective and solidary act often symbolizing and expressing freedom from adult controls (Harford and Spiegler 1982), may help explain why school-based alcohol education programs, conducted by adults in a sphere of adult control, appear to have so little effect on adolescent drinking (Moskowitz 1989).

The performance of the drinking group is frequently staged not only for its participants. Ethnographers have noted that the drinking group excludes as well as includes (e.g., Cavan 1966, pp. 216-233), and the excluded are often an audience for the performance. The col-

lective drinking performance of young people may indeed be an instrument of differentiation from other social groups or sometimes of aggression against the audience (e.g., Burns 1980; Moore 1990).

The particular drinking group's performance and its audience typically coexist at what Johnstone terms the level of microcontext. But collective drinking performances may also take on a broader societal significance. Ostensive drinking may serve as a symbol of differentiation and indeed defiance across general cultural boundaries, as Stivers (1976) and Lurie (1971) have argued for specific ethnic groups in American society. In particular, in part because of factors we have already discussed, ostensive drinking can serve as a convenient symbol of generational rebellion for a particular youth cohort. Thus, in the context of the national Prohibition, heavy drinking was a particularly apposite "symbol of liberation" (Fass 1977) for the generational revolt of the college students of the 1920's against what they defined as "Victorian morality."

I have noted in the course of these remarks a few of their implications for interpreting empirical findings on adolescent drinking. An understanding of adolescent drinking as collective behavior and as interactive performance may indeed shed new light on findings in the existing literature, which has typically been oriented toward life history and other individual-level designs and variables. But such an understanding also suggests a need for new study paradigms and designs that would allow us

to study the interplay of individual and collective variations.

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