

The Power of *Informal Social Institutions* Adolescent Binge Drinking: A Case in Point

Have you every asked yourself why people do certain things? Have you ever asked yourself why many people, even millions, do a certain thing that seems to make no sense, or that is bizarre, or that is self destructive, or counter-intuitive, or just plain stupid?

An often spontaneous, but inadequate, response is that everybody is doing it. But why? What has made many, even millions, of people choose some action that has no other rationale than that others are doing it? Who started it and why? What social and personal need does it answer? Sociologists and philosophers ponder these questions. Parents and teachers are confused by them. The advertising world depends on them. Psychologists revel in their power and complexity. The examples are endless. Consider the following two demonstrations. One is relatively harmless, the other is deadly.

Some *Informal Social Institutions* Are Relatively Harmless

Let's take the baseball cap, a rather useful piece of headgear outfitted with a visor to keep the sun out of one's eyes when playing baseball, or otherwise just being in the sun to protect one from the glare of the sun. Practical and easy – a perfect perambulating billboard for a logo on the front and adjustable elastic in the back for one size fits all. Neat!

About twenty years ago, all of a sudden, it became *de rigeur* to wear this cap backwards (mind you, not cocked to one side, or far up on the forehead, or crouched down around the nose). No, it was *backwards*, with the visor projecting over the neck and the elastic band adorning the forehead like an irritating bandage. No one told the young set (six to twenty-six) to do this. It was not a school regulation, a decision of the IRS, a recommendation of the better business bureau, or a suggestion of the Fashion Institute of America. It caught on like wild-fire all over the world. It became an obsession.

Fortunately, this social phenomenon was harmless – it did not impact on ultimate issues; it was not self-destructive – nobody got hurt. Then why study it? Because it represents **the power of *informal social institutions***. While benign in its effect, the backward baseball cap represented enormous social power. It controlled and made millions of adherents emotionally committed to it.

Sociologists tell us that society lives by social institutions. They are the warp and woof of civilized life. They are not natural phenomena, although they are often derived from instinctual experience. Sociologists tell us that there are two types of social institutions: formal and informal. The former are made consciously by Society itself: governmental structures of all types, corporations, churches, schools, etc. **But within all these “formal” structures lie “informal” structures.** Often their history and development are evident, but just as often they are shrouded in anonymity.

However, their lack of history (or of rationality) does not diminish their power. Superstitions, wedding customs, rites of passage, fashions, speech patterns, dining procedures are all sources of informal institutions.

The adolescent or young adult world is a fertile field for the development of many informal institutions: the need to rebel, define oneself as unique, be different but also to belong, peer pressure, inferiority, identity confusion, acceptance and rejection, dress, personal appearance, first love, etc. Such is the cultural world of the adolescent/young adult. Some of these informal institutions stick around for a long time. Some come and go, and then return years later (short hair/long hair; wide ties/thin ties). Some are intense, but short-lived and never come back.

The Stakes Get Higher

In any case, the saga of the backward baseball cap, however benign or nonsensical, is cited only as a backdrop for some other adolescent/young adult informal social institutions that are not so innocuous, ones that can be a matter of life or death, happiness or pain, joy or tragedy. We intend to cite two, but only develop one of them in this letter: **Adolescent binge drinking and the misuse of the internet.** They both arise from normal human experiences. Every society has informal social institutions surrounding sexuality and alcohol/drugs. Since both of these areas have profound moral, physical, and social consequences, we do not take lightly the informal social institutions that develop because of them, especially in adolescents and young adults.

At this point one may object: kids are kids, they are going through a phase, they grow out of it. Unfortunately, some die from it, some never outgrow it, and some suffer a lifetime of grief because of it – not counting the grief that their families and friends have to endure because of them.

It is very hard to point out the moment when a normal social experience becomes an informal social institution. In the former, you are in charge; in the latter, the institution is in charge. While you may think you are in charge, the informal social institution knows better: it starts to define you and compel you. It has the power of social conformity (that's why everybody is doing it). It becomes hip, the "in" thing, the badge of belonging.

Adolescent Binge Drinking

The informal social institution we want to address in this letter is adolescent/young adult drinking, but in a very particular way. We are not referring to the experimentation that furtively goes on or even the social drinking that develops. We are referring to a social phenomenon that has developed over the past twenty-years, referred to as "binge" drinking, a custom (now an informal social institution) that, some say, originated in colleges (young adult) and is now part and parcel of the adolescent drinking scene on Long Island. Ever creative, it has taken different forms such as beer

ping pong, and other assorted games where unlucky (or lucky!) contestants have to chug-a-lug.

