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READING 4

Multiple Crowds and Multiple Life Styles: Adolescents' Perceptions of Peer-Group Stereotypes

B. BRADFORD BROWN, MARY JANE LOHR, AND CARLA TRUJILLO

University of Wisconsin—Madison, University of Washington, and University of California—Berkeley

As a young person moves into adolescence, interactions with peers take on an added level of complexity. In addition to dyadic ("friendship") and small-group ("clique") relations, both of which are apparent in childhood, the adolescent's social world seems to be heavily influenced by the division of peers into larger collectives, commonly referred to as "crowds." One's crowd affiliation reveals not only who one "hangs around" with, but also one's reputation among peers. Crowd labels—jock, loner, druggie, popular, nerd, and so on—reflect personality, social position, life style, or some other basic aspect of how one is viewed by peers.

Some researchers ascribe a unidimensional structure to the adolescent crowd system. Dunphy (1963) suggests that, basically, crowds provide a convenient means of integrating opposite-gender cliques so as to socialize teenagers into heterosexual roles. Coleman (1961) argues that in each high school, the "leading crowd" establishes the values and life styles for all other students to follow. In these conceptualizations, beyond superficial differences, one crowd is much like another.

Others, however, have taken the differences implied by this menagerie of crowd labels more seriously. Building on Erikson's (1968) theory, Newman and Newman (1976) contend that peer-group affiliation is central to identity development in early and middle adolescence. According to their theory, to obtain support for a fledgling sense of identity a teenager needs to affiliate with a group of peers whose norms correspond with her or his own values and interests. Newman and Newman (1976, p. 268) suggest that "the adolescent experiences an internal questioning about the group of which he is most naturally a part. . . . He also scans the range of possibilities that exist within

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his social environment, and tries to assess himself in relation to the existing social groupings." Having a number of groups with well-defined, distinctive characteristics and life styles facilitates the selection of a crowd that will provide a meaningful "provisional identity." Furthermore, one can "try on" different identities by transferring affiliations among crowds with different norms and life styles.

For Newman and Newman's (1976) perspective to be accurate, differences among crowds should be more than vague or superficial. Indeed, even in early adolescence one should observe considerable *consensus* among teenagers about the activities and interests characteristic of each crowd and considerable *differentiation* among crowds on these dimensions, so that each group offers a unique provisional identity.

Ethnographies of the adolescent social system all mention a variety of crowds with distinctive "personalities" (Buff, 1970; Cusick, 1973; Gottlieb, 1975; Larkin, 1979; Varenne, 1982). There is even a hint of common crowd types across a variety of school settings in that in nearly all these investigations there is a group of athletes, an "elite" or high-status crowd, and a crowd with a more delinquent image. Most ethnographies, however, focus on a small portion of the student body—often one or two cliques of seniors—and it is not clear how readily the students share the ethnographers' interpretations of their (the students') social world.

The present study was designed to move beyond ethnography by having adolescents systematically identify and describe the major crowds they perceived in their school. Analyses focused on the degree of consensus and differentiation apparent in teenagers' descriptions of various peer groups. To gather evidence of teenagers' *own* perceptions rather than adults' interpretations of the adolescent social world, the typology of crowds and the categories on which groups were stereotyped were derived empirically from pilot testing of adolescent samples rather than abstracted from previous studies of high-school peer groups.

RESPONDENTS (*R*)

Analyses were based on responses from two samples. The first, a college sample, included 20 male and 73 female undergraduates in an intermediate-level psychology course at a midwestern university. This group was included to sample efficiently students from a wide range of high schools and to obtain a group with enough "emotional distance" from high school to be objective in reporting peer-group stereotypes. All students had graduated from high school within the past three years; 91% were white, and most came from middle-class backgrounds, although the size, location, and ethnic composition of their high schools varied considerably.

The second, a "teenage" sample, included 310 students attending the junior (grades 7–9) or senior (grades 10–12) high school in a racially homogeneous (96% white), residentially stable, working- to middle-class midwestern community. Each school had about 1,000 students. The sample was evenly divided by grade and gender.

MEASURES

The self-report questionnaire given to all *R*s was designed to identify the stereotypic characteristics that students associated with each major crowd in their school. The format of and coding procedure for the questionnaire were derived from a pilot study of 133 adolescents who were asked to name the major crowds in their school, provide a one-sentence description of each group, then describe the distinguishing features of each crowd—the appearance, attitudes, activities, hangouts, and so forth that typified members of a given group.

