

POPULARITY IN THE PEER SYSTEM

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Chapter 8

Popularity in Peer Group Perspective *The Role of Status in Adolescent Peer Systems*

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Few facets of child and adolescent social interactions have been the subject of as much research and controversy over the past decade as the concept of popularity. Through extensive study of childhood populations in the latter portion of the 20th century, sociometric researchers derived a categorization scheme that designated popular youth as individuals routinely nominated by peers as well liked (or close friend or desirable activity companion) and rarely nominated as disliked (or not a friend or unwelcome activity companion). As they began studying older youth, these scholars were surprised to discover that adolescents have their own definition of the term *popular*, and it fails to correspond to standard sociometric terminology. Although often admired and emulated, the "populars" are not necessarily well liked and harbor behaviors and characteristics inconsistent with the common portrait of sociometrically popular children. To resolve this definitional dilemma, sociometric scholars now routinely designate two forms of popularity among adolescents: one referring to an individual's likeability or acceptance among peers and the other to the person's social status (Cillessen & Rose, 2005).

Although expedient, this solution obviates an understanding of



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popularity from the perspective of the adolescent social system. Why is popularity so important in this social system? Why do young people seek popularity and yet deride those who have it? Why do popular youth manifest a mix of prosocial and antisocial behaviors? To address these questions, I review another body of research—much of it ethnographic and typically emanating from more sociological or social-psychological perspectives—that elucidates the meaning and purpose of popularity within the adolescent peer system (Merten, Chapter 3, this volume). I then offer suggestions for future research that may help to bridge these two research traditions and their respective theoretical perspectives on popularity.

THE SOCIAL IMPETUS FOR POPULARITY

Adolescence is routinely perceived as a period of intensified peer interest and interaction (Brown & Larson, 2009). The reason for the increased salience of peers at this life stage lies in the consequences of a combination of biological, psychological, and social developments that are fundamental to adolescence in contemporary U.S. society. The three most important changes concern puberty, autonomy, and social expansion. Pubertal development is routinely regarded as the initiator of adolescence. One of its primary consequences is heightened interest in sexual and romantic relationships. Such interest directs most young people to interactions and relationships with peers of the other sex. Because such peers have been largely ignored or avoided in middle and late childhood (Maccoby, 1988), there is a fair amount of social learning required to become adept at other-sex relationships.

Although young people might be able to turn to adults for instruction in how to interact with the other sex or how to be effective in mixed-sex social situations, a second fundamental change discourages this option. The transition to adolescence is accompanied by increased expectations for autonomy, expectations that are manifest in the minds of both young people and their elders. Early adolescents display an increasing interest in taking responsibility for their own decisions (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). They begin to question the legitimacy of parents' rule making or oversight of their behavior, especially in matters that they regard as more personal than moral or prudential (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Parents are less eager to relinquish their authority, but still acknowledge that in some cases their children should be granted more of a voice in decisions about their activities (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). Teacher–student

relationships also become less personal with the transition to secondary school in early adolescence (Eccles et al., 1983). This is partly because of the structural arrangement of secondary schools (teachers see more students for less time each day than in elementary school), but also because of a sense that their students do not desire as close a relationship with school adults as in younger grades (Finders, 1997). The drive toward autonomy prompts young people to rely more extensively on peers to guide them into the heterosocial world of adolescence.

Turning to peers becomes more challenging because of a third development common in adolescence, namely the transition to a much larger and more diverse nexus of age-mates. With the move to secondary school, young people typically encounter a greater number of classmates, often from more demographically diverse backgrounds and almost certainly extending beyond the geographical boundaries of the immediate or nearby neighborhoods served by their elementary school. A daily routine of shifting classes exposes students to a much larger share of age-mates than they encountered in elementary school. Extracurricular activities (after-school programs or community sports teams) often draw from this larger pool of peers as well. Not only are these changes likely to disrupt existing friendship networks, but they also heighten the need to get to know—and to be known by—the new, larger network of peers. Given the difficulty of establishing personal relationships with everyone in this greatly expanded peer setting, establishing one's identity or reputation and discerning the identity of everyone else become critical tasks at the outset of adolescence.

Collectively, these developmental changes plunge early adolescents into a new and challenging social environment. Reluctant to rely on adults as much as they have earlier in their lives, young people naturally look to peers for assistance in developing the skills necessary to thrive in this new environment. A peer system evolves to meet adolescents' developmental needs. That system is charged with developing norms for social interaction, especially as they pertain to mixed-gender systems of relationships, establishing mechanisms that allow expression of autonomy and identity, and deriving a means of maintaining the boundaries of acceptable attitudes and activities. As I indicate in the sections that follow, popularity is a central feature of the peer system. It endows certain individuals with the authority to set and enforce norms, anchors a process of peer socialization regarding system norms, and helps to organize the specification of acceptable social identities.

The magnitude of this task should not be underestimated. Popularity is a central feature of a system charged not merely with establishing

and maintaining the norms of one peer group but with facilitating the formation and operation of a larger system that spawns numerous peer groups and regulates their interactions. The peer system arises in part to foster key social relationships (romantic affiliations and more intimate friendship bonds), but it also addresses other major developmental tasks. Preoccupations with autonomy and identity that are so central to adolescence in individualistic societies also become woven into the peer group structure in such cultures (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994; Newman & Newman, 2001). To understand popularity's role in this venture, one must first appreciate the basic organizational and operational features of the emerging peer system.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND OPERATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF THE ADOLESCENT PEER SYSTEM

"When you're in junior high, everything's different." Finders (1997) uses this statement from one of her study participants as the heading for her book's first chapter to underscore how dramatic young people regard the transition between elementary and middle school social systems. Although some elements are retained across the transition—early adolescents still form friendships and cluster together in friendship or activity groups—new types of relationships and new levels of interaction emerge to create a more complex social structure (Brown & Larson, 2009). More important, one's actions and affiliations are held up to public scrutiny in a way that is disquieting to many early adolescents. As one of Merten's (1996a, p. 56) middle school respondents noted about her peers, "They're judging you this year, and that's what I don't like. Because they never used to judge you last year. They wouldn't judge [you] on what you looked like; they would judge you on your personality. This year they're judging you on what you look like, what clothes you wear, what kind of friends you hang out with. Like, if your friend is a burnout then you're a burnout." Some young people even argue that peer social dynamics trump the school's intended mission of academic learning and advancement. Duncan's (2004, p. 143) sample of British girls confessed that they would advise a new student to establish her position within the peer system before attending to classes and academic requirements. "It was highly important to understand the peer hierarchy and to find a comfortable position within it."

