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The Role of Peer Groups in Adolescent Social Identity: Exploring the Importance of Stability and Change

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Number 84, Summer 1999

JOSSEY-BASS PUBLISHERS
San Francisco

As a young person moves into adolescence, interactions with peers take on an added level of complexity with the introduction of reputation-based peer groups, commonly referred to as "crowds." This chapter examines the identity function of crowds.

Identity Claims and Projections: Descriptions of Self and Crowds in Secondary School

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Adolescents are notorious for describing their peers with such stereotypic labels as "nerd," "dirtball," and "jock." It is a somewhat troubling and unattractive tendency that adults may prefer to overlook or dismiss. However, at least for American secondary students, these reputation-based abstract social categories—"crowds"—are so pervasive that we must attempt to understand their psychological meaning for adolescents.

Crowds seem to perform an important integrative function, mediating between the concrete events of social experience in the secondary school milieu and the ongoing psychological experience of individuals (Brown, 1990). They serve as available, preexisting, symbolic categories through which adolescents can recognize potential friend or foe, tormenter, collaborator, or competitor (Brown, Mory, and Kinney, 1994). They also provide available identities, recognized by peers, through which adolescents may themselves be known (Stone and Brown, in press). This way of knowing may be superficial, but it seems that adolescents prefer to be understood partially rather than to be invisible or mistaken for someone who values the individual rejects. Moreover, even adults must often settle for knowing others and being known in terms of categorical conceptual schemas that do little justice to their authentic identities (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Macrae, Milne, and Bodenhausen, 1994; Tajfel, 1978). Theorists (Erikson, 1963; Newman and Newman, 1976) have speculated that adolescents, in particular, may prefer a "safe" group identity to the commitment of a deeper personal identity in early adolescence as they cope with unpredictability in virtually every dimension of their existence.

By identifying with a particular crowd, adolescents can achieve at least a provisional identity, one that establishes their place within the peer system while they are working on developing a more comprehensive and personal sense of identity. Of course, all crowds are not equal in the peer system. Typically, crowds are arranged in a status hierarchy (Kinney, 1993; Larkin, 1979) so that there is some incentive for young people to identify with crowds toward the top of the hierarchy—and, certainly, to avoid crowds at the bottom of the status system (Eder, 1985; Kinney, 1993). Thus, in addition to its role in identity formation, crowd identification can be an exercise in impression management (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Some adolescents may attempt to convince their peers that they belong in a particular crowd rather than simply wait to discover which crowd their classmates will associate them with. Others may like to think of themselves as possessing the characteristics usually associated with a crowd they find appealing. Still, peers are free to accept or to reject this effort at impression management. Not all adolescents who fancy themselves part of the popular crowd are recognized as part of this elite group by their peers (Brown and Lohr, 1987; Eder, 1985). Indeed, teenage social systems often include crowds called the “wannabes,” populated by individuals who strive unsuccessfully to be accepted into one crowd or another; their efforts at impression management are acknowledged by peers but not accepted. Unsuccessful efforts at impression management could be a source of shame or frustration that many adolescents would prefer to avoid. Perhaps it is wiser to accept the reputation that peers have of oneself (to identify with one’s “own” crowd), rather than try unsuccessfully to alter that reputation.

Thus, it is interesting to explore how adolescents identify with various crowds. Self-descriptions may be honest evaluations of self characteristics, or they may be efforts at impression management. If one asks adolescents to describe the typical characteristics of various crowds and to rate themselves on those characteristics, one can study the extent to which they seem to identify with various crowds. Is there a tendency to identify with one’s own crowd (the group with which one is commonly associated by peers), or is there an inclination to portray oneself as similar to a high-status crowd? Alternatively, is there a tendency to portray oneself as similar to the “normal” or “average” teenager, thus conveying a self-image that avoids pigeonholing in any specific crowd niche?

Method

Data were collected from two schools, using focus groups and surveys.