From these open-ended descriptions, we identified six categories commonly used to characterize crowds: dress and grooming styles; sociability (the way members related to students outside their group); academic attitudes (how students felt about school achievement and learning); the crowd's hangout at school; typical weekend activities; and participation in five types of school-sponsored extracurricular activities (athletics, clubs, performing groups, leadership groups, and social events). From three to five descriptive alternatives were identified for each category (see Table 1). For example, in dress and grooming, crowds were typified either as stylish (wearing designer clothes or the latest fad), athletic or casual in dress, neat and clean, looking tough or messy (leather, ripped jeans, too much makeup, etc.), or showing poor taste (outdated styles, clashing colors, "high waters," etc.).

TABLE 1 PERCENTAGE OF CROWDS IN EACH TYPE ASSIGNED TO EACH CATEGORY DESCRIPTION

	CROWD TYPE															
Category descriptor	Brain[a]	Jock		Druggie		Nobody		Normal		Popular		Tough		Misc.[b]	
Dress and grooming															
Neat and clean	58	2	16	5	7	8	8	63	32	4	10	0	3	21	21
Casual, athletic	6	55	52	10	24	3	8	27	51	6	21	2	18	25	29
Stylish	3	41	31	0	6	3	1	3	16	85	59	0	4	16	15
Tough-messy	1	0	1	82	57	3	30	0	1	2	8	91	66	21	18
Poor taste	28	0	0	2	5	83	51	7	1	0	1	0	5	11	11
Sociability															
Disruptive	0	5	2	44	68	0	5	0	1	2	13	78	75	12	1
Not with it	73	1	2	8	4	84	78	10	16	0	6	7	4	18	25
Friendly	23	27	50	25	13	11	6	83	74	19	25	7	9	50	43
Cliquish	3	65	45	13	11	0	8	0	7	83	54	4	10	18	17
Academic attitude															
Enjoy, try hard	99	13	49	2	1	32	14	53	41	26	50	0	2	26	27
Positive	1	75	45	8	10	43	30	33	53	57	31	6	10	27	35
Take or leave it	0	9	4	32	22	11	38	3	5	11	9	11	23	19	22
Hate school	0	0	0	55	65	11	14	0	1	0	9	79	62	26	13
Extracurricular participation															
High	14	39	53	0	1	3	3	17	33	48	49	4	1	9	23
Moderate	72	60	45	12	10	38	21	69	61	36	34	2	11	53	39
Low	13	1	1	88	89	59	76	14	6	16	16	93	88	38	38
School hangout															
Common areas	26	77	72	6	2	26	10	57	52	81	56	11	13	40	32
Out-of-way	3	0	3	86	90	5	23	3	7	4	16	85	76	13	25
Special interest	53	22	21	3	2	13	1	20	14	6	13	0	2	28	22
Nowhere	19	1	4	3	6	55	66	20	25	9	14	0	9	19	20
Weekend activities															
Social-party	13	79	72	6	5	11	9	57	49	77	52	2	10	50	35
Drink, use drugs	1	16	4	69	88	3	6	7	1	19	11	47	54	14	17
Cause trouble	0	1	2	19	3	0	9	0	1	0	5	45	29	5	8
Solitary	82	1	21	2	3	86	75	33	48	2	31	2	6	27	37
(N of crowds)	(71)	(94)	(209)	(64)	(124)	(38)	(168)	(30)	(209)	(47)	(162)	(47)	(151)	(98)	(140)

Note: First column of figures for each crowd is from the college sample; second column is from the teenage sample. Where figures for a given crowd type on a given category do not add up to 100%, the remainder represents crowds assigned to the "other" descriptor.

[a] Figures are omitted for teenage sample because too few of these *R*s mentioned a brain crowd.

[b] Includes all crowds coded as "hybrid," "special interest," or "unassignable."