What is the nature of the changes that young people regard as so radical and disturbing?

Organizational Changes

Sociometric studies often use the entire grade level as the nomination pool for ratings of adolescent popularity or related behaviors, under the assumption that this unit forms a coherent, unified system comparable to self-contained classrooms in elementary school settings. Such an assumption is questionable in light of the restructuring that occurs in early adolescence. Except in small and very homogeneous contexts, the peer system is composed of an array of groups. Adolescents typically conceive of groups in two different ways. One involves sets of peers who commonly hang out and do things together. Social scientists typically refer to these interaction-based groupings as *cliques*. On average, cliques tend to have between five and eight members, which investigators point out is an optimum size for maintaining reasonably close relationships among all dyads in the group (Dunphy, 1969; Kindermann, 2007; Larkin, 1979).

The other conception of groups clusters individuals who are perceived as sharing a common image, lifestyle, or pattern of behaviors, even if they don't all routinely hang out together. Typically, these reputation-based clusters are called *crowds*. The central defining feature of crowds is that each proffers a unique provisional identity—a set of values, music and grooming styles, activity preferences, orientations toward school, and so on that, collectively, set it apart from any other group (Brown & Larson, 2009). Thus, any peer system that includes multiple crowds automatically features multiple identity or lifestyle choices. In other words, both across and within adolescent peer systems, there is more heterogeneity than is often apparent in depictions of the youth culture, including many sociometric studies of popularity.

Heuristically, cliques and crowds seem to be noticeably distinct, and social scientists work diligently to emphasize their differences. Merten (1996a, p. 57), for example, cautions that "it is important to keep in mind that in junior high school the terms like *preppie* refer to status categories—not groups with identifiable boundaries and specific criteria for membership. The designation of specific individuals as representatives of these categories makes the categories seem more substantial than they actually are."

Other scholars affirm Merten's distinction between crowd categories and clique groups (Cross & Fletcher, 2009), but adolescents are not so facile at differentiating the two terms. Kindermann (2007) used the social-cognitive mapping technique, in which adolescents name all the different groups of peers they can think of who hang out together, to map the clique structure in one middle school sample. When he then asked

respondents to give each group a name signifying "what the group was about," participants offered up common crowd labels, including jocks, brains, nerds, the cool crowd, and in-betweeners. Ethnographers also note the tendency for adolescents to think of cliques in terms of crowd labels, even if they recognize that the crowd may extend beyond one particular clique (Eder, 1985; Milner, 2004; Wiseman, 2002).

An additional organizational change, slower to develop, is the transformation of peer groups from largely gender-homogeneous to mixed-gender units. This transformation seems to occur at different rates among various peer groups, sometimes not becoming apparent until middle adolescence (high school). Dunphy (1969) observed that the transition to mixed-gender groups typically occurred when a clique of girls commingled with an all-boys clique, spurred by the development of a dating relationship between each clique's leader. Scholars have not determined whether this mode of merger is common among current-day U.S. youth, but the commingling of genders within cliques is obvious (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000) and underscores the capacity of adolescent peer groups to adjust to developmental needs driven by puberty.

Beyond these structural transformations is another change that is particularly important for the study of popularity, namely the strong tendency for cliques and crowds to be arranged into a status hierarchy (Garner, Bootcheck, Lorr, & Rauch, 2006). Scholars have debated the basis for the hierarchy. Some studies provide evidence that peer group divisions simply replicate socioeconomic strata apparent in adult society (Eckert, 1989; Hollingshead, 1949) or reflect the surrounding society's emphasis on consumerism (Milner, 2004). Others suggest that group position reflects success at stage-specific attributes such as athletic prowess, social skills, or physical attractiveness (Coleman, 1961). In most cases, status systems seem to strike a careful balance between mimicking and rejecting adult standards. For example, it is common for peer systems to value academic success but not academic effort (Friedenberg, 1963; Gordon, 1957) or to admire the skill in getting along well with adults but not subjugation to adult rules or authority (Garner et al., 2006). In this way, peer groups can nurture healthy autonomy development without encouraging alienation from adults.

Garner et al. (2006) reported substantial variation in the nature of status hierarchies that could be observed in the high schools of various communities. Organization ranged from a traditional pyramid structure, in which one or two groups enjoyed the highest status position and increasing numbers of cliques occupied positions further down the hierarchy, to pluralistic systems, in which no one group dominated and there

was a climate of egalitarianism and tolerance, to oppositional structures featuring hostile relationships between the popular crowd and at least one other peer group. These distinctions, however, portray peer structures in middle adolescence and point to developmental changes in peer groups that I describe later in this chapter. In early adolescence, the more hegemonic pyramid structure is a consistent theme in research studies. Such a structure may better serve the developmental needs of young people as they try to navigate the new peer social system.

