

# Handbook of Peer Interactions, Relationships, and Groups

---

EDITED BY

Kenneth H. Rubin  
William M. Bukowski  
Brett Laursen

---

CHAPTER 20

## Informal Peer Groups in Middle Childhood and Adolescence

B. BRADFORD BROWN  
ERIN L. DIETZ

As they mature, children face an increasingly complex peer social environment. By the time young people reach middle adolescence in most cultures, both the amount of time spent with peers and the types of relationships they must negotiate have expanded dramatically. Aware of this, scholars have devoted considerable attention to studying peer relationships from middle childhood through adolescence. Yet the bulk of this work focuses on dyadic relationships (especially friendship) or individual characteristics salient to peer interaction (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Remarkably little attention has been paid to *peer-group* relationships (Cairns, Xie, & Leung, 1998), even though they account for a healthy portion of young people's encounters with and concerns about peers (Crockett, Losoff, & Petersen, 1984), and despite evidence that children behave differently in groups than in dyads (Benenson, Nicholson, & Waite, 2001). In this chapter we focus on research devoted to peer-group interactions from middle childhood through adolescence—roughly, ages 6–18. We consider the theoretical and methodological challenges in pursuing this research, the insights that scholarship has yielded to date, and the types of research that ought to be pursued in the future.

We look explicitly at *peer groups*, recognizable subdivisions of a young person's peer context. One can distinguish between "formal" groups, which are organized by adults and occur in adult-supervised settings (school classrooms, afterschool program participants, sports teams, collectives of youth overseen by religious or community organizations, etc.), and "informal" groups, which are initiated and overseen by young people themselves. Informal groups, which are the subject of this chapter, can further be divided into interaction- and reputation-based collectives of young people. Typically, "interaction-based groups" are relatively small (3–10 people) and identify a group of friends or playmates who engage in activities together; they are often labeled "cliques." "Reputation-based groups," most often referred to as "crowds," refer to larger collections of individuals who share the same image or status among peers, even if they fail to spend much time interact-



THE GUILFORD PRESS  
New York London

ing with each other (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). Typically, these groups are defined by members' abilities (brains), interests and activities (jocks, skaters, druggies), social status (populars, geeks), and ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds (Asians, farmers). Because they are not based on interaction, they defy a common defining feature of groups, yet we include them because of their obvious significance in the social experiences of many adolescents.

Informal groups are difficult to study in childhood and adolescence because their boundaries are not fixed and their membership is subject to frequent changes, especially in childhood (Kindermann, 2007). Reputation-based groups are especially problematic because there is only moderate consensus about who belongs to each group (Brown, Lamborn, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1993). Yet both types of groups are central to social interaction patterns and the formation of more easily recognized dyadic relationships (friendships and romantic or sexual alliances).

We do not attend to studies that ask respondents to provide global ratings of their friends in general because of evidence that a young person's friendship network can cut across several interaction- or reputation-based groups; in other words, the global ratings do not refer to a functional group (Kiesner, Poulin, & Nicotra, 2003; Urberg, Degirmencioğlu, Tolson, & Halliday-Scher, 1995). We also ignore the large corpus of sociometric studies dealing either with standard sociometric categories (popular, neglected, rejected) or peer ratings on specific behaviors or traits (aggression, bullying, etc.). This work addresses important characteristics of young people within a social context, but the unit of analysis in these studies (typically, a school classroom or grade level) is rarely a meaningful group to the young people being examined. In fact, Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, and Van Acker (2006) presented evidence that the specific peers identified as high in sociometric status (in their study, regarded as "cool") differed among members of different peer groups within a classroom.

In this chapter we first identify the central issues that have occupied researchers' interest in young people's informal peer groups over the past 15 years, then review major theoretical or conceptual frameworks that underlie this corpus of research. Next, we discuss classic studies, as well as more exemplary recent studies of informal peer groups, before turning our attention to key directions for future research.

### Central Issues

Much of the research about child and adolescent peer groups can be placed in one of four major domains: issues of definition and measurement, group structure, group functioning, and the impact of membership on individual outcomes. We overview issues in each domain.

#### Definitions and Measurement

Compared to other aspects of young people's peer relationships, research on peer groups is limited. One reason for this is the lack of consensus among scholars on how to define or measure peer groups. Different definitions or understandings of interaction-based groups are apparent in the four major methods that have been used to identify these collectives. One method is to ask respondents to list all of their closest peer associates within a circumscribed network (most often, a school classroom or grade level), then use various

statistical procedures arising from social network analysis (e.g., factor analysis or the Negative Entropy program [NEGOPY]) to identify the most common linkages among network members (e.g., Bagwell, Coie, Terry, & Lochman, 2000). This approach creates cliques that comprise interconnected dyadic friendships. A second method, social-cognitive mapping (SCM; Cairns, Perrin, & Cairns, 1985), involves asking a subset of individuals within a social network to name all the groupings of three or more person who "hang out" together, then generating a co-occurrence matrix to determine which sets of individuals are consistently described by raters. This approach treats peer groups as collectives that routinely interact, regardless of their affective ties (e.g., strength of friendship) with one another.