Sample. Two midwestern public schools participated in the study: a middle school (526 students in grades 6–8) and the adjoining high school (1,493 students in grades 9–12). These schools serve an area with a preponderance of middle-class and upper-middle-class families, though districtwide integration plans have, in recent years, provided for increasing diversity within the student bodies. The questionnaire subsample employed for the present analyses included 256 7th, 9th, and 11th graders (n 's = 83, 87, and 86, respectively), of whom 48 percent were female and 52 percent were male. Except for a mod-

est intentional overrepresentation of African American students, the sample reflected the racial and ethnic composition of the schools: 13 percent African American, 4 percent Asian American, 4 percent Hispanic American, 75 percent European American, and 4 percent multiracial students.

Students were invited to complete a self-report questionnaire after being identified, through nomination procedures (explained in the next section), as prominent members of seven major crowds. Participants were not informed that they had been identified earlier by peers as members of particular crowds. The questionnaire focused on perceptions of crowds and relations between crowds. Of the students recruited for the questionnaire phase of the study, 88 percent filled out usable questionnaires. Of the remainder, 4 percent refused or were denied parent permission, 5 percent did not attend scheduled administrations due to absence or other commitments, and 3 percent failed to fill out the questionnaire completely and credibly.

Peer-Rated Crowd Affiliation. The peer-rated crowd affiliation of potential participants was determined through a modified version of Brown's (1989) STR (Social Type Rating) procedure.

Step 1: Identifying Crowds. In the first step of this study school counselors and teachers identified a set of boys and girls in each grade (total $n = 35$) who would participate in small group interviews. School personnel were asked to choose students representing a good cross section of the student body. Focus groups were continued until such diversity had been achieved.

In two or three small focus group interviews per grade, students were introduced to the concept of the “crowd” and asked if their school had crowds. Participants in every focus group recognized crowds as part of their school world and were able to differentiate between interaction-based “cliques” and reputation-based “crowds.”

After this short introductory discussion, students individually constructed lists of crowds. Then a tentative master list was compiled from these individual lists and fine-tuned through focus group discussion to obtain consensus regarding the major crowd types at each school. In order to achieve consensus across focus groups, major crowds that had emerged on some groups' master lists but had not been mentioned by other groups were introduced to those groups for consideration.

Focus groups in both schools consistently mentioned six crowds: “normals” (average students who get along with students in most other crowds), “brains” (nonathletes who enjoy academics and computers), “jocks” (students who participate in contact sports during every season), “populars” (students who have a boyfriend or girlfriend, are physically attractive, and wear brand-name clothes), the “black crowd” (mostly African American students), and the “wannabe black crowd” (students of varying ethnicity who adopt African American styles of dress and behavior and who meet with varying degrees of acceptance from the black crowd).

Some less prominent crowds—“skaters,” “nerds,” “partyers,” “loners,” and “performers”—were reported to be nonexistent in one or more grades and were therefore not considered major crowds. However, one of the most prominent

crowds among the high school students, "headbangers," was not mentioned by 7th grade focus groups; and a prominent crowd in the middle school, "trouble-makers," was not mentioned in the high school focus groups. The headbangers were said to openly use drugs, listen to heavy metal rock music, skip school, fight, and wear combat boots and concert t-shirts. Troublemakers were said to skip school, fight, act loud, and get into trouble with teachers. Previous research (Brown, Lohr, and Trujillo, 1990) and current interview material suggest that the rebellious crowd-type may evolve across adolescence from general rule-breaking behaviors to drug use. Thus, the troublemakers and headbangers were maintained in the master crowd list and combined as "rebel crowds" for analyses, along with the six major crowds that were continuous across the three grades.

Step 2: Identifying Crowd Members. A second group of sixty-three informants completed a brief rating survey in which they nominated members of the above-mentioned crowds. These students were volunteers from several study halls, including one for at-risk students. This sample was similar to the full sample in terms of ethnicity, gender, and apparent crowd affiliation. For each school, the survey began with a definition of the crowd concept and a list of the crowds the focus groups had "mentioned most often," with a few identifying phrases serving to describe each crowd. Then, for each crowd, students were asked to list at least ten grademates who were crowd members.