Operational Principles

In the United States, these structural changes in the peer system are most likely to occur as young people transition into middle or junior high school, typically at age 11 or 12. Spurred by the presence of older youth in more advanced grade levels, the peer system quickly infiltrates new arrivals to the school. There is a scramble to consolidate friendship networks into viable cliques and to identify high-status cliques and clique leaders. Criteria for popularity or high status typically replicate those for older students. In fact, popular cliques in older grades have a vested interest in promulgating their status criteria among new students—and even selecting the "popular group" leaders—as a means of maintaining their favored position in the peer system (Bishop, Bishop, & Bishop, 2003). Once high-status cliques are identified and the criteria for judging status established, other cliques can find their place along the hierarchy, according to their adeptness at conforming to status norms and forging friendly relations with high-status groups or their members (Milner, 2004). "Once status systems become well established," Milner (2004) reports, "they are relatively stable. Adolescents repeatedly report the difficulty of changing their status once their peers have categorized them" (p. 83). Individuals who defy the popular group's norms too dramatically may have difficulty finding or forming a clique. Payne (2007) indicated that the sexual minority youth whom they observed were not successful in forming a friendship group until the later years of high school.

Combined with all of the academic adjustments that young people confront in the school transition (Eccles et al., 1983), the intense negotiations over group affiliations and group status positions can seem overwhelming, especially when the criteria for judgments shift substantially, from personality to grooming styles or friendship affiliations, as one of Merten's (1996b) respondents noted. The salience of group affiliations over personality in the quest for popularity or acceptance is particularly important. Other contributions to this volume detail personal character-

istics that are associated with sociometrically derived popularity scores (Aikins & Litwack, Chapter 7, and Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, Chapter 4, this volume). Certainly, such characteristics contribute to an individual's ability to become part of the popular crowd, but in the final analysis popularity is designated by membership in a high-status peer group. One can attain popular status simply by being friends or romantic partners of popular clique leaders and thereby gaining admission to their clique. There is a certain "guilt by association" (if your friend is a burnout, then you're a burnout). And although particular characteristics—athletic prowess, physical attractiveness, material wealth—are generally advantageous, the specific traits valued by the peer system are context specific and can vary considerably among communities (Coleman, 1961). In this regard, popularity is more a characteristic of the peer group or peer system than the individual.

Given the amount of energy that early adolescents invest in establishing their place in the peer group system, it is surprising how reluctant they are to articulate their position. Several investigators have noted the inclination of early adolescents to disavow membership in a given crowd, to claim membership in multiple groups, or to characterize their own clique as just a group of friends, even as they readily supply crowd labels—often derogatory—for other clusters of peers (Brown, Von Bank, & Steinberg, 2008; Cross & Fletcher, 2009; Dumphy, 1969; Eckert, 1989; Finders, 1997). The derogation of out-groups is a common feature of intergroup relations when groups are competing for a limited resource (such as status), according to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). For lower status crowd members, denying their group affiliation may be a face-saving strategy because group status is associated with self-esteem. In fact, Brown et al. (2008) demonstrated that adolescents who were rated by peers as members of low-status crowds did not suffer as much loss of self-esteem if they disavowed their crowd affiliation or claimed membership in no crowd than if they affirmed peers' assessment of their group membership. Such findings serve as a caution about the validity of self-ratings of crowd affiliation.

The challenges that young people face as they enter a secondary school environment are quite foreboding. They must become aware of the prevailing peer norms, discern the various crowds within the peer context, decide how they want peers to perceive them, perhaps compete with others for affiliation in popular groups, and assemble or work their way into a group of friends who will help them achieve their social goals. They need to accomplish all of this quickly, mindful of the potential social cost of missteps (gaining a reputation that is difficult to alter).

The peer system appears to be well organized to assist in this mission. Building on the work of Corsaro and Eder (1990), Youniss, McLellan, and Strouse (1994) discerned four fundamental principles underlying the social adjustment process. First, young people behave in a rule-like fashion. Second, they operate as if they share meanings for actions and norms for procedures that they establish through mutual understanding. Third, group activities focus on repeatable themes that all group members recognize. Finally, young people believe that the activities in which they participate are orderly and necessary. These principles, according to Youniss and his colleagues, arise from interactions in the situation, among participants, rather than from some code of rules or laws that exist outside the setting. In this way, on a broader level, the peer system reflects the budding sense of autonomy that is so salient to individuals' developmental agenda at this stage of life.

Summary

In adolescence, popularity is a key component of the fundamental organization of adolescent peer systems. Peer groups emerge and are arranged into a status hierarchy, which allows a particular group of peers (those who are leaders and members of the popular crowd or highest status groups) to take leadership in defining the dominant norms governing individual behavior and intergroup interactions within the social system. The widespread desire to gain membership in the popular crowd (Coleman, 1961; Eder, 1985) legitimizes the authority of high-status youth and their efforts to establish and maintain norms, thereby assuring a well-functioning peer system. The shared meanings for which early adolescents strive and their belief in the legitimacy of operational procedures provide stability to what otherwise could be a chaotic social system through this time of transition. Popularity is defined by the peer system and embodied in its organization as high-status group membership. However, these general principles do not reveal much about the specific practices that keep the system running—and in some cases undermine its efficiency. It is to these practices that I now turn attention.

POPULARITY AND PEER GROUP DYNAMICS

The social system that emerges from the restructuring in early adolescence is likely to include a variety of groups or crowds. These groups can be categorized in numerous ways (see, e.g., Sussman, Pokhrel, Ash-

more, & Brown, 2007), but in terms of popularity or status, four types of groups can be discerned. First among these are the populars, who enjoy high status and are charged with the task of demarcating and enforcing the dominant group norms within the peer setting. Second are the unpopulars, who manifest a general lack of social maturity and ineptitude in adjusting to the normative demands of the new peer system (Merten, 1996b; Cnaan, 1987). In some settings, these are the only two groups to become apparent in middle school (Eder, 1985; Kinney, 1993), but in most cases at least one other category is visible, which could be labeled mid-rangers. Groups in this category are neither particularly high nor low in status but may be arranged in various intermediary points along the status hierarchy. Finally, there may be iconoclasts. Likely to emerge later than the other groups, often not until high school, these groups display norms that are oppositional to the popular crowd and often antagonistic toward adult standards or expectations as well; they tend to have hostile relationships with high-status groups in the peer system.