Studies indicate that the cliques young people identify through SCM correspond substantially with observer ratings of groupings within classrooms (Gest, Farmer, Cairns, & Xie, 2003). Nevertheless, fearing that young people's ratings will be skewed by their biases about certain peers or their inclination to overstate their own status or connections, some investigators prefer to rely on their own observations of peer interactions to identify cliques within the social network (e.g., Eder, 1985). This, too, assumes that peer groups encompass common coparticipants in social interactions but further constrains interactions to what adult observers can see. A final alternative is simply to ask respondents to think about peers who are part of their group and to answer questions on a self-report survey in terms of that group (e.g., Kiesner, Cadimu, Poulin, & Bucci, 2002). The basis of the peer group in these studies is subjective and certainly meaningful to the respondent but unknown to the investigator and probably variable among respondents.

Among studies of larger, reputation-based peer groups ("crowds"), many investigators employ a common definition of the groups, namely, clusters of individuals who display similar behaviors, or who share a common image or reputation among peers, whether or not they commonly interact with each other. In some cases, however, respondents report their crowd affiliation themselves, whereas in other studies, investigators rely upon peer ratings (see Sussman, Pokhrel, Ashmore, & Brown, 2007), and there is evidence that the two methods do not correlate very strongly (Brown, Von Bank, & Steinberg, in press; Urberg, Degirmencioğlu, Tolson, & Halliday-Scher, 2000). Moreover, self-ratings sometimes direct respondents to select the group with which they identify the most, and other times, the group with which they would be most closely associated by peers. In some cases, raters or respondents can select just one crowd; in other cases, they can indicate membership in multiple groups.

From a theoretical perspective, it may be reasonable for investigators to maintain these separate methods of identifying peer groups, but they make it difficult to compare findings across studies and to draw meaningful conclusions about the nature of young people's peer-group affiliations and interactions. Even in their recent review of research on young people's peer relations, Rubin et al. (2006) offer two distinct definitions of peer groups, one focusing on the nature of relationships and interactions among group members, and the other emphasizing the capacity of group members to influence each other.

If investigators can reach agreement on the way to define and operationalize peer groups, they can proceed to a more daunting challenge: deriving methods to map peer groups and observe group interaction that can adjust to the changing social context that many young people encounter as they move from middle childhood through adolescence. In many nations, young people move from neighborhood elementary schools, featuring self-contained classrooms, to communitywide secondary schools, requiring hourly

shifts to new classrooms and new sets of peers. Entry into community-based activities (e.g., European sports clubs) can also broaden the base for peer-group formation. The emergence of mixed-gender groups and romantic relationships at some point in adolescence further complicates the social network. Classroom based procedures for defining peer groups, especially those that are gender-specific, lose their value and meaning in the face of such transitions, which is certainly one reason for the paucity of studies of clique patterns among middle adolescents. Another is that as the social context from which peer groups are formed expands in size (from the classroom to grade level or school, or from the neighborhood to the community), it strains the capabilities of statistical programs used to identify groups.

### **Peer-Group Structure**

Beyond efforts to define peer groups and to delineate a strategy for measuring them, researchers have endeavored to identify their structure or organization, focusing on issues such as group size and stability, homogeneity, and rates of participation. Of course, these features vary according to how groups are defined.

### **Participation**

With regard to participation rates, for example, when asked whether they belonged to a clique, virtually all of the Italian sixth and seventh graders in Kiesner et al.'s (2002) study claimed membership in such a group at school, and 85% belonged to an out-of-school clique. Similarly, Bagwell et al. (2000) located nearly all of their fourth-grade American respondents in cliques, using an admittedly liberal set of statistical criteria for identifying groups based on student lists of close friends. Using an SCM procedure, Kindermann (1993) placed 85% of his fourth-grade sample into a clique. On the other hand, Espelage, Holt, and Henkel (2003) classified less than 70% of their eighth-grade sample as clique members, and with more stringent requirements for peer groups, Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, and Leadbeater (2000) found that less than 20% of the middle school youth in their sample were part of a clique. Membership in peer crowds is similarly variable among studies (Sussman et al., 2007), although it tends to be higher when based on peer ratings rather than self-report.

### **Group Size**

In contrast to incidence rates, there is substantial agreement about the average size of interaction-based groups. Most investigators report a median group size of between five and eight members for cliques, roughly the same as Dunphy (1963) noted in his classic observational study of Australian youth half a century ago. Again, however, there are methodological challenges. SCM requires raters to recall freely all members of each clique they name, possibly leading to an underspecification of members, and some of the statistical routines used to derive clique structures from lists of friendship nominations are inclined to limit the size of groups, or are prevented from fully articulating clique membership because of missing data from some network members. Based on observations of children's play groups, Ladd (1983) found that boys tended to have larger cliques than girls, and sociometrically popular youth had larger groups than average or, especially, rejected children. Others have also observed that boys are drawn to larger playgroups than are

girls in the early portion of middle childhood (Benenson, Apostoleris, & Parnass, 1998). Whether this persists across adolescence is difficult to determine because the playground no longer serves as a viable observation context for older youth.

Reputation-based groups are much more variable in size, not only across different crowd types but also within type across schools or communities (Garner, Bootcheck, Lorr, & Rauch, 2006; Thurlow, 2001). Crowd size is also very sensitive to research method. Among U.S. teenagers, the "normal" crowd is much larger, and the "loner" or "outcast" group is much smaller, when information is gathered via self-report rather than peer ratings (Brown et al., in press). Group size increases if individuals are allowed to claim membership in more than one crowd.