After information from all raters was collected, coded numerically, and entered into a computer, a proportion score was calculated to represent the percentage of raters who placed a student in a given crowd. Peer-rated crowd affiliation was assigned by a 60 percent rule: students whose nominations for a particular crowd were over 60 percent of their total nominations were assigned to that crowd. Students with the most nominations from each crowd were recruited for the questionnaire phase of the study with a goal of five males and five females for each crowd for each grade. The questionnaire sample included thirty-seven jocks, thirty-three populars, forty-seven normals, forty black crowd, thirty-nine brains, twenty-three wannabe black crowd, and thirty-six rebel crowd members (7th grade troublemakers and high school headbangers).

Other Measures. On the questionnaire, in addition to demographic information (sex, ethnic affiliation, grade level, and age), there were three sets of measures: respondents' descriptions of the seven major crowds, respondents' self-descriptions in several domains on which crowds were characterized, and respondents' self-declared relation to each of the crowds.

Crowd and Self-Descriptions. Respondents were asked to characterize themselves and each of the seven major crowds in their school in domains of dress and grooming, behavior toward people not in their own crowd, weekend activities, and relations with teachers. Respondents were also asked to rate each crowd's status on a scale from 1 ("very low") to 5 ("very high"). The descriptive domains and descriptor choices within items were based upon previous research by Brown and colleagues (Brown, Lohr, and Trujillo, 1990) and were slightly modified in consultation with focus group interviewees. Respondents were first asked, "What are the dress and grooming styles of each crowd (and

yourself)?" In response, they were asked to choose, for each crowd (and themselves), the best descriptor among six possible alternatives: "expensive/stylish," "casual/neat," "out-of-style," "tough," "messy/dirty," and "really varies." Directions explained that respondents could choose the same descriptor for several crowds but only one descriptor per crowd. However, they had the option to choose "really varies" if they thought that crowd members varied so much that they couldn't give a single answer. The second descriptive item asked respondents: "How do the members of each crowd (and you) act toward other people? That is, how do they (and you) usually treat people who are outside the crowd?" Response options were: "hassle people/pick fights," "cliquish/tight-knit," "neutral," "friendly/sociable," and "really varies." The third descriptive item asked respondents: "What are the usual weekend activities of each crowd (and yourself)?" Response options were: "drink/use drugs," "hassle people/make trouble," "social/party," "small group," "alone/family," and "really varies." The fourth descriptive item asked: "How do members of each crowd (and you) get along with teachers?" Response options were: "kiss up" to teachers, "show respect," "are neutral," "don't like teachers," and "really varies."

Finally, students were asked to rate the similarity or dissimilarity of each pair of crowds from 1 ("extremely similar") to 10 ("extremely different"). For this exercise, students were told that they should simply think about "the characteristics of crowd members" and use any criteria they felt to be important for rating how similar or different the crowds are.

Self-Descriptions and Identification with Hypothesized Reference Groups. As respondents described themselves in the domains for which they described their school's crowds, they implicitly expressed how similar or different they perceived themselves to be from each crowd. Respondents' identification with each crowd was computed as the number of matches between an individual's self-description and the description of that crowd in the domains of dress and grooming, behavior toward people not in their own crowd, weekend activities, and relations with teachers.

Identification with one's own crowd was computed as the number of matches between respondents' self-descriptions and their description of the crowd to which peers had assigned them. Identification with the high-status crowd was computed as the number of matches between respondents' self-descriptions and their description of the crowd with the highest mean status score for their grade. Identification with a moderate or average identity was computed as the number of matches between respondents' self-descriptions and their description of the crowd found to be the most moderate and average. Each identification score could range from 0 to 4.

Results

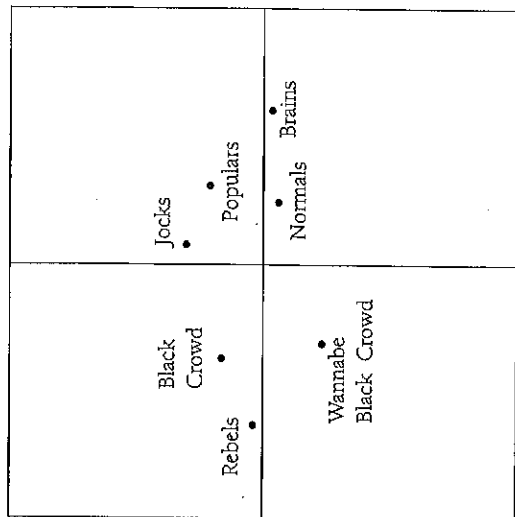
First, analyses were conducted to determine the overall structure of the social context according to the respondents' perceptions. Analyses then turned to the issue of whether the social context was uniform or varied across grade. Finally,