In patterns of social interaction, particularly intergroup relations, each type of group harbors different motivations. Popular crowds strive to maintain their dominance over the social system and enforce their own norms. They tend to be particularly derisive of the unpopulars, who, as a result, are motivated to avoid the derogation or abusive treatment that they receive from peers, particularly the populars. In some respects, their objective is to become invisible (Merten, 1996b) or too strange or intimidating to contend with (Bešić & Kerr, 2009). Mid-rangers have a split objective. On the one hand, they strive to become candidates for membership in higher status crowds, thus trying to befriend the populars and mimic their attributes, attitudes, interests, and activities. On the other hand, especially if their group lies toward the bottom of the status hierarchy, they are motivated to avoid association with unpopulars (Milner, 2004), making them eager to join in the derision levied upon unpopular group members. They can become avid cheerleaders or bystanders of populars' relational aggression and bullying of low-status peers. The iconoclasts, on the other hand, are more assertive or aggressive in challenging populars' authority. They are motivated to be everything that populars are not, to disrupt the populars' hegemony of the peer system, and to visibly articulate their differences with the prevailing norms of the social system (Eckert, 1989). The more rigid the hierarchy within a peer setting, the more distinctive the motives and actions are among these different types of peer groups (Garner et al., 2006). These group-dependent motives form the backdrop for intra- and intergroup interactions.

Conformity and Visibility

Conformity to clique norms is an especially salient issue for high-status group members because it is usually a prerequisite to moving up the dominance hierarchy within a clique. The stronger one's allegiance to group norms, the more likely group leaders are to recognize and trust a member, possibly elevating the person's status over less conforming members (Wiseman, 2002). However, adolescents throughout the peer system acknowledge strong peer pressure to conform to clique norms. They understand that nonconformity can lead to expulsion from the group, leaving them without any friends (Larkin, 1979). This is true even among oppositional groups (freaks, Goths) who rail against the tight conformity of high-status cliques (Larkin, 1979; Milner, 2004).

To obtain a high rank in this system, one has to anticipate the criteria by which status will be judged and then pursue those criteria or, better yet, control the process of stipulating criteria. This is why leaders of high-status cliques tend to complicate or elaborate group norms in ways that will give them a competitive advantage (Milner, 2004). Leaders then endeavor to maintain strict allegiance to group norms among all members. This effort sometimes can be taken to extremes, as Finders (1997) observed in one popular middle school clique:

Because group identity was privileged over individual identity, allegiance to peer group remained central. . . . Physical appearance, dress, social behavior, academic achievement, and reading and writing preferences were carefully monitored by the girls to present a united front. Not only did the girls arrange their hair and dress similarly, but on weekends they exchanged grocery bags full of clothing so that the next week each girl could come to school dressed in the same outfits as those of her tight circle of friends" (pp. 48–49).

To maintain their ranking in the system, high-status groups strive for maximum visibility, often by controlling activities within the context that offer such visibility (Cnaan, 1987). Visibility brings attention from others, which serves as its own reward beyond its effect on enhancing social status (Eder, 1985). In schools in the United States, cheerleading, glory sports such as football or basketball, leadership positions (e.g., student council or class officers), social distinctions (prom queen or king), and pictures in the yearbook are frequent sources of high visibility. Accordingly, members of popular crowds strive to control the election or selection process into these positions (Eder & Kinney, 1995; Finders, 1997).

Peer Socialization

Popular clique leaders have a variety of methods at their disposal to inspire or induce conformity to group norms. Some appear to be more prosocial, others more aggressive or punitive (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). Dunphy (1969), for example, detailed clique leaders' efforts to inculcate heterosocial skills and interests among group members. Leaders first set an example by pursuing a romantic relationship with a member of an other-sex clique, then offered encouragement for fellow group members to follow their lead with other members of the other-sex clique. They structured opportunities for the cliques to interact so that members could locate potential romantic partners and hone their skills at pursuing romantic relationships. This combination of behavioral display, encouragement, and structuring opportunities proved very effective in helping cliques integrate into heterosocial units. An essential factor in the leader's success was his or her own skill in the behavior that defined the clique. When Dunphy examined nonelite crowds, such as the more aggressive and delinquent "wharfie" cliques, he found that the same principle applied, except that the crucial skill shifted from interacting with the other sex to more deviant behavior. Likewise, in Macleod's (1987) study of the deviantly oriented "hallway hangers," the leader tactfully ceded authority temporarily to a more athletically oriented group member when the clique competed in basketball because his relatively inept leadership on the basketball court could threaten his control of the clique in other situations.

Most studies of group dynamics focus on more antagonistic socialization techniques. These range from gentle teasing of group members who fall short of the normative ideal (Eder, 1993) to ignoring members who display undesirable or unapproved behavior to more aggressive efforts to demean individuals or demote their group status (Merten, 1997). Wiseman (2002), whose ethnography was the basis for a full-length feature film, *Mean Girls*, provides a catalog of all of the socialization and control strategies in a popular group leader's arsenal. She describes how leaders may use selective attention to reward certain followers and punish others, create gossip to undermine someone threatening their authority, displace someone's role in the group and thereby the person's status, verbally berate someone in front of other group members, arrange for the individual to be temporarily shunned by other group members, or in extreme cases expel the individual from the clique.

