

**THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG LOW SELF-ESTEEM,
ALIENATION, ALCOHOL USE IN ADOLESCENTS:
A CIRCULAR MODEL**

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The Relationship Among
Low Self-Esteem, Alienation, and Alcohol Use In Adolescents:
A Circular Model

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To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Terry Edwards entitled "The Relationship Among Low Self-Esteem, Alienation, and Alcohol Use in Adolescents: A Circular Model." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Adolescence, the period of human development between 13 and 18 years, is characterized by many psychological and physiological changes (Coleman, 1961; Josselyn, 1952; & Mitchell, 1971). Adolescents must adapt their childhood strategies to fit the responsibilities and commitments of the adult world, and they must develop new strategies to equip them for the realities of adult life (Erikson, 1968). As adolescents mature they may encounter a few difficulties, but usually teenagers reach adulthood with few problems. In a 1987 study, 82% of the 14-16 year old subjects were classified as not being in need of treatment (Kashani, Rosenberg, Beck, Reid, & Battle). Nevertheless, problems such as low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use are real and serious in the lives of many adolescents.

Many adolescents in our society suffer from low self-esteem (Mijuskovic, 1986). Self-esteem, the degree of correspondence between one's self-concept and the concept of what is ideal (Cohen, 1968), may be lower during adolescence than during adulthood. Problems of self-esteem may be especially acute during adolescence since rapid physiological changes may cause them to feel uncomfortable about their appearance (Josselyn, 1952). Since many teens are struggling to achieve an idea of who they want to be, teens may see themselves as not fitting into their ideal (Williamson, Swingle, & Sargent, 1982). For example, some

teens mature later than they might wish, while others might mature earlier than their peers, producing embarrassment and self-consciousness (Schneiders, 1969).

Low self-esteem seems to be a prominent cause of loneliness (Mesch, Lew, Johnson, & Johnson, 1987; Weitan, 1983). Teens who suffer from low self-esteem may not feel comfortable around other people. Eventually they may alienate themselves from their peers (Coopersmith, 1967). Lonely people tend to think negative thoughts that prevent them from pursuing intimacy (Young, 1956). Since adolescence is not complete until the individual subordinates childhood identifications and achieves a new identity through healthy relationships (Erikson, 1968), poor peer relationships are predictive of future developmental problems (Hartup, 1983; Johnson, 1980; Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Putallaz & Gottman, 1982). Through providing a link between separating from parents and establishing an adult identity, healthy peer relationships enable adolescents to prevent alienation (Brown & Lohr, 1987), to develop ego strength and to encourage prosocial behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). In contrast to a situation of healthy peer relationships, alienation is a situation of detachment, isolation, or negative response to the norms and values of society. Adolescents may be more prone to feeling alienated because they do not have a system to guide them in social situations.

According to Mitchell (1971), among the "more alienated youths there is a direct and mutually reinforcing relationship with drugs" (p. 103). Likewise, as adolescents become more involved with drugs, they are more likely to become further alienated (Mitchell, Hong, & Corman, 1979). Mitchell theorized that continued drug use increases the tendency toward isolation and even helps the person maintain an alienated status.

Mitchell (1971) explained that a drug, such as alcohol, can serve to lower the self-esteem of a teenager. Drugs may serve to disguise the inadequacies of the user so that the person is ego-inflated. Drugs may also provide a temporary thrill, a feeling of maturity, and an escape from loneliness, while helping the adolescent feel more aligned with his ideal self (Stantan & Todd, 1982). He may feel even worse about himself when not under the influence of the drug.

Low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use are intricately related in the lives of some teenagers. This research paper will utilize a circular model to explain the process of the relationship among low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use. Since it is a circular model, adolescents may enter this cycle at any point. For example, an alienated adolescent may turn to alcohol for escape, and suffer a lowering of self-esteem realizing his current circumstances. However, any of the three variables; low

self-esteem, alienation, or alcohol use may set the process into play.

It is hypothesized that adolescents who have low self-esteem may become alienated and eventually turn to alcohol as a form of refuse and solace. Alcohol use may lead to further deterioration of self-esteem and alienation. Although other variables may contribute to the adolescent problems of low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use, this paper will focus on the research findings which support the existence of a process which may be described through a circular model of the interaction of these variables in the lives of adolescents.

CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Although most teens solve the developmental issues of adolescence with no serious tragedies, the problems of adolescence have elicited much research. Researchers have studied adolescent self-esteem, alienation, and the relationship between alienation and alcohol use. The interaction of all these variables may be interrelated and perhaps components of underlying dynamics.

Self-Esteem During Adolescence

Researchers have demonstrated interest in understanding how self-esteem changes during the adolescent period. In one study, Wallace, Cunningham, & Del Monte (1984) utilized the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to assess self-esteem in subjects at 9 years of age and again at 14 years of age. Subjects exhibited significant increases in total self-esteem with age. Although significant increases could have occurred during a short time period, the changes were probably gradual over the 5-year period.

Juhasz (1985) used The How I See Myself Survey to measure the self-esteem of 219 seventh and eighth graders. Although only two questions were asked, many of the respondents' answers did not relate to personality variables indicating that subjects may have had difficulty with the self-evaluation. Although this study was unclear

in its measurement of self-esteem, it suggested that early adolescence is a time when teens are experiencing problems identifying with their own ideas about their personality traits and how they feel about these traits.

Davidson (1972) tested 1374 male high school students each year that they were in high school. A variation of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to assess self-esteem. Although there was significant individual variance, as a group they showed small increases in self-esteem over the three year period.

In another study, McCarthy and Hodge (1982) used cross-sectional and longitudinal methods to study self-esteem during adolescence. Results of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were compared with results of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to assess the development of self-esteem over a year's time. The original sample consisted of 1970 junior high and senior high school students who completed both questionnaires. A year later, researchers retested 1852 subjects of the sample. The subjects were grouped into three levels of two grades each.

Using the Rosenberg scale, significant increases in self-esteem were found among the three levels for the first year testing. Significant increases were found between the first and second year test scores for each grade group for both the Rosenberg and the Coopersmith scale. Both self-esteem scales used in this study showed a positive

correlation between self-esteem and age during the adolescent years.

It is important to note that the self-esteem scores of the test dropouts were not significantly different from the self-esteem scores of those who completed the study. This suggests that the results of the study were not influenced by the characteristics of those subjects who remained in the sample.

Self-Esteem and Alienation

Current research on the development of self-esteem during adolescence concludes that self-esteem continues to increase during the teen years. Although self-esteem may fluctuate due to teen related problems, there is generally a positive relationship between age and self-esteem during adolescence. Given that self-esteem is developing during the adolescent period, its relationship to adolescent alienation is of interest.

In a 1968 study, Blane, Hill, & Brown utilized self-report questionnaires to study 526 boys and girls in grades nine through twelve. Alienation was measured by the use of a high school version of the Dean Alienation Scale. The Dean Scale measures self-reported feeling of social isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness. On this scale, powerlessness refers to the feeling of inability to control situations. Normlessness refers to purposelessness and conflict of norms. Social isolation

refers to separation from group standards. Self-esteem was measured by the Janis and Field Personality Questionnaire. The items in the Janis and Field Personality Questionnaire measure self-consciousness, feeling of personal worth, and anxiety in social situations. A significant inverse relationship was found between alienation and self-esteem. Self-esteem was also inversely related to social isolation and powerlessness as measured by the Dean Scale.

In a study of the social context of self-esteem, 91 adolescents ranging from 11-18 were asked about their self-esteem, relationships with their parents, relationships with peers, and concept of their school performance, popularity, and athletic ability (Walker & Greene, 1986). Global self-esteem was measured by using a six-item from of the Rosenberg scale which had been adapted by Bachman & O'Malley (1978). Perception of relationships with parents was measured by the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scales. The University Of Michigan Youth in Transition Study was used to study relationships with peers. A rating scale assessed subjects' perception of their own school performance, popularity, and athletic ability.

Global self-esteem, as measured by the Rosenberg scale, was significantly related to self-reported self-evaluation for adolescents. Researchers also found that

self-esteem was significantly positively related to high quality relationships. An alienated adolescent may not have quality relationships with peers, and may, therefore, suffer from low self-esteem.