### **Stability**

One reason for the difficulty in specifying group size is that membership is in a relatively constant state of flux. The consensus seems to be that clique membership is reasonably stable over the short term (less than a month) but quite unstable over longer time periods (3 or more months) (Kindermann, 1993, 2007). However, although young people may shift from one clique to another or witness frequent changes in the membership of their clique across childhood, they will likely continue to associate with the same types of peers in terms of traits such as aggressiveness or academic engagement (Cairns & Cairns, 1994) and retain similar status positions (as central or peripheral members of groups) across their peer-group transitions. The stability of crowd affiliations in adolescence is unclear because these affiliations have rarely been measured at more than one time point. In one U.S. sample (Kinney, 1993), crowds became much more clearly delineated with the transition from middle school to high school, but the boundaries between crowds blurred in the final year or two of high school. This suggests the possibility of multiple or partial group memberships among young people.

### **Exclusivity**

In Verkooijen, deVries, and Nielson's (2007) sample of Dutch adolescents, nearly half of those who acknowledged belonging to any crowd claimed membership in two or more groups. Peer ratings of crowd affiliation based on social-type rating (STR) procedures (Brown et al., 1993; Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1985) are rarely unanimous and often are divided between two or three groups. One solution is to give an individual continuous scores on all crowds, representing the proportion of raters assigning the person to each group (e.g., Brown et al., 1993). The notion that individuals can be partial members of multiple crowds may undermine many people's notion of a peer group, but it seems to be a more accurate depiction of adolescents' experiences with peers.

The possibility of multiple group memberships is acknowledged more directly in studies of interaction based groups that differentiate group members from "liaisons" (those whose friendships seem to connect them to two or more groups) and "isolates" (those with no reciprocated friendships with members of discernible cliques). Liaisons constituted over a third of Henrich et al.'s (2000) ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of U.S. middle school students. Shrum and Cheek's (1987) classic study of clique positions indicated that the percentage of liaisons swelled from less than 10% of third graders to 40% of high school students. Although it is sensible that clique (and crowd) members vary in their centrality and that groups vary in how tightly knit or exclusive

has yet to emerge, especially if one focuses on naturally occurring groups rather than groups arbitrarily conceived by researchers (e.g., a collection of peers brought together for an experimental session in a research laboratory). The logistics of identifying interaction-based groups, then coordinating schedules to bring the group together for study are admittedly daunting, especially in middle childhood when group composition frequently changes. Intragroup processes within reputation-based groups are even more challenging, because they do not necessarily center on observable interactions among group members. Many of the most insightful studies of group processes involve intensive ethnographic analyses; some of these are highlighted in a later section of this chapter. The key issues for investigators to address are (1) the major emergent roles within a group that are vital to group functioning, (2) how specific members come to occupy these roles, and (3) how group activities serve to maintain (or, in some cases, undermine) the integrity of the group and the attitudes or behavior of group members. These are standard issues in small-group research, but they are complicated by developmental issues within the target population. By late childhood, clique dynamics seem to be influenced by the emerging crowd structure, in that young people may interpret the behavior of groupmates in terms of the larger social system in which the clique is located.

### *Intergroup Dynamics*

One danger of concentrating too closely on processes within a clique of young people is that its activities may be heavily influenced by its relationships with other cliques. Much of the research on intergroup dynamics has applied principles of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to assess the extent to which children or adolescents favor their own group over other groups of peers. In many cases they employ experimental or survey methods to study "minimal groups," clusters of youth that essentially are created for the study and have little meaning beyond it. This focus on the dynamics of ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation is important, if one believes that peer influence emanates primarily from fellow group members rather than from the larger collective of agemates.

With the emergence of a peer crowd system in early adolescence, however, young people seem to become more preoccupied with peer status. According to ethnographic studies of American youth, ingroup favoritism can easily give way to desires to be part of cliques from higher status crowds (Eder, 1985; Merten, 1996). By middle adolescence, the sharp status distinctions between crowds can galvanize cliques into bitter rivalries (Eckert, 1989; Willis, 1977), in which ingroup favoritism is still visible but defensive in tone. However, Kinney (1998) offered evidence that status distinctions among crowds are actually tempered with the proliferation of peer groups that can occur as children transition to public high schools, and Larkin (1979) observed a dissipation of crowd boundaries toward the end of high school that allowed for broader mixing of cliques.

The consequences of these transformations for the sort of intergroup dynamics predicted by social identity theory need to be examined more closely. Moreover, one must be cautious about generalizing ethnographic findings because they are often based on observations of highly visible and cohesive cliques, whose members seem to be more highly identified with their group than is typical of most peer groups in a social system. Tarrant (2002) reported that ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation among British teenagers, especially males, was enhanced by strong identification with one's clique. Thus, ethnographies may be prone to present extreme cases of intergroup dynamics.

they are (Eder, 1985), it is not clear that statistically identified liaisons actually connect members of two peer groups in any meaningful way. Likewise, isolates are often not truly isolated; an isolate may have a strong friendship bond with one member of the peer social system or extensive bonds with peers outside the social system being evaluated. When evaluation of clique positions is confined to an arbitrarily defined social system (e.g., a school classroom), the group structure that investigators identify may not adequately capture the peer experiences of young people, whose peer relationships often extend beyond this social system.

