

Visibility, Vulnerability, Development, and Context: Ingredients for a Fuller Understanding of Peer Rejection in Adolescence

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Merten's recent assessment of the responses of four boys who were associated with a low-status peer crowd in junior high school, provides important insights on processes of social rejection in early adolescence. To build on these insights, investigators must broaden the sample beyond core members of one socially rejected peer group and broaden their methods beyond self-reports and self-assessments from rejected youth. Conceptual frameworks must consider the full range of characteristics that contribute to peer status—physical stature and development, personality traits, social skills, interests, abilities, and values—and be sensitive to contextual (school and community) factors that shape the peer group system and constrain mobility within the system.

Merten's (1996) recent ethnographic study of members of the "mel" crowd in a midwestern junior high school is a noble effort to describe early adolescents' efforts to cope with a negative reputation among peers. Ultimately, however, the study seems to raise more questions than it answers about peer rejection in adolescence. This is due largely to limitations in the conceptualization of peer groups, in the sample of rejected youth, and in the methods employed to study these young people. In this article, I will suggest alternatives to Merten's conceptual and empirical approaches that can further elucidate the dynamics of social rejection in adolescence.

CONCEPTUALIZING CROWDS

Merten's (1996) basic premise—that membership in a rejected crowd heightens one's visibility and makes one more vulnerable to peer derision—is sensible and persuasive. It prompts such questions as why crowds emerge in

adolescence and how an individual becomes associated with a particular peer group. Merten offers no substantive explanation for the emergence of crowds and only a vague rationale for assignment to the mel crowd: failure at "disengaging from one's childhood past and engaging one's adolescent future" (p. 11, this issue). Other research on peer crowds indicates that the plight of these young people is better understood from a conceptual framework that places adolescent role and norm transitions in developmental and contextual perspective (see Brown, 1990).

The Emergence of Crowds and Crowd Identities

Crowds commonly emerge in American secondary schools to help students cope with several changes that occur at this time of life (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). First, there are physical changes, whose sexual impulses spawn a press for heterosocial interests to replace the remarkably gender segregated world of late childhood (Maccoby, 1988). Second, there are psychological changes, with new emphases on autonomy, self-regulation, and crystallization of identity. Third, there are contextual changes in which young people typically transition from a small elementary school with self-contained classrooms to a much larger school in which a different set of peers is encountered each hour of the day.

Crowds emerge as prototypic identities. Adolescents can readily identify—and, to a surprising extent, readily agree upon—the normative characteristics of each group (Brown, Lohr, & Trujillo, 1990; Deyhle, 1986; Mory, 1994). Crowds provide guidelines for heterosociality and other new or redefined roles in adolescence. They also can be embraced as a transitional step between psychological dependence on parents and autonomous self-definition. Finally, they serve as a means of classifying unknown peers on the basis of simple physical, sartorial (dress and grooming), or behavioral cues, so as to help regulate social interactions with a host of peers too large to know as individuals.

In essence, each crowd maps an alternative prototypic pathway through the developmental changes that typify adolescence within a particular social context (school or community). Moreover, crowds are arranged (at least cognitively) in social space, such that adolescents can articulate the "rules of engagement" among crowds: which crowds befriend or date each other, which crowds scrupulously avoid each other, and so on (Eckert, 1989; Eder, 1985; Kinney, 1992; Larkin, 1979). Although crowds occasionally are differentiated along a single axis (e.g., Ianni, 1989; Kinney, 1992), most social systems feature a multidimensional differentiation of crowds (Brown, Dolcini, & Leventhal, in press; Deyhle, 1986; Larkin, 1979; Schwendinger &

Schwendinger, 1985). Because each dimension differentiates among crowds that are respected or admired and those that are not, there can be multiple crowds in a school that, for many reasons, are socially rejected or devalued. Discovering this "network of crowd relationships" is a vital step in any investigation of crowd influences.