In a study of peer group affiliation and adolescent self-esteem, 310 adolescents in the seventh through twelfth grades were asked to identify the major crowds in their school, describe these crowds, rank them according to status, and name five classmates who fit into each of the major crowds (Brown & Lohr, 1987). From this, five major crowds were determined to exist within the school system. Next, researchers gave those subjects who were named as a member of one of the major crowds a list of names to identify. Students who could not be identified by any members of the five major crowds were labeled "outsiders". Researchers then tested crowd members and outsiders to determine the differences between the two groups. It was not distinguished, however, how long the "outsiders" had attended the school.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used to measure self-esteem. Status was self-reported and peer-reported. Additionally, "outsiders" were asked to describe how they related to peer group status and how important crowd affiliation was to them.

Those outsiders who wanted to be in a crowd but knew that they were not part of a crowd and those who distorted

their position as crowd members had significantly lower self-esteem than did the independents. Independents are adolescents who knew they did not belong to a particular crowd but did not think membership was particularly important. Outsiders had significantly lower self-esteem than did satisfied members of a crowd. Interestingly, outsiders' self-esteem was not significantly lower than unsatisfied members of a crowd. Those who were satisfied with their position, as it related to their ideal, had higher self-esteem than those who wish to belong to a higher status group. Self-esteem was positively related to adolescents' satisfaction with their social status as related to their ideal. This study is also important in that it differentiates between self-induced isolation and non-self-induced alienation. It is non-self-induced alienation which is significantly related to low self-esteem and not simply the characteristic of being a "loner".

In a study of adolescence ranging from 14-16 years of age, Kashani, Rosenberg, Beck, Reid, and Battle (1987) utilized many tests to study the differences between well-adjusted adolescents. Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents (DICA) and the Million Adolescent Personality Inventory (MAPI) were used to assure that the subjects were not dysfunctional. A child psychologist reviewed the DICA and DICA-P to confirm the classification of well-adjusted subjects. Results from the DICA, DICA-P, and the MAPI were

used to compared well-adjusted subjects to non-well-adjusted adolescents. In this study, a well-adjusted adolescent is one who is free of dysfunctions as measured by the DICA, DICA-P, MAPI, and the child psychologist. Well-adjusted subjects reported significantly higher self-esteem than the remaining sample. Well-adjusted subjects had less alienated attitudes and significantly less concern with problems of personal esteem. This study provided support that adolescents with less problems regarding esteem are also less likely to have an alienated attitude. Adolescents with low self-esteem are more likely to develop an alienated outlook and to, therefore, become alienated.

Alienation and Alcohol Use

Since alienation has been determined to be a problem for many adolescents, researchers have tried to investigate the relationship between adolescent alienation in adolescence and other variables that might uncover a relationship between alienation and alcohol use in teenagers.

Williams' Attitudes Toward Temperate and Irresponsible Use of Alcohol Scale was used to measure the self-reported attitudes of 526 adolescents in grades 9-12 (Blane, Hill, & Brown, 1968). The Dean Alienation Scale was used to measure alienation. Subjects who scored high on the alienation scale were significantly more likely to condone the irresponsible use of alcohol. This study indicates that

alienated teens tend to have more favorable attitudes toward drinking behaviors. Although this study does not measure differences between attitudes of drinkers and of non-drinkers toward socially accepted uses of alcohol, it does provide evidence that alienated teens have more favorable attitudes toward alcohol which may cause them to experiment with and use it.

In a study of the relationship between anomie and drug use in high school juniors, the Anomie Scale of Srole was administered as well as specific items dealing with drug use (Lasky & Ziegenfuss, 1979). Researchers defined "anomie" as a sense of alienation. Although the questionnaires covered many different drugs, each drug was separated as to its specific relationship to anomie. In addition, non-users were separated from drug users for each drug so that the anomie among the users of specific drugs could be compared with anomie among non-users. A higher number of alcohol users were classified as highly anomic by researchers. This study provided further support that alienation is related to alcohol use. Teens who are alienated are more likely to use alcohol and teens who use alcohol are more likely to become alienated.

In a study of 1014 adolescents between 13-18 years, self-reports were used to classify the subjects as to frequency of use (Downs, 1983). Rejection was measured by whether or not the subjects avoided a heavy drinker or non-

drinker due to his level of drinking. Abstainers were much less likely to be avoided than the alcohol users. Downs reported that the results of this study indicate more rejection of heavy drinkers by their peers than rejection of abstainers by their peers. Therefore, adolescents who use alcohol are more likely to be alienated by their peers than are non-users. However, it should be noted that the items which were used to assess reported alcohol use were not listed in the study.

