

Misfit or Miss Goody Two Shoes? Adolescent misperceptions abound

January 7 2015



Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

It's true: teens are misunderstood. But apparently, teens themselves have dramatic misperceptions about what their peers are doing when it comes to sex, drugs and studying, possibly prompting them to conform to social norms that don't exist.

That's according to [new research](#) that shows [adolescents](#) overestimate the

amount of drug- and alcohol-use and sexual behaviors that many of their [peers](#) are engaging in. At the same time, they underestimate the amount of time their peers spend on studying or exercise.

"The behavior of all types of kids are grossly misunderstood or misperceived by adolescents, not just the jocks and the populars but also the brains and the burnouts," said senior investigator Mitch Prinstein, John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology at UNC-Chapel Hill, where the study was based and spearheaded by Sarah Helms, a postdoctoral fellow in the lab at the time. Researchers at Stanford and Tillburg University also co-authored the study.

"Adolescents tend to conform to stereotypes that we have seen in the Breakfast Club, but those stereotypes do not exist as dramatically as we once thought," he said.

The study examined the perceptions and behaviors of 235 10th grade participants at a suburban, middle-income high school.

Following a method commonly used in adolescent research, five reputation-based groups were identified: socially-oriented populars, athletically-oriented jocks, deviant-oriented burnouts, academically-oriented brains, and students who were not strongly affiliated with any specific crowd. Jocks and populars also ranked higher in likability than burnouts and brains, and were thus identified as high-status.

Students reported their engagement in various behaviors confidentially, allowing researchers to compare the actual and perceived behavior of the groups.

Comparisons between the groups, from what the individuals reported as their own behaviors to what others thought of them, clearly resulted in what the study called "gross [misperceptions](#)."

Even teens in the high-status groups had exaggerated perceptions of their own group peers' risky behaviors.

In the instance of cigarette use, students in the popular crowd reported that they smoked about 1.5 cigarettes a day in the past month, while others in- and outside their group thought they smoked three cigarettes a day. Jocks said they didn't smoke much at all but others estimated they smoked at least one cigarette per day.

Burnouts reported that they smoked about two to three cigarettes per day, but their peers pegged the perceived amount at a half-pack to a whole pack of cigarettes a day.

According to their schoolmates' perceptions, jocks not only smoked more, they binged on alcohol more and had more sex than what the jocks reported as their actual behavior.

Burnouts faced similarly significant misperceptions: yes, they smoked relatively more marijuana than other groups but not nearly as much as what their peers thought they did. The burnouts were also wrongly presumed to shoplift and damage property more frequently and study less than what they reported in reality.

In fact, jocks and popular teen-agers - the two social groups seen as having the greatest potential of influencing others' behaviors - reported levels of sexual and legally deviant behaviors that were not significantly different from either the burnout or brainy groups, according to the study.

"The results of the study offers bad news for popular peers by demonstrating that they don't party and have sex as much as people think they do," said Prinstein.

On the other hand, the brainy crowd studied on average only about half the amount of time that their peers thought they did.

Since teens are sensitive to the judgment of their peers and often try to emulate the "cool kids," researchers are working to better understand the role that peers play during this impressionable period. This particular study shed light on the extent of adolescent misperceptions as well as its implications.

"This quest for identity can sometimes lead adolescents in the wrong direction," said Geoffery Cohen, a co-author and professor at Stanford Graduate School of Education.

A second prong of the study followed a group of 9th graders at a rural, low-income school through the 11th grade to examine the link between adolescent perceptions of high-status peers and adolescents' own drug use.

Researchers found that the increases in substance use that high schoolers reported during the 2.5-year study - for instance increases in cigarette, marijuana, and alcohol use - was predicted by their perceptions of what the popular students were doing: That is, those who believed popular peers were engaging in these behaviors more in 9th grade were at higher risk, two years later in 11th grade, of engaging in the same behaviors. Those with higher perceptions of their popular peers' substance use at the outset in 9th grade had steeper increases of their own drug use over time, suggesting that these misperceptions contribute to [risk behavior](#).

"The implications ... are troubling," according to the study, which was published in November by the American Psychological Association.

"Results suggest that adolescents have a caricatured [perception](#) of their peers' behavior (perhaps especially so for high-status peers) and are influenced by those gross misperceptions."

The powerful effect of perceived norms was also seen in a series of [other studies](#) by Prinstein, Cohen, and their colleagues, published by the APA in September.

Using an experimental simulated chat room, the researchers found that high schoolers were highly susceptible to the risky norms set by popular peers—even when these norms were experimentally manipulated rather than real-life measures.

Moreover the 9th graders who thought their popular peers had high numbers of sex partners and who were highly susceptible to peer norms in this experimental chatroom were at the greatest risk of elevations in their risk [behavior](#) a year-and-a-half later.

"Adolescents conform not to what others do, but what they think others do. The lesson of this research is that adolescents are wrong - most kids aren't as risky as they may think," Prinstein said.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Citation: Misfit or Miss Goody Two Shoes? Adolescent misperceptions abound (2015, January 7) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-misfit-goody-adolescent-misperceptions-abound.html>

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