As crowds emerge in adolescence, individuals begin to associate particular peers with each group. The more closely one's physical features, behaviors, and attitudes match the prototypic traits of a particular crowd, the more likely one is to be associated with that group. Of course, most adolescents offer an imperfect match to any crowd. Moreover, there is an inclination to avoid too rigid and uniform a crowd identity because it constrains experimentation with alternative identities and ultimate assertion of a unique and personal self-image. As a result, each crowd has a set of core members (those whom most peers associate with the crowd) and more peripheral members (who fit the crowd norms less perfectly and are less consistently or confidently associated by peers with the crowd). There is also a substantial number of individuals who "float" among crowds without being clearly associated with any one group.

The Case at Cronkite

Merten (1996) suggests that the crowd system at the school he studied, "Cronkite" Junior High, is two dimensional, with one dimension anchored by the preps and the burnouts at either end, and the other anchored by the mels at one end and all other groups at the other. Merten offers no explanation of what characteristics differentiate crowds on the first dimension, or of where the mels fall on this dimension. Beyond the rather vague description of success or failure at relinquishing one's childhood past and embracing one's adolescent future, he also fails to specify the differentiating features of the second dimension—the characteristics that peers routinely employ to identify mels. This is unfortunate because it limits our appreciation of mels' position in the social system. We do not know the factors that are central to their image among peers or the crowds to which they could most easily change affiliations.

Consider, for example, the social system in a midwestern middle school I recently studied with demographic characteristics similar to those Merten (1996) attributes to Cronkite. Data from a multidimensional scaling exercise, in which students rated the degree of similarity of all possible pairs of major crowds in the school, allowed us to generate a map of the peer crowd system (see Figure 1). Follow-up interviews with students helped clarify the characteristics that discriminated crowds on each of the system's two major dimen-

These data more clearly reveal the social situation for differing types of rejected youth—in this school, the nerds and the punkers. Students reported that members of each group could shift to one other crowd fairly easy (from nerd to brain or from punker to skater), but would find the transition to any other crowd to be a formidable challenge (especially for the nerds). Merten's (1996) constricted description of the Cronkite crowd system indicates that the mels were far more "distanced" from other peer groups than were other rejected crowds in the social system (the burnouts?). Yet, without a clearer image of the school's social system, it is difficult to appreciate the position of the mels.

EMPIRICAL APPROACHES

Ethnographic approaches to human behavior offer two major advantages over many other methodologies. They provide a detailed and in-depth analysis of a particular phenomenon. They also encourage interpretations that arise from within the setting and setting participants, rather than risking the constraints of an incomplete or inappropriate preconceived theoretical framework. Merten (1996) attempts to take advantage of these strengths by focusing on just four boys who are members of the mel crowd and relying almost exclusively on their own accounts of and insights about their experiences at Cronkite.

Although well intended, this approach has distinct disadvantages as an attempt to understand responses to peer rejection in early adolescence. First, Merten by-passes the important initial step of establishing mels as a socially rejected crowd and confirming these four boys' placement in that crowd. Although the rejection of mels seems intuitively obvious, information from ethnographic interviews with nonmels—or from peer rating tasks (e.g., Brown, 1989; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1985)—would establish both the consistency of the group's negative image and the basis for that image. Are mels identified primarily by physical features (e.g., small stature, delayed pubertal development, lack of athletic ability), behavior patterns (tattling, befriending teachers, entering conversations inappropriately, etc.), attitudes and values (negative evaluation of sexual activity, commitment to being "straight"), or some combination of these factors?

Establishing these identifying features of the crowd is essential to interpreting the success of mels' efforts to change and thereby escape association with the mel crowd. Les and Scott claim they changed markedly from 7th to 8th grade, but neither they nor Merten make any mention of physical

<p>Prep *</p>	<p>* Jock * Black</p>
<p>* Brain * Nerd</p>	<p>* Gang Skater * * Punker</p>

Figure 1: Students' Perceptions of Social Distance among Crowds in a Midwestern Middle School.