In another study using 393 high school students, 328 reported that they used alcohol (Carmen, Fitzgerald, and Holmgren, 1983). An alienation scale (Jesser, Graves, Hanson, & Jesser, 1968) was used to measure aspects of alienation. Drinking motivations were measured by a scale designed to distinguish between positive psychological functions and positive social functions. While the results may be influenced by gender differences regarding social influences, this study suggested that social factors influence adolescents' attitudes toward drinking and may motivate teens to use alcohol.

In another study of 433 high school seniors, a self-reported scale utilized 11 bipolar adjective pairs to measure personality characteristics (Wright, 1985). Another questionnaire measured frequency of drinking during the past six months. Poly-drug users were significantly more likely to report feeling rejected and bored.

Interestingly, 25 of the 30 drug users reported alcohol as one of the main drugs that they used. Although this study does not focus upon alcohol usage alone, the rate of alcohol use was so high among the drug users that the results may reveal much about alcohol users.

Teens who use alcohol may be more likely to feel alienated from their peers and they are also more likely to feel uninterested in the social activities that are going on around them. Likewise, if the teen feels uninterested and rejected in the first place, then he is more likely to become alienated.

CHAPTER 3

Discussion

Since adolescence is a time when self-esteem is at a critical point of change, it is imperative that the variables which may hinder the development of a healthy self-esteem be analyzed. Although self-esteem may fluctuate and may be even lower at times during the teen period, adolescence is a time when self-esteem is increasing. However, studies which use homogeneous samples of alienated or alcohol using teens reveal a lowering of self-esteem.

According to research, low self-esteem is related to alienation. More specifically, low self-esteem is positively related to social isolation, feelings of powerlessness, and feelings of normlessness. Teens who feel powerless to change social situations and unable to conform to the norms of society are probably more likely to feel alienated from society. It seems plausible that alienated adolescents may feel negatively about themselves if they are not as socially active and perceive themselves as socially unsuccessful as they wish they were. Since these teens may perceive a discrepancy between actual and ideal images, their self-esteem may suffer. Thus, rather than a unidirectional relationship, low self-esteem and alienation seems to be mutually reinforcing.

Research demonstrates two types of social alienation. Some adolescents are excluded from peer groups and social

activities regardless of serious and conscious efforts to fit into the high status groups. These teens suffer from low self-esteem because they do not feel that they achieve their ideal of how they should function as a member of social groups. Other adolescents do not fit into one of the peer groups, but they also do not regard group membership as particularly important. These teens do not envision group status as an important ideal and may not attempt to fit in. These teenagers are generally satisfied with their status, and their self-esteems do not differ significantly from those of the group members.

Perhaps more important than alienation are adolescents' feelings about themselves due to their concept of their own social status relative to their concept of the ideal social status. It is the frustration of not achieving their ideal which actually serves to lower self-esteem in the alienated adolescent instead of the social disengagement and isolation. To summarize, research suggests that low self-esteem may lead to alienation while alienation may also lead to lower self-esteem, indicating a mutually reinforcing relationship.

Research reveals a positive relationship between alienation and alcohol. Although alcohol using adolescents score significantly higher on alienation scales, the relationship between these two variables is more complex. Alcohol users report feeling more rejected and

bored than non-alcohol-using peers. Adolescents who feel rejected and uninterested in social situations around them are more likely to disengage in social interaction and, therefore, to become alienated. Adolescents who use alcohol are more likely to be avoided by their peers due to their level of drinking than are non-alcohol users. Alcohol use itself may serve to alienate users from their peers through causing peers to avoid social interaction with the alcohol users. Alienated adolescents are more likely to condone the irresponsible use of alcohol, suggesting that alienation may predispose adolescents toward alcohol use.

When the studies on alienation are viewed in relationship to each other, much can be learned about the relationship between low self-esteem and alienation and between alienation and alcohol use. Though the studies reviewed by this author suggest that alienation is either a causal factor or an effect of another variable, it seems premature to make an assumption regarding a one way directionality at this time. Rather, it seems plausible that alienation may be both influenced and influential in relation to low self-esteem and alienation. Again, research seems to suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship between the three variables.

