Drinking to belong: Students and low self-esteem

It's that time of year again, when students old and new are heading to university. Certain behaviors might be expected in the coming months, drinking in particular. Drinking is widespread among student populations, whether for social enrichment or the need to conform. However, many college students experience the darker side of binge drinking; violence, unsafe sex or poor academic performance. Hamilton & DeHart's new research in Self and Identity examines motivations for drinking in students with low self-esteem, finding that these individuals indulge far more than their more confident peers.

Hamilton & DeHart carried out a friendship threat manipulation on 195 students, all of whom had their levels of self-esteem, explicit and implicit, evaluated. They were asked to think about their best friend and what aspects of themselves they kept secret from said friend. Both groups were then shown bogus articles, the first on how secrets between friends cause conflict and a second control group on the secret aspects of selves which bear no relationship to friendships. All participants were questioned the following night on how many drinks they had consumed with other friends - not their best friend - after the test.

The results show those with low self-esteem drank more with other friends following the threat to belonging posed by the bogus article. They appeared to seek out positive social interactions with others to repair the threat to the most important friendship. The authors note, "We suggest that this occurs because students with low implicit self-esteem…are less able to compensate for self-doubts. Because individuals with low implicit self-esteem have fewer self-resources to draw on, they may regulate threats to their belongingness differently and potentially experience a greater desire to fit in with others.”

There was a marked difference between those with low implicit vs. explicit self-esteem, the former having consumed almost 11 drinks and the latter only six on the night. The difference in actual behaviours from these two groups indicate ways of understanding students at risk of excessive drinking in the face of a threat to belonging.

Past research has shown that negative experiences can cause increased alcohol consumption to cope with negative emotions. Hamilton and DeHart sought to show that these triggers are stronger in individuals with low self-esteem, who are more sensitive to a fall out with a significant friend and who have less of a personal buffer to compensate for such upset. With the evidence they gathered from their study, the authors urge further research to enable interventions to help students avert low self-esteem to restore feelings of acceptance.

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