The one-sentence description of each group of people was employed to derive a lexicon of crowd types—that is, a listing of specific crowd labels that seemed to describe the same type of group (jocks, for example, subsumed groups referred to as jocks, athletes, sports, sporties, football players, and so on). Seven major crowd types were identified: brains (intellectually oriented students), druggies (heavy users of illicit drugs and/or alcohol), jocks (athletically oriented), outcasts (socially inept and/or intellectually retarded), populars (high-status students who lead social activities), toughs (who have a ganglike or delinquent image), and normals (average, middle-of-the-road students who constitute the "masses"). Also, there were categories for special-interest crowds (actors, chess crew, farmers, etc.), hybrids (e.g., popular smarties or "wasted" jocks), and unassignable names.

From this information, a forced-choice, self-report questionnaire was derived. On the first page, *R*s named (in their own words) all the major crowds they

perceived in their school. *Crowd* was defined as "a label attached to students who act the same way or do the same things, whether or not they hang around each other." On successive pages, *R*s were instructed to choose, for each crowd on each of the eight categories listed previously, the best description that typified crowd members. The same description could be assigned to more than one crowd. If, on any category, *R*s felt that none of the descriptions listed adequately fit a given crowd, they could write their own.

PROCEDURE

Generating the Data The college sample included all students in an intermediate psychology course. The teenage sample included students in three or four classrooms per grade who were selected within ability groupings so that the sample would be reasonably representative of the student body. The questionnaire was group-administered by a member of the research staff and was completed anonymously. *R*s also indicated their grade level (or year that they graduated from high school), gender, and, for college *R*s, the size, location, and ethnic composition of their high school. Usable questionnaires were completed by 93% of the college sample and 95% of the teenage sample.

Data Coding Coders assigned each name listed on the first page of the questionnaire to 1 of the 10 crowd-type categories. Interrater agreement, using Flanders's (1967) statistic, was .91 for the college sample and .86 for the teenage sample.

Data Analyses Analyses focused on three major questions: First, do the number and types of crowds named by *R*s vary by sample, gender, or, for the teenage sample, grade level? Next, how strong is the consensus on stereotypic traits of each crowd? This was operationalized as the proportion of categories for which at least 65% of *R*s chose the same description for a given crowd. Third, how well differentiated is the stereotypic image of one crowd type from all other types? Log-linear analyses (Goodman, 1972), conducted separately on each sample, examined each possible pair of crowd types (special-interest crowds, hybrids, and unassignable crowds were combined into a "miscellaneous" category) on each descriptive category. Analyses indicated, for each pair of crowds on each category, whether the pair's distribution of responses (among the descriptors for that category) differed significantly. Gender and grade level were included as factors in log-linear analyses for the teenage sample. Along with gender, the size and ethnic composition of the high school of the *R*s were included as factors in analyses of the college-sample data. A summary categorical score was calculated for extracurricular participation, based on descriptions of each crowd's involvement in the five areas of extracurricular activities.

RESULTS

The number of crowds mentioned ranged from two to eight, but most students named between four and six groups. On average, college students named more crowds ($M = 5.26$) than members of the teenage sample ($M = 4.47$). There was no gender difference in number of crowds named by the college sample; but in the teenage sample, females named more crowds ($M = 5.32$) than males ($M = 5.05$), ANOVA $F(1,298) = 17.28$, $p < .001$, and the number differed by grade level, $F(5,298) = 7.54$, $p < .001$. The number named increased steadily across grades—from an average of 3.92 crowds in grade 7 to 5.23 in grade 12—except for a dip between 9th and 10th grades, the point at which students made the transition from junior to senior high school.

Jocks were the most frequently mentioned crowd type, acknowledged by two-thirds of the teenage sample and over 90% of the college *R*s. Brains, druggies, and special-interest groups were noted by over half of the college sample, whereas normals were the only type other than jocks mentioned by a majority of the teenage sample. In fact, brains, x^2 (1, $n = 244$) = 60.76, druggies, x^2 (1, $n = 244$) = 8.61, and special-interest groups, x^2 (1, $n = 244$) = 31.00, appeared significantly more often, and normals, x^2 (1, $n = 244$) = 11.70, significantly less often in the college sample than in the teenage sample ($p < .001$ for all differences except druggies, $p < .01$). More females (56%) than males (30%) in the teenage sample mentioned a popular crowd $G^2 = 7.28$, $p < .01$. Otherwise, gender differences were not significant, and grade differences did not fluctuate in a systematic fashion.