### *Homogeneity*

The final structural issue concerns the degree of similarity among group members. Consistent with the notion that "birds of a feather flock together," throughout middle childhood and into adolescence, most cliques comprise youth of the same gender and school grade level, although this homogeneity diminishes in middle adolescence. Reports about clique homogeneity in ethnicity (in multiethnic social contexts), socioeconomic status (SES), or other demographic characteristics are less consistent. One might expect that most cliques are homogeneous in behavioral characteristics or sociometric status. Farmer et al. (2002), however, found that aggressive, sociometrically rejected, and deviant youth all were distributed broadly among cliques in a social network, although the relative concentration of these youth in a given clique did affect the clique's influence on its members. Clique homogeneity may also be contingent on its demographic composition. Henrich et al. (2000) found less variability among members of middle school girls' than among boys' cliques on measures of academic performance, internalizing, and friendship quality.

Studies suggest that member similarity is an important predictor of the initiation and maintenance of dyadic relationships (friends or romantic partners). To date, researchers have not examined this issue in the context of peer groups, nor have they considered whether member homogeneity on specific characteristics is especially predictive of group stability.

Generally, then, although scholars have explored numerous aspects of peer-group structure, several issues remain uncertain. Some of these are contingent on clarifying the definition of "cliques" or "crowds," or the ways that group membership is measured. Others require researchers to be more attentive to developmental issues—to the fact that group structure may change over the course of the group's existence and/or differ as a function of members' ages.

### *Peer-Group Functioning*

The ultimate concern of parents, educators, and policymakers may be how peer groups affect members' attitudes and behaviors, but to understand these effects, one must first examine how these groups operate. Some investigators have concentrated on intragroup dynamics, whereas others have been concerned with intergroup dynamics. We briefly summarize issues in both areas.

### *Intragroup Dynamics*

There is an extensive literature, much of it laboratory based, examining the dynamics of dyadic relationships in childhood and adolescence. A similar literature on peer groups

### Group Influences on Individuals' Behavior

Whereas social psychologists may be drawn to the study of peer groups because of the intriguing interpersonal processes that occur between and within groups, developmental psychologists are more likely to be interested in the potential of groups to influence young people's behavior and psychological adjustment. Documenting peer group influence is obfuscated by the opportunity of young people to choose freely most of their peer groups. This allows them to seek out or form groups with like-minded or "like-behaved" associates, so that similarities between self and group norms, or group members' characteristics, are a function of "selection" rather than "socialization." Carefully designed longitudinal studies can control for selection effects to derive a more accurate estimate of peer-group influence. The most reliable evidence of influence processes comes from experimental designs, but it may be difficult for such a methodology to address the full range of influence mechanisms that occur within peer groups (Brown, Bakken, Amringer, & Mahon, 2008). They must be complemented by longitudinal, ethnographic observations of peer-group interactions in natural contexts (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1995; Eder, 1985).

At this point, scholars still do not have a clear idea about which personal characteristics are most amenable to peer-group influence, or what factors moderate the type or level of influence that peer groups can exert on children and adolescents. For example, Ellis and Zarbatany (2007) found that short-term (3-month) effects of group membership on behaviors of Canadian early adolescents depended upon the group's position within the peer social system. Using a modified SCM method to identify cliques, the investigators found that group level of deviance predicted individual change in deviance, but only for those who belonged to groups that were low in social preference (e.g., whose members were generally disliked by peers). Prosocial behaviors increased for respondents belonging to groups high in centrality (i.e., forming the core of the peer social system) but decreased for those in groups low in centrality. Adolescents' commitment to the peer group also seems to be an important factor. In a sample of British ninth graders, Tarrant, MacKenzie, and Hewitt (2006) found that the more strongly youth identified with their friendship group, the stronger was their self-esteem in several domains. Verkooijen et al. (2007) reported that strong identification with one of the risk-prone crowds in a sample of Danish 16- to 20-year-olds was associated with higher rates of substance use.

Thus, group status, group characteristics, and member commitment are all factors to be considered in assessing peer-group effects on member behavior. One might also question whether an individual's status within the group affects the group's ability to influence behavior. Are peripheral members more susceptible to influence, because they strive to conform to group norms to prove their loyalty and improve their position in the group, or are central members (group leaders) most susceptible because their leadership depends upon their being strong models of group norms (see Pearson & Michell, 2000; Wiseman, 2002)?

In addition to exploring factors that might moderate peer-group influences on young people, some investigators have considered how peer-group affiliation itself may modify influences *outside* of the group on members' behavior. For example, Lansford, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, and Bates (2003) collected data at several time points over a 2-year period with a sample of American middle school youth. They found that strong identification with a peer clique was able to temper the ill effects of negative parenting on early adolescents' behavioral adjustment. Such research serves as an important reminder that peer groups do not operate independently of other social contexts that young people must negotiate,

and peer-group interactions may moderate or be moderated by features of these other contexts.

An additional challenge for those studying peer-group influence is to create models and methods that account for the "interactive" nature of influence—the fact that group members influence the group and are at the same time influenced by it. Kindermann (1993) examined changes in achievement motivation from fall to spring in a sample of U.S. fourth and fifth graders. Using SCM to identify cliques in participating classrooms, he found that average levels of achievement motivation in the group predicted individuals' changes in motivation, but the opposite was true as well.

### Theoretical Considerations

The study of child and adolescent peer groups operates at the intersection of two distinct disciplines: developmental psychology and social psychology or sociology. Each has different theoretical traditions that serve as a foundation for research. Theories of small-group behavior are especially pertinent for studies of intragroup dynamics (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). These theories focus on the influence structures that exist within groups and the ways in which group members' actions enhance or undermine group cohesion.