respondents' identification with described crowds was assessed through three sets of analyses: (1) average identification ratings for each described crowd overall and by grade; (2) identification with hypothesized reference groups (see below), again assessed overall and by grade; and (3) the identification pattern for members of individual crowds across grade cohorts. Because preliminary analyses indicated no notable gender differences, this variable was dropped from subsequent analyses.

Mapping the Social Context. The status measure provided one depiction of the crowd system's structure. Peer status rankings ranged from 1.93 (the rebel crowd's status ranking) to 3.65 (the jock crowd's status ranking). Comparisons employing Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure (Holm, 1979; Seaman, Levin, and Serlin, 1991) revealed three identifiable clusters of crowds of similar status: the jock, popular, and normal crowds at the highest level; the black crowd and the brain crowd at the moderate level; and the wannabe black and rebel crowds at the lowest level (see Table 1.1).

Multidimensional scaling analyses (Kruskal and Wish, 1978) permitted a fuller two-dimensional depiction of respondents' conceptualization of their social context. Figure 1.1 presents a map of the seven crowds generated by multidimensional scaling analyses of the similarity data. Crowds that are close

Figure 1.1. Two-Dimensional Mapping of the Social Context Derived from Multidimensional Scaling Analyses of the Perceived Similarity of Each Possible Crowd Pair



together on the map were described by respondents as similar to each other; crowds at greater distance on the map were described as relatively different from each other. Analyses indicated that a two-dimensional solution accounted for over 90 percent of the structure in the data and that a third dimension did not add much to the "fit."

The seven crowds are distributed across the map's quadrants in several "crowd clusters." For example, there seems to be a natural clustering between jocks and popularity and between rebels and blacks; normals and brains are perceived as rather similar as well, but the wannabe blacks are rather remote from all other crowds.

Grade Differences. A series of MANCOVA analyses on status rankings by grade was performed for each crowd (controlling for respondent crowd). Single degree of freedom polynomial contrasts revealed several significant grade trends (see Table 1.1 for *F* and significance values). The jock crowd enjoyed increasing status among successive grade cohorts of students. On the other hand, three crowds suffered status loss among successive grade cohorts: the popular crowd, the black crowd, and the wannabe black crowd. The brain crowd enjoyed less status among 9th grade respondents than among 7th grade and 11th grade respondents. Status rankings for the normal and rebel crowds did not fluctuate significantly across grade.

This collection of findings provides criteria for assigning crowds to appropriate roles as reference groups. In addition to one's own crowd, the highest

Table 1.1. Mean Status Rankings and Identification Ratings for Each Crowd Overall and by Grade, with *F* Values and Significance Levels from Polynomial Contrasts

Status Rankings	Grade					F Value	
	All	7.00	9.00	11.00	Effect	Linear	Curvilinear
Jock crowd	3.65 ^a	3.20	3.79	3.96	26.72***	2.92	
Popular crowd	3.43 ^a	3.80	3.24	3.27	8.54**	3.59	
Normal crowd	3.22 ^a	3.06	3.34	3.26	2.04	2.27	
Black crowd	2.77 ^b	3.11	2.78	2.43	13.85***	0.00	
Brain crowd	2.53 ^b	2.63	2.24	2.73	0.19	6.58*	
Wannabe black	1.99 ^c	2.65	1.76	1.55	47.26***	6.46*	
Rebel crowds	1.92 ^c	1.97	2.02	1.78	2.04	1.28	
Identification Ratings							
Normal crowd	2.08 ^a	2.07	1.93	2.25	0.17	1.97	
Jock crowd	1.36 ^b	1.19	1.27	1.62	6.39*	0.87	
Popular crowd	1.20 ^b	1.23	1.10	1.29	0.15	1.34	
Black crowd	0.79 ^c	0.93	0.89	0.60	4.65*	0.52	
Brain crowd	0.88 ^c	0.90	0.63	1.12	2.17	8.87**	
Wannabe black	0.71 ^c	0.87	0.68	0.59	3.02	0.17	
Rebel crowds	0.43 ^d	0.28	0.49	0.52	4.88*	0.94	