Consensus on Crowds' Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes characterizations by *R*s of each crowd type within each sample. A cursory glance at

this table indicates that *R*s did ascribe different characteristics to different crowd types. But just how strong was the consensus on a given crowd's image? We considered there to be consensus when at least 65% of *R*s selected the same description for a crowd type. With this criterion, consensus was not overwhelming. Of the 42 distributions assessed in the college sample (6 categories for each of 7 crowd types, excluding the "miscellaneous" groups), 60% showed consensus. In the teenage sample, there was consensus on only 44% of the distributions analyzed (too few *R*s listed a brain crowd to include this type in analyses).

Nevertheless, for all crowd types in the college sample and all but the populars in the teenage sample, there was consensus on at least one stereotyping category. In fact, except for the normals and nobodies, college *R*s reached consensus on a crowd's characteristics on at least four of the six categories. This was true for the druggies, toughs, and nobodies in the teenage sample, but not for the jocks, normals, or populars. It is interesting that the normals, who represented the "masses" of average or in-between students, had the least-well-defined image, whereas crowd stereotypes were most clear-cut among druggies and toughs, groups that enjoy marginal status in most high schools. Descriptions of crowds placed in the miscellaneous category displayed the lack of consensus that one would expect: in only one category among college *R*s (extracurricular participation) and none in the teenage sample did more than half the respondents choose the same descriptor for this collection of crowds. Curiously, in both samples, consensus was reached most often with regard to a crowd type's sociability and least often with regard to academic attitudes.

Differentiation

Although *R*s did not agree completely on the specific characteristics of each crowd type, their descriptions did differentiate among virtually all pairs of major crowd types. In fact, in the log-linear analyses, descriptions of 81% of the pairings examined in the college sample and 93% in the teenage sample differed significantly on at least four of the six stereotyping categories; and 60% of the pairings in both samples differed on all six categories. The only pairings that were not significantly differentiated on at least four categories in the college sample were jocks and normals, who differed on three categories, jocks and populars, who differed only in dress and grooming and extracurricular participation, and druggies and toughs, whose characteristics were not different on any category. In the teenage sample, druggies and toughs differed only with regard to weekend activities; otherwise, all pairings of crowds were significantly differentiated on four or more categories. Thus, druggies and toughs were the only pair with a consistently undifferentiated image across both samples.

There were virtually no significant grade or gender differences in patterns of differentiation among pairs of crowds. Sample differences in patterns of differentiation also were rare. There were only three instances in which a category differentiated a pair of crowds in the college sample but not the teenage sample and only 11 instances in which the reverse was true. Still, subtle sample differences were observed. The image of populars was inconsistent across the two samples. Also, although jocks and normals were significantly differentiated on four categories in each sample, the specific categories were not the same in both samples.

DISCUSSION

Over the past several decades, many researchers have preferred to portray the adolescent peer system as a monolithic youth culture (Coleman, 1961; Eisenstadt, 1956; Parsons, 1942), an age group with a singular focus, sharing a common set of values, interests, and life styles. Our findings fail to endorse this viewpoint, demonstrating instead that adolescents perceive their social world as comprised of a diverse array of peer groups with distinctive, well-differentiated life styles. Results of this study confirm ethnographers' accounts (e.g., Buff, 1970; Cusick, 1973; Larkin, 1979) so strongly that one wonders why the notion of a youth culture still persists. Perhaps it is because some researchers have focused too heavily on the most prominent segments of adolescent society. Jocks, for example, the most widely recognized crowd among our respondents, have been the focus (along with jocks' frequent companions—populars) of many studies (Coleman, 1961; Cusick, 1973; Varenne, 1982), whereas few investigators have attended to the no-

bodies, the normals, or the host of special-interest crowds mentioned by our respondents. Certainly, the prominence of jocks in our samples underscores the central role that athletics plays in the adolescent social system, but it is unwise to assume, as some have (Coleman, 1961), that this crowd is capable of shaping the entire adolescent peer culture.