The word “binge” has the connotation of excessive, extravagant, unrestrained, immoderate. It has the intention of getting intoxicated as quickly as possible because being intoxicated is where “it is at,” it’s cool, it’s cute. It is now expected behavior and it has crossed gender lines. **It is not the drinking that is fun, but getting drunk, as fast as possible, that is *de rigeur*.** It is now a part of teen culture – one of those informal social institutions that define adolescent life (would that we could just stick with backward baseball caps!).

This pattern of adolescent binge drinking is part of the larger problem of alcohol and alcoholism in the United States. As a nation we have been singularly unsuccessful in dealing with it. We raised the legal drinking age to twenty-one (a formal institution!), which is an anomaly in itself. [If you are under twenty- one, you can marry, have a child, but can’t have a drink at your own wedding or at the baptism of your child.] **But the informal social institution of adolescent/young adult drinking remains and has morphed into the social practice of binge drinking, a plague on Long Island.**

WHAT TO DO?

What to do? It is encouraging to hear of some University administrations that have taken a zero tolerance policy on any form of drunkenness. Iona College I have heard, faced this phenomenon squarely after having some students die as a result of alcohol. Their policy sends any drunk student, no questions asked, to a hospital rehab immediately. Three instances and you are out. But, on the other hand, there is a large high school on Long Island where the guidance counselors are told by the administration not to discuss with the students the drinking problem which is rampant in the village.

What about the parents? In some cases they are part of the problem. Some have drinking problems of their own. They were the boomers that let it all hang out. (You see, taboos had a good side – they kept you from disaster when you were not smart enough to do it yourself.) Some parents do not want to see it. Many see it but do not know what to do about it, “since everybody is doing it.” And there are even some parents who encourage it either tacitly or environmentally. It is a mixed bag. Everyone knows it is going on and where it is going on – but who really wants to stop it? Take a look at some of the adolescent websites.

The only corporate solution that we see viable was demonstrated recently to us by Barbara Keller, the founder of COMPASS in Suffolk County. She believes that the only effective prevention comes about when a coalition is formed of all the social entities in a geographical district (school or village). And she means ALL! It must mean a convinced judgment that there is a problem and a concerted effort of all sixteen components of a society (parents, police, school, church, business, etc.) that this problem must be faced and effectively dealt with. She believes that the stakes are too high in human loss to let nature (and the second nature of informal social institutions) take its course. Are we ready for this?

We begin by raising consciousness about this problem. We are committed to addressing this issue head on. The stakes are too high to turn a blind eye to this epidemic. Like Ms. Keller, the founder of Compass, we also see the need to engage many sectors of our school and community to battle this life threatening phenomenon confronting our children. The first step is to get parents aware of this deadly behavior. We want our Faculty and Guidance Counselors to be aggressive in addressing the needs of students who are already in the drinking circuit.

In light of the alcohol related tragedy over the recent Christmas holiday and concomitant weekday drinking fests, we are more determined to deal as much as we can with adolescent binge drinking.

We reaffirm our policy to address notorious occasions of drinking on and off school property and want to make this explicit to you. Students who are known to be abusers of alcohol or drugs will be required to participate in a rehabilitation program if they are to continue at our school.

We see a close parallel of adolescent binge drinking to the phenomenon of the high school prom. When we addressed the Prom issue last year, we were pleasantly surprised by the thousands of letters expressing support for our stand indicating that it was a courageous and necessary solution. Both binge drinking and the prom are informal social institutions that dominate and harm adolescent culture. **It is our hope that the latent public response to binge drinking would be as powerful as it was to the confrontation of the Long Island prom culture.** At this point, we can only hope.

As parents, you are encouraged to enter into this dialogue about adolescent binge drinking. **No one can solve this problem on his or her own. For the health and safety of your children, we want to create the necessary coalition of parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators that will work together to confront this very dangerous informal social institution.**

Please feel free to contact us at any time if we can be of help on behalf of your children. You can count on us to keep you informed if we learn of any unhealthy or dangerous activities in which your children are engaged.

This statement on “Adolescent Binge Drinking” has been composed by the Marianist Province of Meribah in conjunction with the Administrative Staffs of Chaminade High School and Kellenberg Memorial High School for the purpose of greater community awareness of destructive influences within the adolescent culture.