Although the existing research suggests that alcohol use leads to low self-esteem in adolescents, the studies do not focus on supporting such a relationship. Studies

suggest that teens who use alcohol are more likely to be avoided by their peers. Studies also suggest that teens who are avoided by their peers or have lower self-esteem than those teenagers who are accepted by their peers. Therefore, it is probable that alcohol use has the capability of lowering self-esteem through alienating the teenager at a time when peer relationships are so essential to a healthy self-esteem. If a teen who desires to be accepted by peers is rejected, then the teen feels unworthy or inadequate in meeting social standards. In dealing with this discomfort of these feelings, alcohol may be turned to for relief. Thus, it seems that the process of the relationships among low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use is a circular one (See Figure 3.1)

Insert Figure 3.1 Here

Current research supports the evidence of a process of interaction among low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use among teenagers which may be described through a circular model. Rather than several unidirectional relationships, the three variables are mutually reinforcing. Any one of the three variables may set off the causal model and, therefore, lead to the other variables. Once set into play, this process may continue to deteriorate the life of

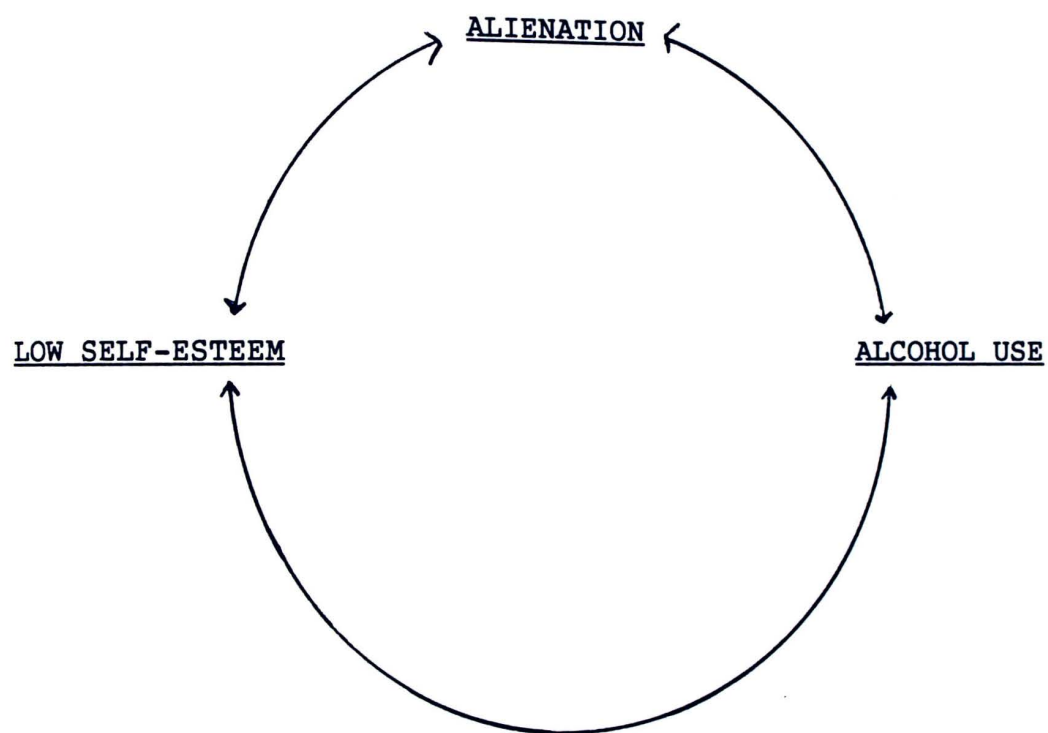


Figure 3.1 The Circular Model

the teen. For example, a teen who suffers from low self-esteem may become alienated and turn to alcohol. She may suffer further depression of self-esteem which then may lead to further alienation and alcohol use. While this model does not intend to explain all causes of esteem, alienation, and alcohol problems which occur among teenagers, it does provide a workable framework by which such problems may be viewed.

Recommendations For Further Research

Although research supports the theory that low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use are significantly related, there are no longitudinal studies which focus on the directionality of these relationships. It is imperative that these three variables be researched together in a sample of adolescents so that this model may be understood.

