

At the Threshold

THE DEVELOPING ADOLESCENT

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7

PEER GROUPS AND PEER CULTURES

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In the eyes of many adults, adolescents seem to have a passionate herding instinct. They shuffle in packs from home to school to shopping centers to street-corner hangouts. In rare moments of physical isolation from peers, they maintain connection with friends through use of their favorite technological invention (well, perhaps second favorite, right behind the Walkman or boom box), the telephone. They insist that dressing, talking, even walking like everyone else their age is a profound statement of their individuality.

Although certainly an exaggeration of the realities of teenage life (46), such an image underscores the salience of peer groups as a major context of teenage behavior and development. Peer groups are not unique to adolescence, nor do they first appear at this stage of life (77). Yet there is something special about their role in adolescent development, or at least the attention they command from adults, that invests peer group relations with a prominent place in studies of adolescence.

For some time, however, adolescent peer groups have suffered an image problem. The profound impact of Coleman's treatise on the adolescent society (40), intermittently reinforced with mass media portrayals of the disturbing uniformity of youth, have lulled researchers and policy makers into a false assurance that the character of teenage peer groups and peer culture is well charted. Many feel comfortable regarding the peer group as a social-structural proponent of the conformity and single-mindedness of young people. There is persistent, contrary evidence, however, that there are *multiple* peer cultures, which encompass and encourage the diversity that truly characterizes young people's value systems and behavior patterns. Although such evidence is compelling, many researchers remain blithely wedded to the task of describing a uniform, homogeneous, singular adolescent peer culture.

171

In other facets of adolescent peer relations, such as friendship, we have witnessed a dynamic growth in insight since the early 1970s. Research on peer groups, however, has remained remarkably stagnant (118), largely, I think, because of the unsettled debate over the basic nature (uniformity or diversity) of youth culture. Before the study of adolescent peer groups can move forward, researchers must discard their false images of teenage peer culture and strive for a more sophisticated conceptualization of peer groups. This shift will direct attention to a new set of questions: What accounts for the emergence of peer groups and peer cultures in adolescence? How do teenagers come to understand and find their place in this peer system? How stable is the system? Does the structure of peer groups or the pattern of interrelationships among peer cultures remain consistent throughout adolescence? Do young people commonly shift their allegiances among peer crowds? How do peer groups affect individual behavior and psychological well-being? Finally, can or should adults attempt to structure adolescent peer cultures or manipulate a teenager's place within the peer system? These questions form the agenda for this chapter.

Roads Too Well Traveled: Laying the Youth Culture Theme to Rest

"Teen-agers' are not adolescents in a total society of all ages; they are a race with a distinct plumage and music . . . Such a subculture . . . is a language and mores *against* the adults, or at best excluding them, as if they were a foreign tribe, probably hostile. In principle, every teen-ager is a delinquent" (71, pp. 18-19). With these words Paul Goodman captured a perspective on adolescence that has flourished for decades (59, 106), fueled primarily by Coleman's landmark study of teenage values and lifestyles in ten Chicago-area high schools in the late 1950s (40). This study seemed to provide evidence supporting Parsons' (106) characterization of youth as irresponsible, hedonistic, and recalcitrant in the face of adult expectations—forming a unified, monolithic culture opposed to adult society. In Coleman's data and conclusions three factors sharply differentiated the adolescent peer culture from adult society. First, adolescents' career aspirations reflected youthful hedonism rather than a concern with making substantive contributions to society. More boys, for example, desired to become famous athletes or jet pilots than missionaries or atomic physicists, and more girls aspired to be famous actresses than schoolteachers. Second, criteria for popularity with peers devalued academic achievement in favor of characteristics less valuable in the eyes of adults, such as athletic prowess or membership in the "leading crowd." Third, parents and chil-

dren seemed to espouse opposing views on such issues as the most desirable characteristics of a friend or dating partner. Coleman concluded that adolescent peer culture drew teenagers into a preoccupation with the present and, therefore, alienated them from adult society. Despite sizable community (and, of course, individual) differences in his findings, Coleman chose to emphasize the predominance of a monolithic adolescent peer culture that was oppositional to that of adults.