Much of the work on intergroup dynamics stems from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) or one of its derivatives. A product of symbolic interactionist perspectives on social relationships, this theory posits that individuals are motivated to favor their own group and to denigrate other groups as a means of self-image enhancement; they also tend to perceive outgroup members in more generic terms (Brewer, 1993). This process may be the basis for prejudice and discrimination directed at outgroup members (Aboud, 2003), which encourages investigators to regard intergroup relations in adversarial terms.

Studies of adolescent crowds also draw from symbolic interactionist theories, especially fundamental notions such as the impact of reflected appraisals on self-understanding (Cooley, 1902). Additionally, these studies consider more developmental conceptualizations of identity (Erikson, 1968), as well as the extensions of symbolic interactionist theories that address issues of status and intergroup competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The challenge for researchers from more sociological or social-psychological traditions is to come to grips with the developmental features of peer groups. This includes the evanescent and constantly evolving nature of clique structures in middle childhood, and the emergence of more heterosexual peer structures with the transition to adolescence. The appearance of peer crowds in many societies, usually in early adolescence, further complicates the study of clique dynamics. Although it does not appear that all cliques are squarely situated within specific crowds, as Dunphy (1963) claimed (Urberg et al., 1995), crowd structures do alter individuals' access to peers who might become part of a friendship clique (Brown et al., 1994; Kinney, 1993). They also affect individuals' inclinations to associate with cliques whose members are linked with more or less desirable crowds within the peer system (Eder, 1985). The connection between cliques and crowds may itself be a developmental phenomenon, growing stronger between middle childhood and early adolescence, only to fade as adolescence progresses (Kinney, 1993; Larkin, 1979).

To date, however, there is little theory to guide the integration of developmental and sociological or social-psychological perspectives on peer groups across middle child-

hood and adolescence. The challenge is to consider how group dynamics that are well articulated in sociological or social-psychological models are modulated by aspects of individual development of group members. In the next section we highlight a few studies that are moving the field in this direction.

### Exemplary Studies

The most common theme in research on interaction-based groups during childhood and adolescence concerns ingroup favoritism in intergroup relations, perhaps because this theme is easily adapted from studies of older populations. Many investigators employ experimental or survey methods to study "minimal groups," clusters of youth that are essentially created for the study and have little meaning beyond it. For example, Abrams, Rutland, and Cameron (2003) presented a sample of British youth, ages 5-11, with profiles of hypothetical peers who either were fans of England's or Germany's national soccer team and made statements that seemed either to bolster or to undermine the team that they favored. After establishing that respondents all favored the English team, the investigators asked how acceptable respondents thought the hypothetical peers would be to other English or German team fans (the "ingroup" and "outgroup," respectively, from the respondents' point of view). Children viewed a hypothetical peer who supported his or her own team (normative peer-group member) as more acceptable to the group than one who seemed to support the other team (deviant group member). They also judged normative ingroup and deviant outgroup members as more likable and more easily accepted by the "English" peer group than other hypothetical peers. These inclinations increased across age, presumably because of older respondents' more sophisticated social-cognitive skills.

Nesdale and Flesser (2001) entered status into the equation by leading a sample of 5- or 8-year-old Australian children to believe they were part of a group judged by experts to have either high or low ability at drawing pictures. When asked to compare their group to an outgroup (judged to have a level of drawing ability opposite that of their group), children claimed to like their ingroup members more than outgroup peers, but especially if they were in the high-status group. However, when children in a low-status group were told that they might be able to change to the other (high-status) group, respondents said they had less in common with ingroup members and more desire to switch groups than when they were led to believe that their ingroup was high in status or the outgroup was unresponsive to new members. This suggests that even young children appreciate status differences among groups.

To examine status effects in a more concrete setting, Bigler, Brown, and Markell (2001) distributed blue and yellow T-shirts randomly to children (ages 7-11) in a summer learning program. They created conditions in which attention was or was not drawn to the T-shirts (teachers did or did not use T-shirt color as a basis for classroom activities, such as lining up for recess), and status was or was not accorded to one T-shirt color (via the presence or absence of posters in the classroom depicting students with yellow T-shirts as frequent winners of classroom competitions the previous year). The investigators found that in classrooms lacking status markers but featuring group activities organized by T-shirt color, students expressed more favorable attitudes about their ingroup than about the outgroup, reflecting similar dynamics to Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif's (1961) classic observations of children's intergroup dynamics in a summer camp.

In classrooms that also featured status differentials between groups, high-status group members still displayed ingroup favoritism, but the low-status group rated ingroup and outgroup members more equally.

These studies illustrate a progression in research design toward examining intergroup dynamics in more realistic ways. Yet ecological validity remains doubtful, because investigators have not yet found a way to assess the dynamics in observations of *actual* cliques in school classrooms or other contexts of children's social interactions. Researchers studying intergroup dynamics have been more successful in this regard, using either experimental or ethnographic methods. For example, in an effort to determine how adolescents are influenced by peers during an effort to "break in" to an interaction-based group, Cohen and Prinstein (2006) involved a sample of U.S. high school males of average social status in what subjects were led to believe was a chat room encounter with e-confederates who appeared to be either high or low in social status. The researchers used previous information collected on students in the school to construct groups of e-confederates whose identity (though not revealed) the subjects could infer. The e-confederates displayed aggressive and health-risk behaviors, and the experimenters tracked the degree to which subjects conformed to e-confederates' behavior. Subjects modeled this behavior when it emanated from ostensibly high-status peers but actually rejected the same behavior when it came from what appeared to be low-status peers.