A study proposed by this author would use a sample of twelve and thirteen-year-olds. Self-esteem, alienation and alcohol use should be measured annually for six years. In this manner, much may be learned about the direction of these three variables during the adolescent period. Longitudinal research could also focus on the precise periods of adolescence which coincide with critical periods for the development of self-esteem and the need for healthy peer relationships. Longitudinal research could also focus on the period during which teens are most vulnerable to using alcohol. Although such research is

expensive and time consuming, the only way that the progression of the three variables can be studied is through following the development of individuals. Cross-sectional studies reveal much about age related differences; however, they cannot track the development of low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use as a model within the individual.

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory

(Coopersmith, 1967) could be used to assess self-esteem. Much of the current research on self-esteem during adolescence suffers from poorly designed Likert scales. Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1967) consists of an adequate number of items, it may be criticized along with the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) for using four-point scales. Not only should Likert scales consist of an odd number of points, but they should also consist of seven or nine points, which provide more of a spread. However, the Coopersmith scales are widely used and accepted and they seem to provide reasonable assessments of self-esteem. A major problem with self-esteem research lies in the misuse of such scales as the Coopersmith scales. Walker and Greene (1972) use modified and partial forms of the Rosenberg scale. Though shortened or modified versions may be desired, such altered versions have questionable validity and reliability at best. The items which have been changed or omitted may have been

essential to the statistical data of the test. This author would suggest the use of the complete Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory with the exception that the Likert-scale be extended nine points.

The Dean Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) could be used to measure alienation. The Dean Alienation Scale (1961) may also be criticized for using five-point scales instead of a seven or nine point scale. As a result this author would recommend that the Likert scale be extended to a nine point scale.

Subjects could self-report if they used alcohol on a weekly basis. Although self-report may be scrutinized for its ability to assess a true measure of alcohol use, this method seems to yield the most adequate measure available.

While collecting data for the longitudinal study, a short-term research design could be implemented to assess the directionality of the relationship between low self-esteem and alcohol use. Subjects could be grouped according to self-esteem scores and according to whether they reported using alcohol or not at the time of the first testing. At the time of the next testing, the effect of the onset of alcohol use on self-esteem scores could be assessed. In this way, the self-esteem scores of the subjects who began to use alcohol after the first testing could be compared to those subjects who did not report using alcohol either on the initial testing or the retesting. Subjects who

initially scored similarly on self-esteem scales could be compared according to whether or not they had begun to use alcohol after the first testing. This study could also investigate whether subjects who scored lower on the first self-esteem scale were more likely to begin to use alcohol than those who scored higher on the initial self-esteem scales. This research design would not only provide information about the relationship between low self-esteem and alcohol use, but it would also provide data on the possible directionality of this relationship. Based on previous research, the relationship between low self-esteem and alcohol use is mutually reinforcing rather than unidirectional.

Further research is also needed to differentiate between those students who score high on alienation scales regardless of their efforts to fit into a peer group. Past studies who have included satisfied non-crowd members have contaminated research by including teenagers who are not at risk of the detrimental effects of alienation because they are happy and comfortable with their place in their peer groups. Such research could also target those alienated adolescents who are at a risk of developing the problems related to alienation such as low self-esteem and alcohol use.

Reviewing the literature revealed a variable which may influence the low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use.

Although this research paper is not concerned with sex differences regarding the three variables, some of the studies included in the data reported significant differences in peer relationships and social motivators and the interaction of these factors with self-esteem and alcohol use. Although males are influenced in the same direction as females, females demonstrate significantly stronger relationships between alcohol use and social relationships and between peer relationships and self-esteem (Walker & Greene, 1986). While such gender differences may seem to call for specialized research for each sex, the differences between the sexes in regard to these three variables seem more quantitative than qualitative.

Summary

Low self-esteem, alienation, and alcohol use are intricately related in the lives of adolescents. Self-esteem is negatively related to alienation, thus, teens with low self-esteem may be more alienated than peers having higher self-esteem. Alienation seems to be positively related to alcohol use among teens. In turn, research suggests that alcohol use is negatively related to self-esteem - meaning that alcohol use is associated with low self-esteem in adolescents. Rather than uni-directionality, the research seems to suggest a two-way circular relationship among the three variables. Each variable is related to each of the other variables in a mutually

reinforcing manner.

A literature review suggests the need for further research to assess the circular model proposed by this author. Longitudinal research could reveal the order in which the circular model is set into play. Such research could also assess the correlation among the three variables in adolescents. This author believes that the problems of teenagers cannot be treated until the causality is understood.

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