

Psychology in Our Social Lives

Binge Drinking and the Death of a Star Athlete

Jonathan Andrews was an honour roll student in southern Ontario, a football and rugby player, swimmer, environmentalist, and animal lover who, after graduating from high school, had travelled with friends to South America to explore the world and its cultures. Within his first week at Acadia University, he succumbed to binge drinking and died of blood alcohol poisoning (Calgary Herald, 2011).

Jonathan was not the first university student to fall victim to binge drinking repercussions. In 2010, two students died in alcohol-related accidents at Queen's University. Cameron Bruce fell out of a sixth-floor window of the Victoria Hall residence during orientation week. Then, in December, Habib Khan was killed after falling through a rooftop skylight at Duncan McArthur Hall. At St. Thomas University in Fredericton, rookie volleyball player Andrew Bartlett, 21, died in a fall down a flight of stairs in October 2010 after a team initiation party (MacQueen, 2012).

Queen's has banned its homecoming events since 2009, infamous for excessive partying that spilled off-campus and onto city streets. It joined universities like Western, Guelph, and Acadia in policing a ban on alcohol in residence rooms during orientation week, and added a host of dry events to emphasize that a blood-alcohol level isn't essential to university life. Queen's also operates a Campus Observation Room that provides a confidential, safe, nonjudgmental place to sober up.

Acadia University students and administration began formal meetings within weeks of Andrews's death to look at alcohol policies. The provincial health ministry was commissioned to write its best-practices report. Acadia's student director sent a letter to parents of newly enrolled students that August outlining new alcohol restrictions, and urging them to talk to their kids about drinking before students leave home. But one of the most innovative initiatives is the Red and Blue Crew in which volunteers take a six-hour training program that teaches CPR, skills to identify medical emergencies, and techniques for defusing risky situations. Those who complete the program sport wristbands in the school colours of red and blue.

In the health ministry's report, it was concluded that it is increasingly difficult in Western society to envision having a "good time" without alcohol being a de facto requirement, and therefore the university administration and leadership plays the largest role in shifting the culture to one of responsible fun.

The subdiscipline of psychology discussed in this chapter reflects the highest level of explanation that we will consider. This topic, known as **social psychology**, is defined as *the scientific study of how we feel about, think about, and behave toward the other people around us, and how those people influence our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour.*

The subject matter of social psychology is our everyday interactions with people, including the social groups to which we belong. Questions these psychologists ask include why we are often helpful to other people but at other times are unfriendly or aggressive; why we sometimes

conform to the behaviours of others but at other times are able to assert our independence; and what factors help groups work together in effective and productive, rather than in ineffective and unproductive, ways. A fundamental principle of social psychology is that, although we may not always be aware of it, our cognitions, emotions, and behaviours are substantially influenced by the **social situation**, or *the people with whom we are interacting*.

In this chapter we will introduce the principles of **social cognition** — *the part of human thinking that helps us understand and predict the behaviour of ourselves and others* — and consider the ways that our judgments about other people guide our behaviours toward them. We'll explore how we form impressions of other people, and what makes us like or dislike them. We'll also see how our **attitudes** — *our enduring evaluations of people or things* — influence, and are influenced by, our behaviour.

Then we will consider the social psychology of interpersonal relationships, including the behaviours of *altruism, aggression, and conformity*. We will see that humans have a natural tendency to help each other, but that we may also become aggressive if we feel that we are being threatened. And we will see how **social norms**, *the accepted beliefs about what we do or what we should do in particular social situations* (such as the norm of binge drinking common on many university campuses), influence our behaviour. Finally, we will consider the social psychology of social groups, with a particular focus on the conditions that limit and potentially increase productive group performance and decision making.

The principles of social psychology can help us understand tragic events such as the death of Jonathan Andrews. Jonathan is reported to have said to his parents that he planned on making as many friends as possible in that first week before classes. Many people might blame the tragedy on Jonathan himself, asking, for instance, “Why did he drink so much?” or “Why didn't he say no?” As we will see in this chapter, research conducted by social psychologists shows that the poor decisions Jonathan made on the night he died may have been due less to his own personal weaknesses or deficits than to his desires to fit in with and be accepted by the others around him — desires that in his case led to a disastrous outcome.

References

Calgary Herald. (2011). [Obituaries: Jonathan Andrews](http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/calgaryherald/obituary.aspx?pid=153605945). Retrieved July 2014 from <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/calgaryherald/obituary.aspx?pid=153605945>

MacQueen, K. (2012). [Battling the binge: Inside the war against risky drinking on campus](http://www.macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/battling-the-binge/). Macleans.ca Retrieved July 2014 from <http://www.macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/battling-the-binge/>