Notes: Means reported have been adjusted for respondent crowd. Within analyses, means with different superscripts in first column differ significantly by the simultaneous Dunn Bonferroni procedure. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

status and moderate crowds had been hypothesized to be reference groups. Among 7th grade respondents, the popular crowd emerged as the highest status crowd; among 9th and 11th grade respondents, the jock crowd had the highest ranking (see Table 1.1). Therefore, perceived similarity to the popular crowd was computed to represent identification with the highest status crowd for 7th grade respondents, and perceived similarity to the jock crowd was computed to represent identification with the highest status crowd for 9th and 11th grade respondents. The crowd nearest to the center of the map was the normal crowd, which had been described by focus group interviewees as average and "middle-of-the-road." Identification with the normal crowd was thus computed to represent identification with "the average teenager."

Identification. An examination of each crowd's attractiveness as a reference group showed that respondents reported themselves to be more similar to higher status crowds than to lower status crowds. However, it was to the normal crowd that students reported themselves to be most similar (see Table 1.1). Pair-wise comparisons employing Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure revealed that students reported themselves to be significantly less similar to the two high-status crowds than to the normal crowd, but even less so to other crowds. Note that except for the normal crowd, the rank ordering of identification scores matches the rank ordering of crowds by status scores.

A series of polynomial contrasts was conducted to test for grade trends within separate MANCOVA analyses on identification scores for each crowd (controlling for respondent crowd). These revealed significant linear trends in identification scores for the jock crowd, the rebel crowd, and the black crowd. For jock and rebel crowds, identification ratings were significantly higher among older, versus younger, grade cohorts. For the black crowd, identification scores were lower for successive grade cohorts (see Table 1.1). A significant curvilinear trend revealed that identification ratings for the brain crowd were significantly lower among 9th grade respondents than among 7th and 11th grade respondents.

Identification with Hypothesized Reference Groups. As mentioned previously, the reference group with which respondents identified most frequently was the normal crowd, for which the average identification score was significantly higher than that of respondents' own crowd ($t[255] = 2.51; p < .05$). For 7th and 11th grade respondents, identification with one's own crowd was more frequent, on average, than identification with high-status crowds ($t[255] = 5.39; p < .001$) (see Table 1.2). However, for 9th grade respondents, identification with one's own crowd was equivalent to identification with the normal crowd (see Table 1.2 and Figure 1.2).

A series of polynomial contrasts within MANOVA analyses (multivariate analysis of variances) on average identification with the three hypothesized reference groups revealed that the oldest cohort of students expressed significantly more frequent identification with the high-status crowd in their grade than did 7th or 9th grade cohorts ($F[2,252] = 5.74; p < .05$). In other words, 11th grade respondents reported themselves to be more similar to the jock

Table 1.2. Crowd Differences in Average Number of Matches with the Characteristics of Three Potential Reference Groups

Groups	Identification with		
	One's Own Crowd	High-Status Crowd	Normal Crowd
Overall	1.86	1.40	2.11
7th Grade	1.80	1.25	2.08
9th Grade	1.94	1.24	1.94
11th Grade	1.85	1.69	2.29
<i>Respondent Crowd</i>			
Jocks	2.05	1.97	1.97
Populars	1.73	1.91	2.46
Normals	2.68	1.51	2.68
Black crowd	1.73	.98	1.53
Brains	1.69	1.00	2.26
Wannabe black	1.17	1.69	2.39
Rebel crowds	1.51	.89	1.48

Figure 1.2. Average Identification Scores for Three Reference Groups Across Grade



crowd than 7th or 9th grade respondents reported themselves to be to the popular and jock crowds respectively (see Table 1.2 and Figure 1.2).