Fearing the leader's power and angling for any opportunity to move

up the status hierarchy, other group members generally endorse the leader's actions, but the leader must be careful not to venture too far in these aggressive socialization strategies. If she appears to break the rules for interpersonal interactions or violate shared meanings of the group (recall Youniss's principles), the clique can turn out the leader and lift someone else into power. Milner (2004, p. 89) noted that "in the competition for status, people (especially leaders) often vacillate between being nice and being mean, depending on whether they see the other person as a supporter or as a threat. Conversely, followers are usually nice to those above them in the hope of being accepted as an intimate, and hence raising their status. At the same time they often resent the deference they have to show. Frequently, those with high status are talked about and envied, but disliked."

The need for this arsenal of supportive and combative social skills explains why sociometric studies have found that high-status individuals are associated by peers with both prosocial and antagonistic interpersonal behaviors. What seems most impressive about popular youth's interpersonal behaviors is not that they vacillate between positive and negative interactions but that they do so strategically, in a way that serves to maintain their dominance both within their own clique and across the peer system as a whole.

Intergroup Interactions

Turning attention from intragroup to intergroup relations, investigators' reports tend to emphasize more negative strategies of socialization and control. Although popular group members can treat out-group peers kindly, they are better known for antagonistic interactions. Initially, this may simply serve as an indicator of their qualifications to be popular. One prerequisite to entry into a high-status group is renouncing allegiance to adult conventions and authority. Aggressive behaviors accomplish this, signaling to peers one's budding maturity and openness to the new (adolescent) social system (Merten, 2005). Such behaviors enhance visibility, a key element in admission to popular cliques. Among his sample of British schoolgirls, Duncan (2004, p. 147) noted that "one could be popular within one's own clique, but to be known as one of *the* popular girls implied that you would be brash, aggressive, and involved in rumors and fights amongst the girls."

Adler and Adler (1998) argue that high-status group members are verbally aggressive to outsiders simply because they can get away with it. "Clique members join together in disparaging outsiders; they learn that

those in the in-group can freely demean out-group members, and that their targets will return for renewed attempts at acceptance" (p. 158). However, they also acknowledge that such tactics build cohesion among group members. Once the jockeying for position among peer groups is completed in early adolescence and the new popular crowds are established, they will work diligently to defend their position. One way of doing so is to demean groups who are lower in the status hierarchy or who refuse to conform to popular group norms (Bishop et al., 2003). Disparaging peers who are not part of the high-status groups serves to lower outsiders' status and discourage group members from befriending them or following the outsiders' norms (Milner, 2004).

Canaan (1987) found a pattern of relational aggression among high-status middle school girls and more physical aggression toward outsiders by high-status boys. Top-group boys were said to gang up on a low-group member in places unmonitored by adults and then shove the boy around until he was reduced to tears. "This is not a playful thing," one respondent confided, "This is serious. They usually don't stop until the low group member throws a fit. Then the top group gang says 'Calm down, you faggot'" (Canaan, 1987, p. 393). Girls' relational aggression can be equally pointed. Finders (1997) described how a clique of popular middle school girls openly characterized many of their classmates either as "dogs" (unattractive to boys) or "babies" (still conforming to adult rules and expectations). In the presence of the former they would bark loudly and then giggle as they walked away.

The popular group's behavior can have a domino effect, in which individuals outside of the high-status groups pick up the pattern of verbally or physically harassing low-status peers as a sign of allegiance to the popular group norms. Merten (1996b), for example, described how middle school students would pick on members of the low-status "mels" simply to conform to expectations or urgings of other peers, with little regard for the impact of their actions on their victims. Picking on the mels also diminished chances that they would be associated with the mels and thereby become a target of victimization by others (the agenda of mid-rangers that I have already mentioned).

Adults may regard the bullying that Merten (1996b) observed as shameful, but to adolescents it is understandable, and consistent with unspoken rules about who aggresses against whom and for what reasons. When Horn (2003) provided a sample of white, middle-class high school students with scenarios in which a low-status group member was excluded by a high-status peer from a prototypically high-status activity, she found that most ninth graders found the scenario believable and

acceptable, often invoking stereotypes about high- and low-status groups to justify the popular peer's actions.

Only in peer settings containing iconoclast crowds are the popular groups likely to be challenged directly. Eckert (1989) conducted an ethnographic study among high school youth in a largely white, working- to middle-class midwestern community, finding the peer system anchored by two major crowds. The high-status jocks were counterpoised against the iconoclastic burnouts, who prided themselves on being the antithesis of the jock crowd: largely working class, following more of a vocational than college-bound academic curriculum, disengaged from athletics and school activities, cool if not hostile toward school adults, and more openly deviant. Each group claimed a different portion of the school property for social interactions; jocks generally preferred to take the long way around between classes rather than risk running the burnout gauntlet by cutting across the courtyard where burnouts congregated. Because the jocks retained friendly relations with school adults, the burnouts' intimidation and opposition did little to undermine the jocks' status, but it certainly dampened the aggression that jocks could mete out against other groups.

The portrait of antagonistic intergroup interactions must be tempered by two factors. First, it underrepresents reports of more measured approaches that popular group members may take to maintain their group boundaries or their control of high-status activities. Dunphy (1969), for example, discovered that when adolescents tried to "crash" a given crowd's social function, group leaders tended to simply ignore the uninvited guests rather than drive them away in a more hostile fashion. Likewise, Merten (1996a) recounted that when a burnout infiltrated the ranks of the cheerleading squad, which heretofore had been staffed exclusively by popular girls, the popular crowd fumed and grumbled to each other but took few steps besides ignoring the interloper to remove her. Second, most accounts of intergroup relations are taken from a narrow and fairly homogeneous range of peer settings: middle schools with the traditional pyramid status system. Without further study of more diverse settings, it is not clear how common the popular group's aggressive and antagonistic behaviors are across secondary schools.

Dyadic Relationships

Patterns of intergroup and intragroup interactions affect the quality and character of dyadic relationships that adolescents form with peers. Some of the impact seems to be related to status striving, but status position is also a factor.