In an ethnographic study, Adler and Adler (1995) used their role as parents to observe pre-adolescent groups closely over a period of several years. They discovered that the multiple roles occupied by group members were organized into a hierarchy of authority among these roles, reminiscent of the dominance structure that Savin-Williams (1979) found in groups of boys of comparable ages in a summer camp environment. Interactions were careful and stress-laden, relationships were cautious, and violations of group norms were quickly addressed by individuals of higher status than the offender in the group hierarchy. Other investigators offer similar portraits of high-status cliques among early adolescent girls (Eder, 1985; Wiseman, 2002). The study suggests that cliques may be highly differentiated and carefully regulated environments.

Results from another ethnographic study, however, caution against overgeneralizing findings from assessments of youth in only one portion of the peer-group system. Finders (1997) followed two female cliques, one high and the other low in social status. Although the high-status group conformed to interaction patterns observed in previous studies, the low-status group came from more economically disadvantaged backgrounds and focused on school achievement rather than peer popularity and influence. The low-status group members concentrated their social interactions on family and kin rather than peers, and approached peer interactions in a calmer, more supportive manner. The interaction style among this group's members resembled Eckert's (1989) depiction of older, mixed-sex groups in the "burnout" crowd, also hailing from less economically advantaged circumstances. Although interactions among groups lower in social and/or SES may be less emotionally charged, they still serve the central mission of establishing and enforcing group norms. Eder (1993) described how extensive group conversation, derogation of outgroup members, and occasional teasing of group members serve to affirm and maintain group expectations about relationships with the other sex in a clique of middle school girls.

Exemplary studies of adolescent crowds are more challenging to identify, partly because they are as much a cognitive as a concrete phenomenon. Ethnographers tend to focus on a single, central clique within a crowd, whose dynamics may not be typical of crowd membership as a whole. It seems prudent to regard crowds as playing a moderating



role on the dynamics observed in interaction-based groups, as is suggested by Finders's (1997) and Eckert's (1989) results. Moreover, because crowd affiliations do not necessarily involve persistent and exclusive daily interaction with crowd members, young people can more easily sidestep their influence. Brown et al. (in press) charted changes in self-esteem and social self-concept over a 1-year period among members of different peer crowds in a large sample of U.S. adolescents. Drawing from symbolic interaction theory principles of reflected appraisals, the authors reasoned that members of low-status crowds (established through peer ratings) might escape the blow to their self-concept stemming from such a reflected appraisal by claiming membership in a higher status group or in no crowd at all. Conversely, youth perceived by peers to be in high-status crowds might not advance in self-esteem if they did not acknowledge their association with a highly esteemed crowd. Analyses provided modest support for these hypotheses, suggesting that crowd influences can be moderated by members' cognitions or level of group identification.

Virtually all of the studies of child and adolescent peer groups, even the exemplary cases that we have cited, follow groups and their members over short periods of time—no more than a year. This is simply not sufficient time to understand either the normative effects of groups on members or the range of individual (member) differences in such effects. Although investigators are improving in their ability to interpret study results within the context of the developmental period from which their respondents are sampled, there still is little effort to replicate studies across age groups to examine developmental trajectories in peer-group structures, functions, or influence processes.

### Future Research Directions

Our understanding of peer-group processes has increased dramatically over the past 15 years, but there is still much to be learned. We have already urged investigators to develop and to apply more comprehensive, interdisciplinary conceptual models, and to seek new methods that can adjust to developmental changes in the organization of peer groups. Researchers should address five additional objectives.

1. *Consider cultural issues more carefully.* Studies of peer-group dynamics are derived from fairly diverse populations in several nations on two continents, but European or European American youth still dominate samples. Cultures that deemphasize peer interactions in childhood and adolescence deserve closer attention, and more attention should be paid to the dynamics of peer-group formation and interaction in multicultural settings. This will help investigators identify ways in which cultural forces shape the nature of peer-group relations, as well as how peer-group norms may precipitate changes in young people's other social relationships in contexts outside of middle-class European or European American youth.

2. *Extend the time frame of longitudinal studies.* Few studies examine the organization and operation of peer groups at more than two time points, and very few consider peer-group dynamics in middle adolescence (ages 15–18). Longer term studies with more frequent data collection points pose daunting logistical and methodological challenges, but they are sorely needed to address several important questions: Is there a curvilinear trajectory in the stability of clique and crowd affiliations (reaching an apex at the begin-

ning of middle adolescence)? What makes some cliques or crowds more stable than others, and how does this stability affect the peer group's capacity to exert influence over individuals? How do peer groups adapt to oscillating memberships as individuals move in and out of romantic relationships?

3. *Develop more coordinated assessments of the two levels of peer-group interaction.* Rather than considering the study of interaction- and reputation-based groups as independent lines of investigation, researchers should attempt to bridge these two topics with more coordinated studies. Are cliques nested within crowds or wholly independent of them, or does this vary among crowds or across different social contexts? Is the organization or operation of cliques markedly different when dominated by members of one crowd versus another, or when members are drawn from several crowds instead of just one? Is clique membership more constrained when crowds are organized by ascribed rather than achieved characteristics?