Note: Asterisks indicate the position of crowds in two-dimensional space. Geographical distance between crowds represents perceived social distance between crowds.

sions. The vertical axis differentiated crowds in terms of social status, heterosocial activity, and allegiance to the community's predominant "peer culture" ("with it" music, clothing styles, etc.). The horizontal axis distinguished crowds on their orientation toward school achievement and compliance with adult authority and community standards of conduct (e.g., participation in illegal behavior). Answers to a separate set of questions (other than the multidimensional scaling ratings) confirmed that the distance between crowds approximated the difficulty of changing one's peer image and being accepted by another crowd.

development, which is undoubtedly one facet of the mel prototype. If they failed to mature physically between 7th and 8th grade, and if peers identify physical stature as a key feature of mels, then the boys' changes in attitudes and behaviors could have been easily dismissed by peers.

A second disadvantage is that Merten (1996) concentrates on mels to the exclusion of other categories of rejected youth. A more appealing alternative would be to compare the experiences of a small sample of mels to those of a small group of classmates in another rejected crowd. Merten suggests that peers were reluctant to change their impression of mels because of their symbolic importance in the social system—their role as “anchor” of one dimension of the crowd system. Was this equally true of youths in the crowd that anchored the rejected end of the other dimension of the system? Perhaps the social distance between mels and other crowds was simply too great for the boys to traverse without the “radical” behavioral changes that William displayed. The sample must be broadened to ascertain whether the “visibility/vulnerability” trap that Merten describes is consistent across different types of socially rejected adolescents.

Third, if Merten (1996) is accurate in claiming that these boys were viewed consistently by peers as mels, then his sample includes a restricted range of the mel crowd. As noted earlier, crowds typically encompass both central and peripheral members, based on individuals' degree of conformity to crowd norms (or peer consensus on their reputation). The pathway out of “meldom” is easier for those at the edges of the crowd than for central members (Kinney, 1992). Less drastic changes in attitudes, behavior, or appearance can propel them into another crowd or at least into a sea of peers who “float” among crowds. By concentrating on the crowd's core membership, Merten may have overstated the difficulties of escaping from social rejection in adolescence.

Fourth, Merten's (1996) data are drawn almost exclusively from interviews with these four ostensibly central members of the mel crowd. He quotes from an interview with one other student (Sally's justification for harassing William) and refers three times, without great specificity, to ethnographic observations (in discrediting Les's and Scott's perceptions that peers no longer regard them as mels and confirming William's assertion that peers harass him less in 8th grade). Ascertaining mels' own understanding of their situation is insightful, and the boys' stories are quite instructive. Yet, mels are likely to be an unreliable source of information. Like all adolescents and adults, mels are likely to engage in some form of impression management that projects a positive image of self to others (Goffman, 1959). Crowd members routinely distort or screen reality to achieve a more positive self-portrait (Mory, 1994). Moreover, a common characteristic of socially rejected youth is an inability to accurately interpret or respond to social cues

(Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). This should make us suspicious of mels' accounts of social events. Recall, for example, Les's misreading of Laura's facetious profession of affection for him.

Merten (1996) briefly describes the multiple interviews he collected with more than 100 youths outside of the mel crowd. In addition, his staff apparently had extensive opportunities to observe students in class, the lunchroom, in extracurricular activities, and informal interactions around school. It is puzzling that Merten drew so sparingly from these data—if only to evaluate mels' own reports of their behavior. Scott claimed that he got better at sports; was the change great enough to get him on an athletic team or even make him impressive in gym class? Les tried to befriend popular classmates (the preps?). Did they respond to his efforts at conversations? Did he also try to befriend peers in crowds that were closer to the mels on Cronkite's “social map”?