Preferred Reference Groups for Individual Crowds. A series of single degree of freedom polynomial contrasts in MANOVA analyses within respondent groups assessed potential trends across grade for identification with each of the three hypothesized reference group crowds. Populars expressed increasing identification with the normal crowd across successive grade cohorts ($M_s = 1.50, 2.40, 3.00$, respectively; $F[2,252] = 5.97; p < .05$). Normals expressed increasing identification with high-status crowds across grade ($M_s = 1.04, 1.62, 2.36$, respectively; $F[2,252] = 10.18; p < .001$). The rebels' own crowd served significantly more as a reference group for 9th grade rebels than for those in 7th or 11th grade ($M_s = 1.00, 2.06, 1.23$, respectively; $F[2,252] = 8.14; p < .01$).

Summary and Discussion

Respondents depicted their social context in terms of the dimension of status and in generally subjective terms that yielded a sensible two-dimensional mapping. The jock crowd enjoyed increasing status across successive grade cohorts. The popular, black, and wannabe black crowds suffered status loss among successive grade cohorts. Status scores for the brain crowd traced a curvilinear trend, with 9th grade representing a low point in status.

A number of parallels emerged between grade changes in status and identification ratings. Identification ratings for higher status crowds were higher than identification ratings for lower status crowds. The jock crowd received progressively higher status and identification scores across successive grade cohorts. The black crowd received progressively lower status and identification scores across successive grade cohorts. Status and identification ratings for the brain crowd were lower among 9th grade respondents than among 7th and 11th grade respondents.

Overall, the normal crowd was favored more by respondents as a reference group than were their own crowds or high-status crowds. However, among 9th grade respondents, identification with one's own crowd and with the normal crowd were equal. Respondents in the 11th grade cohort identified with the high-status crowd of their grade more than younger respondents did, while general identification with one's own crowd and with the normal crowd remained relatively stable.

There were three significant grade differences in evidence from analyses of the individual respondent crowds' identification with the three hypothesized reference groups. Members of the rebel crowd identified more with their own crowd during a period when the crowd enjoyed a relatively high level of general social regard (reflected in general identification ratings, but not in status rankings). Popular crowd members expressed increasing identification with the normal crowd across successive grade cohorts, a pattern that may have been related to the popular crowd's reduced status among successive grade cohorts. Interestingly, the normal crowd members seemingly consid-

ered themselves to be more similar to the popular crowd across successive grade cohorts.

Our findings have significance in explicating dynamics of the adolescent social ecology as well as social and personal identity development. First, our findings on age differences in crowd status support assessments by several ethnographers. Eder (1985) and Kinney (1993) have characterized middle school as the high point of adolescents' enmeshment with the popular crowd, and our findings provide evidence for such a dynamic. Eckert (1989) found that the first year of high school represents the apex of rebellious students' competition for prominence, which corresponds to our finding that 9th grade rebels acknowledged sharing the characteristics they ascribed to their crowd more than 7th or 11th grade rebel respondents did.

Finally, the answer to our original question regarding the relative attractiveness of the three hypothesized reference groups was complex and intriguing. Though respondents identified with the normal crowd more than with their own crowd on average, this was not true for 9th grade respondents, whose identification with their own crowd was equal to their identification with the normal crowd. Such a finding supports previous research regarding developmental changes in the salience of crowd affiliation (Brown, Eicher, and Petrie, 1986) and in conformity pressures from peers (Clasen and Brown, 1985).

According to Brown, Mory, and Kinney (1994), a crowd's norms provide a sense of security for adolescents new to the complex high school environment, while older adolescents feel less need for that security and more desire to expand beyond the boundaries of a particular crowd. Perhaps, additionally, adolescents in a new school environment concentrate their efforts on achieving acceptance within a smaller circle of crowdmates, while older adolescents have the cognitive and self-esteem resources to negotiate for acceptance on a broader scale. Our finding that the oldest respondents claimed to share qualities they ascribe to high-status crowds significantly more than younger respondents did suggests that they may perceive that they have achieved such acceptance. The tendency to identify with the normal crowd may reflect a desire to identify with moderate and/or socially desirable behaviors expressed in the crowd system in order to obtain this broader acceptance.