4. *Pay more attention to individuals' positions within a clique.* Ethnographic studies suggest that central and peripheral group members, leaders, and followers have different experiences within cliques (Adler & Adler, 1995; Wiseman, 2002), but beyond the differentiation of clique members, liaisons, and isolates, other investigators have paid little attention to within-group position in their studies of peer-group dynamics. Young people's drive to be fully integrated into cliques or to be engaged only modestly in peer groups should be considered more carefully in attempts to chart peer-group effects on members.

5. *Consider peer-group aspirations, as well as group memberships.* Kiesner et al. (2002) cautioned that isolates who view themselves as part of a clique may still be affected by the group's norms. Likewise, we suspect that young people who are members of one peer group but aspire to membership in another may be influenced more strongly by their "reference group" than by their "membership group" and, as a consequence, may be disruptive to the smooth operation of their clique or crowd. Peer-group aspirations may account for the constant state of flux that seems to characterize childhood peer groups, and it may be a critical missing variable in our understanding of peer influence processes.

Researchers are just beginning to capture the complex dynamics of child and adolescent peer-group relations. As more sophisticated conceptual models and measurement strategies are developed, they are likely to unveil the critical role that cliques and crowds play in the social lives of this age group.

### References

- About, F. E. (2003). The formation of in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice in children: Are they distinct attitudes? *Developmental Psychology, 39*, 48–60.
- Abrams, D., Rutland, A., & Cameron, L. (2003). The development of subjective group dynamics: Children's judgments of normative and deviant in-group and out-group individuals. *Child Development, 74*, 1840–1856.
- Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1995). Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in preadolescent cliques. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 58*, 145–162.
- Bagwell, C. L., Coie, J. D., Terry, R. A., & Lochman, J. E. (2000). Peer clique participation and social status in preadolescence. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 46*, 280–305.

- Benenson, J. E., Apostoleris, N., & Parnass, J. (1998). The organization of children's same-sex peer relationships. In W. M. Bukowski & A. H. Cillessen (Eds.), *Sociometry then and now* (pp. 5-23). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Benenson, J. E., Nicholson, C., & Waite, A. (2001). The influence of group size on children's competitive behavior. *Child Development, 72*, 921-928.
- Bigler, R. S., Brown, C. S., & Markell, M. (2001). When groups are not created equal: Effects of group status on the formation of intergroup attitudes in children. *Child Development, 72*, 1151-1162.
- Brewer, M. B. (1993). Social identity, distinctiveness, and in-group homogeneity. *Social Cognition, 11*, 150-164.
- Brown, B. B., Bakken, J. P., Ameringer, S. W., & Mahon, S. D. (2008). A comprehensive conceptualization of the peer influence process in adolescence. In M. J. Prinstein & K. A. Dodge (Eds.), *Understanding peer influence in children and adolescents* (pp. 17-44). New York: Guilford Press.
- Brown, B. B., Lamborn, S. L., Mounis, N. S., & Steinberg, L. (1993). Parenting practices and peer group affiliation in adolescence. *Child Development, 64*, 467-482.
- Brown, B. B., Mory, M., & Kinney, D. A. (1994). Casting adolescent crowds in relational perspective: Caricature, channel, and context. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Advances in adolescent development: Vol. 6. Personal relationships during adolescence* (pp. 123-167). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Brown, B. B., Von Bank, H. G., & Steinberg, L. (in press). Smoke in the looking glass: Effects of discordance between self- and peer rated crowd affiliation on adolescent anxiety, depression, and self-esteem. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.
- Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cairns, R. B., Perrin, J. E., & Cairns, B. D. (1985). Social structure and social cognition in early adolescence: Affiliative patterns. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 5*, 339-355.
- Cairns, R. B., Xie, H., & Leung, M.-C. (1998). The popularity of friendship and the neglect of social networks: Toward a new balance. In W. M. Bukowski & A. H. Cillessen (Eds.), *Sociometry then and now* (pp. 25-53). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cohen, G. L., & Prinstein, M. J. (2006). Peer contagion of aggression and health risk behavior among adolescent males: An experimental investigation of effects on public conduct and private attitudes. *Child Development, 77*, 967-983.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and social order*. New York: Scribners.
- Crockett, L., Losoff, M., & Petersen, A. C. (1984). Perceptions of the peer group and friendship in early adolescence. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 4*, 155-181.
- Dunphy, D. C. (1963). The social structure of urban adolescent peer groups. *Sociometry, 26*, 230-246.
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eder, D. (1985). The cycle of popularity: Interpersonal relations among female adolescents. *Sociology of Education, 58*, 154-165.
- Eder, D. (1993). "Go get ya a French!": Romantic and sexual teasing among adolescent girls. In Tanner, D. (Ed.), *Gender and conversational interaction* (pp. 17-31). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, W. E., & Zbaratany, L. (2007). Peer group status as a moderator of group influence on children's deviant, aggressive, and prosocial behavior. *Child Development, 78*, 1240-1254.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Espelage, D. L., Holt, M. K., & Henkel, R. R. (2003). Examination of peer-group contextual effects on aggression during early adolescence. *Child Development, 74*, 205-220.
- Farmer, T. W., Leung, M., Rocklin, P. C., Cadwallader, T. W., Pearl, R., & Van Acker, R. (2002). Deviant or diverse peer groups?: The peer affiliations of aggressive elementary students. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 94*, 611-620.