DEVELOPMENT AND CONTEXT

Merten (1996) attributes the failure of the boys' efforts to escape their reputation as mels to their reluctance (in 7th grade) to conform to norms of the adolescent-oriented secondary school and the reluctance of peers (in 8th grade) to relinquish exemplars of this symbolically important social category. Indeed, it seems sensible that such dynamics were working against mels' efforts to change. Yet, I suspect that developmental and contextual forces also contributed in ways that are not acknowledged clearly in this study.

A question to address in this regard is whether association with the mel crowd represented a *change* in peer status. Merten speculated that, by not endorsing norms of their “adolescent future” upon entry to junior high school, these four boys probably moved from the “low end of the accepted continuum” in elementary school to a socially rejected peer status. It is more likely that their reputation preceded them as they made the school transition, and the characteristics that prompted their association with the mels had earlier contributed to their social rejection by elementary school classmates. Adler, Kless, and Adler (1992) document the importance of athletic ability, moderate aggressiveness, and marginally deviant behavior (being not so “straight” or “goodie-goodie”) to social acceptance for elementary school boys. Scott, William, Morton, and Les were confronted with norms of their “adolescent future” well before Merten (1996) suggests they were. The role of adolescent crowds is not so much to create new standards of social acceptance and rejection as to *institutionalize* those that have been brewing for the last several years of elementary school. As Merten acknowledges, crowds simply exac-

erbate the vulnerability of rejected youths by making them more visible. Crowds allow one's social status to be easily recognized by classmates across the entire school, rather than simply within one's largely self-contained classroom in elementary school.

A second question is whether the changes between 7th and 8th grade in peers' responses to these boys were solely a function of their changes in behavior. Just as individuals change over time, so do crowd systems (Brown et al. 1994; Eder, 1985; Kinney, 1993). Although this is most dramatic across school transitions, structural changes among peer groups also can shift within schools. In one ethnically mixed, midwestern high school, for example, Mory (1994) found that the "social distance" between Blacks and jocks or populars diminished appreciably between 9th and 11th grade, whereas the distance between headbangers and jocks or populars increased. One wonders whether 8th graders described mels and the relationships between mels and other crowds in different ways than did 7th graders. Perhaps the boys felt more accepted by peers because, by 8th grade, overt and physical forms of ridiculing rejected peers were no longer socially acceptable.

A final question is how contextual factors contributed to the initial peer labeling of Cronkite students and to their efforts to change reputations among peers. Merten (1996) mentions two features of Cronkite and the community that are important in this regard. First, student turnover was probably quite small because of the stability of the surrounding community. Moreover, the school was structured so that students spent most of their day with the same small set of peers, rather than mixing with a wider range of grademates (as is typical in secondary schools). By minimizing and stabilizing the range of peers encountered during a day, the school structure could quicken the process of labeling classmates into crowds and restrict students' ability to change their reputation among peers.

PUTTING VISIBILITY AND VULNERABILITY IN DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Merten (1996) has provided a fascinating glimpse of four early adolescent boys' perceptions of their undesirable social status among peers and of their reports of efforts to change this status. His interview data reveal the plight of young people who are "stuck" in a socially rejected crowd. His ethnographic, social constructivist methodology offers a promising alternative to sociometric rating schemes, which work well in self-contained elementary school classrooms but are ill-suited to the broader and less stable social context of secondary schools.

To fully appreciate the position of these four boys, however, more attention must be paid to their developmental history of peer acceptance and rejection, their physical stature and development, and the constraints that the school structure (or the surrounding community) places on their social mobility. In addition, their efforts to change should be evaluated in relation to a better understanding of the place of mels in the school's crowd system, and the comparison of these "core" mel crowd members to peers at the periphery of the mels as well as classmates who occupy core and peripheral positions in other low-status peer groups. Such comparisons may require investigators to incorporate multiple methods in their research design, drawing not only from self-report data but also from peer reports and ratings and participant observations. The capacity to combine qualitative and quantitative data and the ability to integrate social constructivism with a sensitivity to developmental and contextual factors seem essential to advances in our understanding of early adolescents' responses to social rejection.

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