The set of crowds and characterizations of each crowd type were strikingly similar in our two samples. Because the samples came from two different cohorts of teenagers and from a variety of secondary schools and communities, it is tempting to conclude—as some researchers have (Buff, 1970; Clark, 1962)—that there is a set of youth subcultures in the United States that seems to transcend time and place. We think that this conclusion is unwarranted for several reasons. First, in many ways our samples were homogeneous: overwhelmingly white, midwestern, and middle class. Extending this work to minority groups or to students in multiethnic social environments could produce a very different portrait of the adolescent social system. Such efforts desperately need to be made. Second, beyond the similar pattern of findings in our two samples, there were several notable differences: certain crowd types were more prominent in one sample than the other. Some groups, such as the populars, had a different stereotypic image in each sample. There also were unique crowd types in each sample that, in the interest of simplifying the report of findings, we chose not to discuss. Over a third of the teenage sample, for example, mentioned a crowd called the "grubs"—a group similar to, but still well differentiated from, druggies and toughs—which seemed to be unique to this particular community.

Two other sample differences deserve some attention. First, why were brains more widely recognized by the college *R*s than by the teenage *R*s? Perhaps the academic orientation that the brains represented was not as viable an identity in the secondary school from which the teenage sample was derived, which sent a relatively low proportion of its graduates (about 50%) on to postsecondary education. On the other hand, the college *R*s were drawn from a clearly biased portion of their high-school populations, and as an academically minded group they may have been more aware of academically oriented crowds such as brains in their high schools.

A more interesting puzzle is why consensus on crowds' characteristics was stronger in the college sample than in the teenage sample. Here, again, several explanations seem possible. Perhaps, with two or three years of maturity beyond high school, the college *R*s were able to put teenage sensitivity to autonomy and individuality behind them and be more honest about peer-group conformity pressures. On the other hand, their time away from high school may have clouded their memory of the diversity within crowds and predisposed them to characterize crowds in more uniform, overly stereotypic terms. It is also possible that the college *R*s were simply a more homogeneous sample, an academically oriented portion of high-school students who tended to share a more common image of crowds than do high-school students as a whole.

This brings us to the issue of why, in general, consensus on crowd characteristics was not overwhelming. Certainly, part of the explanation is methodological: our method of assigning crowds that *R*s named to crowd types was reasonably, but not completely, reliable; error in assignments would deflate consensus in characterizing crowd types. There are other reasons, however, why students may not share a common image of crowd types. First, students vary in their social-cognitive skills, their ability to perceive accurately the social world in which they live (Hill & Palmquist, 1978). Also, a crowd may appear different to students in different segments of the adolescent social system. Eder (1985), for example, describes the sharply contrasting image of populars among girls who are inside versus girls who are outside of this group. Finally, the lack of consensus may reflect a legitimate diversity in the characteristics of crowd members. It is unwise to assume that all members will march neatly in step with the prevailing norms of their crowd.

Although consensus was not overwhelming, crowd types were clearly differentiated, even in early adolescence, and their images did not change significantly across the grade levels in the teenage sample. This lent support to Newman and Newman's (1976) claims that crowds serve as sources of provisional identities for early adolescents. Yet it is important to acknowledge that we found some dynamic features in the peer-group system. The close correspondence between druggies and toughs, for example, is best explained as a metamorphosis across adolescence in the tough-crowd type. Whereas the proportion of students mentioning toughs steadily diminished across grade levels, the proportion mentioning a druggie group steadily

rose. It appeared as if, in the transition to senior high school, toughs became more involved in illicit drug use, thus altering the major identity (and name) of their crowd without changing most of its other norms. But longitudinal studies are needed to determine if junior-high-school toughs really tend to become high-school druggies. The number of crowds named also steadily climbed across grade levels, except for an understandable drop in the school transition year when students were getting acclimated to a new social environment. Whether this developmental change reflects a growing social cognitive sensitivity to the diversity of peer groups or a change with age to a more elaborate structuring of crowds remains to be seen in future studies.

What emerges, then, from our analyses of adolescents' perceptions of crowd characteristics is an image of an adolescent peer system that is diverse and dynamic. Rather than the monolithic youth culture often perceived by adults, our *R*s described a peer-group system well suited to facilitating the identity exploration that Erikson (1968) mandates for this age group. The range of crowds with well-differentiated norms should help adolescents locate a suitable niche for social support and identity exploration. The peer-group system seems to accommodate variations in individual dispositions, cognitive capacities, and community characteristics. Approaching adolescent peer groups from this, the adolescents' own perspective should help us to understand more clearly the role that peer groups play in adolescent development.

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