- Festinger, L., Schachter, S., & Back, K. (1950). *Social pressures in informal group*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Finders, M. J. (1997). *Just girls: Hidden literacies and life in junior high*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Garnier, R., Bootcheck, J., Lorr, M., & Rauch, K. (2006). The adolescent society revisited: Cultures, crowds, climates, and status structures in seven secondary schools. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 35*, 1023-1035.
- Gest, S. D., Farmer, T. W., Cairns, B. D., & Xie, H. (2003). Identifying children's peer social networks in school classrooms: Links between peer reports and observed interactions. *Social Development, 12*, 513-529.
- Henrich, C. C., Kuperminc, G. P., Sack, A., Blatt, S. J., & Leadbeater, B. J. (2000). Characteristics and homogeneity of early adolescent friendship groups: A comparison of male and female clique and nonclique members. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*, 15-26.
- Kiesner, J., Cadinu, M., Poulin, F., & Bucci, M. (2002). Group identification in early adolescence: Its relation with peer adjustment and its moderator effect on peer influence. *Child Development, 73*, 196-208.
- Kiesner, J., Poulin, F., & Nicotra, E. (2003). Peer relations across contexts: Individual-network homophily and network inclusion in and after school. *Child Development, 74*, 1328-1343.
- Kindermann, T. A. (1998). Natural peer groups as contexts for individual development: The case of children's motivation in school. *Developmental Psychology, 29*, 970-977.
- Kindermann, T. A. (2007). Effects of naturally existing peer groups on changes in academic engagement in a cohort of sixth graders. *Child Development, 78*, 1186-1203.
- Kinney, D. (1993). From "nerds" to "normals": Adolescent identity recovery within a changing social system. *Sociology of Education, 66*, 21-40.
- Ladd, G. W. (1983). Social networks of popular, average, and rejected children in school settings. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 29*, 283-307.
- Lansford, J. E., Criss, M. M., Pettit, G. S., Dodge, K. A., & Bates, J. E. (2003). Friendship quality, peer group affiliation, and peer antisocial behavior as moderators of the link between negative parenting and adolescent externalizing behavior. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 13*, 161-184.
- Larkin, R. W. (1979). *Suburban youth in cultural crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merten, D. E. (1996). Visibility and vulnerability: Responses to rejection by nonaggressive junior high school boys. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 16*, 5-26.
- Nessdale, D., & Flesser, D. (2001). Social identity and the development of children's group attitudes. *Child Development, 72*, 506-517.
- Pearson, M., & Michell, L. (2000). Smoke rings: Social network analysis of friendship groups, smoking, and drug-taking. *Drug Addictions, Prevention, and Policy, 7*, 21-37.
- Rocklin, P. C., Farmer, T. W., Pearl, R., & Van Acker, R. (2006). They're cool: Social status and peer group supports for aggressive boys and girls. *Social Development, 15*, 175-204.
- Rubin, K. H., Bukowski, W. M., & Parker, J. G. (2006). Peer interactions, relationships, and groups. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & N. Eisenberg (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development* (6th ed., Vol. 3, pp. 571-645). New York: Wiley.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (1979). Dominance hierarchies in groups of early adolescents. *Child Development, 50*, 923-935.
- Schwendinger, H., & Schwendinger, J. S. (1985). *Adolescent subcultures and delinquency*. New York: Praeger.
- Sherif, M., Harvey, O. J., White, B. J., Hood, W. R., & Sherif, C. W. (1961). *Intergroup conflict and cooperation: The Robbers Cave experiment*. Norman, OK: University Book Exchange.
- Shrum, W., & Cheek, N. H. (1987). Social structure during the school years: Onset of the degrouping process. *American Sociological Review, 52*, 218-223.
- Sussman, S., Pokhrel, P., Ashmore, R. D., & Brown, B. B. (2007). Adolescent peer group identification and characteristics: A review of the literature. *Addictive Behaviors, 32*, 1602-1627.



- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worschel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 178-234). New York: Brooks/Cole.
- Tarrant, M. (2002). Adolescent peer groups and social identity. *Social Development, 11*, 110-123.
- Tarrant, M., MacKenzie, L., & Hewitt, L. A. (2006). Friendship group identification, multidimensional self-concept, and experience of developmental tasks in adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence, 29*, 627-640.
- Thurlow, C. (2001). The usual suspects?: A comparative investigation of crowds and social-type labelling among young British teenagers. *Journal of Youth Studies, 4*, 319-334.
- Urberg, K. A., Degirmencioglu, S. M., Tolson, J. M., & Halliday-Scher, K. (1995). The structure of adolescent peer networks. *Developmental Psychology, 31*, 540-547.
- Urberg, K. A., Degirmencioglu, S. M., Tolson, J. M., & Halliday-Scher, K. (2000). Adolescent social crowds: Measurement and relationship to friendships. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 15*, 427-445.
- Verkooijen, K. T., deVries, N. K., & Nielson, G. A. (2007). Youth crowds and substance use: The impact of perceived group norm and multiple group identification. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors, 21*, 55-61.
- Willis, P. E. (1977). *Learning to labour*. Farnborough, UK: Saxon House.
- Wiseman, R. (2002). *Queen bees and wannabes*. New York: Three Rivers Press.