Status Striving

Youth who are striving to attain or retain high status among peers must be mindful of some basic principles about patterns of association. Affiliating with higher status peers enhances opportunities to raise one's status, whereas affiliating with lower status peers threatens to diminish one's own position. This applies to within- as well as across-clique relationships. The implication of affiliating with adults depends on the nature of the association: Dependent relationships drive one's status down sharply (Merten, 1996b; Milner, 2004); relationships that are more egalitarian or manipulative (in which the young person is able to gain certain privileges from adults without being subservient to them) harbor the prospect of raising peer status (Eckert, 1989). Although scholars sometimes fault secondary school teachers for maintaining more distant relationships with students than is common in elementary school settings (Eccles et al., 1983), early adolescents themselves—or rather the demands of their peer system—may bear major responsibility for the estrangement.

Status striving can affect the selection of friends, especially in early adolescence. Part of the “cycle of popularity” that Eder (1985) describes among middle school girls reflects concerns about popularity. Eder observed that a girl who was reasonably well liked just before being accepted into the popular clique became even more sought after for friendship after her move into the clique, only to have her reputation fall when she failed to respond to peers' overtures of friendship. Peers were put off when their offer of friendship was rejected, thereby diminishing their own prospects for admission to the popular clique. The newly popular girl, on the other hand, felt overwhelmed by so much attention from would-be friends and worried that responding to the overtures would jeopardize her newfound position in the popular clique.

Status can play a role in romantic attachments as well. Brown (1999) theorized that, after learning how to relate to potential romantic partners (typically, other-sex peers), adolescents become sensitive to how peers might respond if they become romantically involved with a specific peer, especially whether the relationship will enhance or demean their status among peers. This is particularly true among members of high-status groups because romantic alliances can elevate the romantic partner into the popular crowd, and there is the threat of censure or expulsion if fellow group members do not approve of the individual's romantic choice.

Status Position

Because objectives for peer interactions vary across different types of groups, norms governing dyadic relationships, especially friendships, also vary. The status vigilance of popular crowds carries over into their friendship patterns. Even though these groups sit atop the status hierarchy, they still promulgate a hierarchy within the clique, so that members enjoy different levels of authority (Finders, 1997; Wiseman, 2002). Ever mindful of threats to their position and aware that clique mates represent the most likely individuals to supplant them in the hierarchy, popular group members remain guarded in their friendship patterns. Although they profess true loyalty and affection for each other, they remain open to opportunities to break off relationships or form new alliances if it will improve their position. As a result, their friendships appear to be shallow and opportunistic (Eckert, 1989; Finders, 1997).

Unpopulars are in a challenging situation. They need close friendships for support, especially in early adolescence when they are so often the target of bullying and ridicule, but their low status makes them unattractive candidates for relationships except among fellow members of the unpopular crowd. Because of the “guilt by association” principle, forging friendships with fellow unpopulars increases the risk of physical or verbal attacks from peers. So friendships are both a valuable and risky proposition. Merten (1996b) reported that the unpopular youth whom he observed maintained tenuous bonds. They offered support and advice to each other in private, but often would publicly disavow any affiliation or shy away if their friend was threatened or attacked by peers so as to avoid becoming a secondary target.

Information on mid-rangers and iconoclasts is more limited, but existing evidence suggests that their friendship bonds are much more intimate and enduring than in either of the other types of groups. Finders's “tough cookies” clique evidenced stable friendship ties and a consistent group structure (in terms of the centrality of group members) in contrast to the high-status “social queens,” whose within-group status was more tenuous and vacillating. Unable to exert much influence over the peer system as a whole, the “middle group” that Canaan (1987) observed turned much of their attention inward, on relationships within the clique. Eckert's (1989) iconoclastic group of burnouts formed especially tight and enduring friendships. Like the tough cookies, the burnouts emphasized group and individual loyalty and support.

Although provocative, these depictions of differences in dyadic relationships stemming from status striving or status position should be

regarded with some skepticism. The information base from which they are drawn is quite limited. In most cases, they arise from ethnographic observations of small and sometimes unusual samples. Few investigators follow their respondents for more than a few months, and most studies focus on early adolescent populations. Closer, more systematic study of the issue, in which a broader array of research strategies is applied to a more diverse set of samples, is needed to reach definitive conclusions about the conditions under which popularity and status affect relationship dynamics. Nevertheless, existing findings do converge consistently on a theme, suggesting that membership in remarkably high- or low-status groups tends to promote less advanced and reliable dyadic affiliations.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES IN STATUS STRUCTURES

So much attention has been devoted to the nature of popularity and the organization and operation of cliques and crowds in early adolescence that investigators can easily forget an essential component of the adolescent peer system: It is a dynamic system that continues to evolve across adolescence. The rich ethnographic database on the organization and operation of early adolescent cliques has no counterpart in middle or later adolescence. The close scrutiny of status strivings among middle school peer groups stands in stark contrast to limited evidence about status in high school crowds. With rare exceptions (e.g., Kinney, 1993), investigators do not follow their study participants across the middle school years, let alone across the transition from middle or junior high school to high school. Thus, much of what can be said about developmental changes in the adolescent peer system remains speculative. Like the associations between group affiliations and relationship dynamics, developmental trajectories—and their implications for popularity—are supported by a limited body of evidence.

The early adolescent/middle school years might best be construed as a period of initiation and consolidation of the peer system. Young people can be expected to spend much of the first year in secondary school simply trying to decipher the new peer system and negotiate their position within the system. This helps to explain the crude features of peer relationships in ethnographic reports of this age group: sharp distinctions between popular groups and nonpopular groups (Canaan, 1987; Eder, 1985); rigid conformity to group norms, even to the point of sharing

wardrobes (Finders, 1997); and aggressive tactics to enforce group norms and punish or deride those who refuse to disengage from adult-dependent relationships and enter the more heterosocially oriented world of peer interactions (Finders, 1997; Merten, 1996b; Wiseman, 2002).