However, the apparent movement toward the normal crowd's characteristics is not universal: not all respondent crowds identify more with the normal crowd than with their own crowd at any grade level. It is interesting to note that strength of identification with normals is inversely related to the distance between that crowd and the normal crowd, as depicted on the MDS (multidimensional scaling) map. We might speculate that the normals offer a relatively safe sanctuary for many adolescents close enough in "social distance" to make identification plausible. This dynamic is in keeping with Schlenker's contention (1980) that people typically seek to convey, in their impression management strategies, an image of the self that is both positive and believable. Additionally, a "normal" image may be bland enough to allow adolescents room for identity exploration. In contrast, committing to identification with

high-status groups might be an implausible stretch for those in low-status crowds and one that could bring disconfirming put-downs in day-to-day interactions with peers (Eder, 1985).

Analysis at the respondent crowd level across grades reveals another layer of complexity. One's choice of reference group depends upon the social climate peculiar to each age group and the relative position of one's own crowd within that context. Identifying with one's own crowd varies in line with shifts in the peer context: when their crowd is held in low esteem students have a tendency to distance themselves from it and to find another alternative for identification. Interestingly, however, opting for an average teenager identity does not seem an attractive solution for status loss among brain crowd members; it was the 7th grade brains who preferred to be normal, while more mature brains felt more comfortable with being brainy.

We believe that our findings represent quantitative corroboration and refinement of previous analyses of developmental phenomena rather than an artifact of cohort differences. We assert, as well, that our study illustrates how important it is not to view adolescents as participating in universal social developmental phenomena. Researchers need to extend their view beyond the aggregate level of analysis.

Though we believe that changes across grade may reflect changes in adolescents themselves and in the context that they experience and create, we acknowledge that potential cohort effects could confound our findings. Our study is also limited by its confinement to two school sites and to questionnaire data (for the most part). Though our school populations served a fair number of economically less advantaged students from subsidized housing nearby and from other parts of town, the schools have traditionally been geared toward the middle-class and upper-middle-class residential districts surrounding them. Also, three-quarters of the students are European American. Replication of the study and the inclusion of observational data would help to judge the extent to which the findings represent adolescent developmental phenomena or merely the self-reported views of a particular and unique group of students.

While adults might interpret crowds as evidence of juvenile superficiality and conformity, adolescents consider them to be important vehicles of social support and identity confirmation, despite their concerns about individuality and conformity. Students learn informally about group dynamics in the school setting, so it behooves concerned adults to structure this learning (Schofield, 1989).

Researchers, administrators, and students need to learn why conflicts arise and how these conflicts might be avoided. Misunderstandings between crowds can erupt into hallway violence, so we need to understand how the posturing of identity assertion and cultural diversity connect. Smaller schools or "schools within schools" might allow students to know each other as individuals and to see similarities between self and other that transcend category membership. It may be feasible to reduce levels of competition and individualism and to

encourage cooperation, understanding, and mutual responsibility between student peer groups (Lesko, 1988; Schofield, 1989). For instance, schools could acknowledge and negotiate student differences in human relations curricula. Schofield (1989) has recommended that group members be taught the schemata used by outgroup members to interpret the intentions and behaviors to which both groups are witness. Also, schools could work to enable students of all types to participate in sports, service, or artistic activities rather than contributing subtly to the polarization of students through such policies as grade or hair-length requirements (Eckert, 1989).

Though some provisional crowd identities offer adolescents a congenial niche, it doesn't seem that all adolescents find a fulfilling crowd affiliation (Brown and Lohr, 1987). Cognitive changes, school transitions, and puberty seem to provide an especially volatile context for the establishment of identity—a process that social identity theorists suggest is fraught with conflict in itself. Tajfel (1984) has pointed out that a complex network of biased evaluations is characteristic of a complex social environment, but social identity theory has little to say about how perceptions are ordered beyond the ingroup/outgroup dichotomy, and about developmental changes characteristic of identity dynamics.

We see in our findings an example of social categorization phenomena enacted among persons at the dawn of formal operational thought and in the midst of what Erikson (1968, p. 87) described as "the persistent adolescent endeavor to define, redefine, and redefine themselves and each other in often ruthless comparison." These results reflect impression management in projections, denials, claims, and presentations of self and reference groups by adolescents. It is clear that, for adolescents, not only are identity development and impression management dynamic processes, but they occur within a dynamic peer context that is experienced differently by its participants depending upon their niche within the system.

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