Through the remainder of the middle school years, young people presumably grow more comfortable with the new peer system and more resigned to their position within it. A continued press toward heterosociality (Connolly et al., 2000) may precipitate further rearrangements of status and group affiliations as bolder or more skillful players pursue relationships more aggressively and successfully. The popular crowd, segmented by gender in the beginning of middle school, tends to meld into a single, mixed-sex group by the end of middle school. Generally, however, there is little reason to expect major alterations in the basic elements or operation of the system during this time period.

The transition to high school generally marks a shift from early to middle adolescence. In many cases, high schools encompass a larger student population than middle or junior high schools, thus signaling a second major expansion in the size of the peer system. Obviously, they cater to an older set of adolescents who are encountering ever-expanding domains of autonomy: obtaining a driver's license, earning the right to vote, making independent health care decisions, and so on. A broader array of extracurricular activities provides more opportunities to demonstrate exceptional talents or abilities. All of these factors carry the potential for major changes in the peer system.

Kinney (1993) found that the increase in the size of the school and scope of activities prompted an expansion in the number of peer crowds available to students. Crowds also began to unite individuals across grade levels, so that freshmen cliques dominated by a particular crowd type would closely affiliate with, if not encompass, members from older grade levels who had the same reputation among peers. Contact with older students provided greater credibility to crowds, even if they occupied the midrange of the status hierarchy. This seemed to diminish students' preoccupation with popularity and status. If they gained the attention of upperclass students, the need to be recognized or directed by popular peers in their own grade level diminished.

Other investigators point to additional transformations in the peer system in middle adolescence that undermine the stature of the popular peer group. The sheer size of the school, coupled with diversification of lifestyles through various extracurricular activities, makes it more difficult for the popular crowd to attain and maintain the high visibility that is critical to establishing and enforcing a dominant set of norms. In

of cliques and crowds. Interests shift away from group relationships to deeper, individual ties in romantic dyads; cliques and crowds no longer serve much of a function in such relationships (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Cliques draw members from multiple crowds, further obscuring the reputation and status of clique members (Brown et al., 1994; Urberg, Degirmencioglu, Tolson, & Halliday-Scher, 2000).

As status striving and peer group conformity fade as organizing principles of the peer system, it makes sense that the correlation between status and likeability will weaken as well. Indeed, by the beginning of late adolescence, the connection between popularity and status has diminished to statistical and practical nonsignificance, so that, just as in childhood, popular youth are simply those who are well liked by peers (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

Studies cited in this chapter support the assertion that the meaning and significance of popularity in adolescence stem from the organization and operation of a new social system that emerges in early adolescence and then continues to evolve over the course of the middle and high school years. Status structures that help to identify popular youth and endow them with certain privileges and responsibilities assist young people in adjusting to a new social system that itself is designed to facilitate the major developmental mandates of the adolescent period.

Although this standard script has been observed in a number of communities across the United States, it is important not to overgeneralize study findings. Most investigators have concentrated on a narrow demographic: predominantly (if not exclusively) white, middle-class populations of youth in the United States. There is some evidence that peer crowds share a similar organization in North America and Europe (Bešić & Kerr, 2009; Delsing, ter Bogt, Engels, & Meeus, 2007; Thurlow, 2001), but the evidence is still quite circumscribed. Investigations of adolescent peer social dynamics in more collectivist cultures are rarely needed, especially because the developmental demands of autonomy and identity may be organized quite differently in those contexts (Kagitçibasi, 2005).

There are several levels of analysis that scholars can pursue in exploring cultural influences on popularity and peer group dynamics. One is

POPULARITY IN CONTEXT

some instances, high-status individuals become partitioned into disparate crowds (Canaan, 1987), often creating confusion about the criteria by which status is achieved. Accompanying the increase in school size may be greater diversity in the ethnic and socioeconomic composition of the student body. Tendencies toward racial segregation within the student body can set the stage for a pluralistic status system, in which separate status structures emerge within various racial groups, or the basic social division of students along racial and ethnic lines undermines the importance of previous social divisions based on clique or crowd identities (Garner et al., 2006; Foley, 1990; Larkin, 1979; Milner, 2004). The growth of autonomy and diversification of activities or lifestyles provides fertile grounds for iconoclastic crowds that openly challenge the norms of high-status groups (Milner, 2004). Finally, because of all the privileges that age itself bestows upon young people, age becomes an alternative source of status. Bishop et al. (2003) found that upperclassmen enjoyed more prestige than underclassmen, often without regard to their crowd affiliation.

All of these factors suggest that the social environment of high school is not likely to be as consistent across schools, as in the case of middle or junior high schools. This may explain why Garner et al. (2006) found such an array of status structures across the high schools that they studied. In the face of such diversity in social systems, it seems unlikely that investigators will find as consistent a set of correlates of popularity among middle adolescents as they have found among early adolescents. However, the key to the meaning of popularity still seems to lie in the organization of the peer system in which it is measured. Schools that manifest the traditional pyramid status structure should harbor popular-crowd dynamics similar to what seems to be common among middle school youth. In social settings with pluralistic or fragmented status structures, popularity may not prove to be a very distinctive or meaningful factor in students' lives.

As middle adolescence unfolds, the very forces that brought status strivings and peer groups to the fore in early adolescence seem to progress beyond the need for these structures. As young people grow more comfortable with their emerging sense of identity, they may find a crowd's provisional identity, once a source of comfort and support, constraining to their identity development. Group identity gives way to individual identity. Many high school students, for example, claim membership in multiple crowds (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). Likewise, in the face of continued autonomy development, they may chafe at the conformity demands

to examine the impact of family culture. Finders (1997), for example, discovered that members of the tough cookies clique were essentially sidelined from pursuing popularity by family values and resources. Their mothers commented that they did not have the money to buy the cost of clothing, pay for the extracurricular activities, or even pay the cost of a yearbook, all of which were de rigueur for acceptance into the popular crowd. Likewise, in Eckert's (1989) study of jocks and burnouts, the tradition of close reliance on peers among working-class youth and their unfamiliarity with the "corporate" style of relationships with peers and adults left them ill equipped to negotiate the status struggles that characterized cliques among the high-status jock crowd.

A somewhat broader level of cultural assessment involves community culture: the prevailing norms within the community in which adolescents reside. Even though Coleman (1961) railed against adolescents for eschewing adult values, he acknowledged the potential of communities to influence value systems in the "leading crowd." For example, the importance that high-status peers accorded to academic achievement seemed to vary directly with the rate of college completion among community adults.

The level of cultural analysis most familiar among scholars in the United States involves ethnic comparisons. Studies of multiethnic high schools suggest that ethnicity may overshadow popularity or status as a means of differentiating peer groups (Foley, 1990; Larkin, 1979). Milner (2004) argues that the proliferation of multiethnic communities has increased the tendency of U.S. schools to feature pluralistic peer social systems rather than systems that feature a singular social hierarchy. Such contexts could encompass two or three distinct groups of popular youth or could manifest so little consensus among students that it is unclear who, if anyone, enjoys high status among peers.

At all of these levels, as well as the level of national comparisons already mentioned, scholarship is very limited. It may seem ironic to call for more careful investigation of these cultural components when I have argued that the adolescent peer system operates relatively independent of adults. The fact that adults no longer control peer relations with the advent of adolescence does not mean that they have no significant influence over these relationships; clearly, they do. Moreover, the degree to which adults absent themselves from adolescents' peer interactions, or even permit relatively autonomous peer interactions, is culturally variable. As with so many aspects of adolescent development and behavior, it is not possible to understand popularity and peer group dynamics without including cultural components.

STUDYING POPULARITY IN PEER CONTEXTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

From the broader, sociological perspective of adolescent peer systems, popularity emerges as a key factor in the definition of status and operation of peer socialization within and among peer groups. As these peer systems emerge and evolve, and as they differ in form and function across cultures or communities, so do the nature and significance of popularity. In treating popularity as an individual-difference variable based primarily on internal characteristics of a person, investigators misconstrue its meaning and significance among adolescents.

A better approach is to regard popularity as an interaction between individual interests or abilities and peer system structures and demands. Both the individual and peer system characteristics on which popularity is based are likely to evolve over the course of adolescence, so popularity ought to be studied as a dynamic trait, shifting over time in response to individual and system developments.

The peer system is not uniform across adolescence or within any period of this life stage. It emerges in different forms in different school or community contexts. Variations in the nature or degree of status differentiation should affect the salience of popularity as well as the individual characteristics that are most important to it. Generalizations about popularity ought to be situated within a social context. That is, investigators should refer to the nature of popularity within highly stratified peer systems, or within pluralistic peer contexts, rather than in more general terms.

Another important question to explore is whether or not popularity is perceived similarly across various segments of the adolescent peer system. Do young people in moderate- or low-status groups regard the same peers as popular as those in high-status groups? Gorman, Kim, and Schimmelbusch (2002) reported that the preponderance of nominations of high-status peers came from adolescents who themselves had fairly high status ratings. Considering evidence that depictions of particular peer groups vary systematically by a rater's own crowd affiliation (Stone & Brown, 1998), it is possible that adolescents may not enjoy as broad a base of popularity as sociometric studies suggest, or that beyond identification of extreme cases (those who are markedly high in popularity or unpopularity) sociometric ratings of popularity are volatile and contingent on the nominators' group affiliations.

It may also be useful to differentiate "local" from "regional" popularity. Some adolescents may enjoy considerable popularity or status

within their own clique or crowd, even if they are not recognized as popular within the broader peer system. Given the normative developmental trajectory of peer systems, it seems likely that the distinction between local and regional popularity will grow more important as young people move from early to middle and late adolescence. With age, status within a friendship group or peer crowd may have more significance for individual adjustment and peer group functioning than status across the peer system as a whole.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that I have overstated the clarity of adolescent peer systems and their evolution. Clique membership is unstable, especially in early adolescence (Kindermann, 2007; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). The stability of crowd affiliations has not been carefully considered because there are hardly any longitudinal investigations of the issue (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). The use of social network programs to define peer groups produces somewhat arbitrary arrangements of individuals, often prohibiting young people from being assigned to more than one group, even though observations indicate that many youth have multiple clique affiliations (Kindermann, 2007). When given an opportunity, a significant share of adolescents will claim membership in more than one peer crowd (Youniss et al., 1994) or disavow affiliation with any crowd. In other words, the adolescent peer group system is inherently fuzzy and dynamic, greatly complicating the study of important constructs such as popularity.

Sociometric studies have identified some general patterns, in which likeability and social status become distinct in adolescence, moderately related early in this period but not so much later on, with prosocial characteristics linked to both facets of popularity but aggressive behavior more common among high-status youth. Seen through the lens of sociological and ethnographic studies, these features of popularity appear to be part of group dynamics that facilitate identity and autonomy development in adolescence through the organization of peer group allegiances and status relationships. However, the peer group system allows for multiple group affiliations, fuzzy group boundaries, and considerable variation on the general theme of a hierarchical status system—variations that are sensitive to cultural or contextual characteristics as well as the course of development across adolescence. Young people's understanding of popularity is embedded within a complex and dynamic peer system, which in turn is embedded within cultural frameworks that, despite adolescents' efforts at autonomy, still influence their behavior. As researchers continue to explore the intriguing issues concerning popularity in adolescence, they should work from more of a multilevel conceptual perspective, seeking to

understand the varying forms that popularity takes in different populations of adolescents.

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