Debunking the Myth of the Youth Culture

Later studies picked up on each of the three major factors apparent in Coleman's results. Adolescents' rejection of responsible adult careers became, in the later work of Keniston, an alienation from adult institutions and value systems. After observing successive cohorts of youth remain uncommitted to an adult society whose values they could not accept (87) or work diligently to transform adult institutions into something more compatible with their own aspirations (88), Keniston attempted to institutionalize the monolithic youth culture as a normative phase of adolescent development. He proposed "youth" as a stage of life to be negotiated between adolescence and young adulthood. Keniston acknowledged "youth" as a provisional life stage, not necessarily experienced by all adolescents (88). Nevertheless, his argument lost its appeal when succeeding cohorts of teenagers in the late 1970s and early 1980s eagerly embraced conventional adult norms and career patterns (83) with a zest reminiscent of Friedenberg's (67) portrayal of youngsters in the 1950s. This left observers pondering whether the monolithic, oppositional nature of the youth culture of the 1960s was a historical aberration rather than an enduring characteristic of the adolescent peer culture.

Meanwhile, other researchers were attempting to replicate Coleman's findings on adolescents' criteria for popularity among peers. In some cases results were consistent with Coleman's (60, 63, 130). Other studies, however, produced curious anomalies. Although a study of Canadian youth reported criteria for being popular much like Coleman's, the overwhelming majority of students said they would prefer to be remembered as an outstanding student rather than as a great athlete or a popular person (68). In other words, students knew the norms of the popular crowd but failed to endorse them. Other researchers found differences by gender, grade level, and/or extracurricular participation in the importance of high grades, good looks, athletic ability, and personal qualities for popularity among peers (12, 28, 123). Equally problematic were Cohen's reanalyses of Coleman's own data, which found evidence for not one but three different

value orientations among students in Coleman's sample (38). Such differences called into question the pervasiveness and consistency of youth-culture norms among adolescents.

Coleman's third factor—the opposing value system of parents and peers—laid the groundwork for studies that addressed three common presumptions about the impact of a monolithic youth culture on parent-child relationships. First, in the seemingly inevitable situations in which parents and peers give conflicting advice, peer pressure would consistently overpower parental influence and thus drive adolescents away from adult values. Second, rapid social change would so transform the future that teenagers would become unified in a set of values and aspirations alien to the parent generation (33). Third, the ability of peers to wrest adolescents' allegiance away from parents would vault teenagers into deviant activities.

In fact, however, little support was found for any of these expectations. Studies of real or hypothetical situations in which parents and peers offered conflicting advice indicated that teenagers do not routinely acquiesce to peer pressure. In fact they are more likely to follow adults' than peers' advice in matters affecting their long-term future (for example, college choices or career planning), and they actually rely on their own judgment more often than that of either peers or parents (13, 85, 93, 116). Furthermore, Dombusch found that adolescents faced with conflicting parental and peer advice often choose to follow the group that they believe is most likely to learn of their choice (52). Thus, whatever evidence we find of adolescents' inclination toward peer conformity may simply be a sign that peer groups are better detectives than parents.

As for the hypothesized "generation gap," studies across several decades show consistent evidence of a strong *congruence* between parents and teenagers in political, religious, and moral values (6, 53, 61, 86, 103, 127, 132, 134). Thus, even if the peer culture does attempt to wean adolescents away from their parents' value systems, the evidence is that its efforts are unsuccessful. Other studies have reported that peers usually *reinforce* rather than contradict parental values (3, 86, 129). Indeed, Cooper et al. found that adolescents tend to replicate in their friendships the pattern of relationships they have with family (42).

Finally, there is the question of whether peer groups draw teenagers away from the influence of parents and into deviant activities. In cases where peer group norms are in obvious opposition to prevailing adult norms, such as in delinquent gangs, researchers have found that adolescents are not so much being pulled away from adults by the deviant crowd as driven to this crowd by parents' ineffective child-rearing practices (36, 50). Dishion and Patterson provided longitudinal evidence of how parents'

inability to imbue youngsters with effective social skills contributed significantly to their involvement in delinquent adolescent peer groups (51, 107).

Redirecting Research to the Multiplicity of Peer Cultures

In the face of all this evidence, why does the notion persist that there is a monolithic, hedonistic youth culture that pulls students away from adult values and norms? For their tendency to focus on small but vocal, controversial, and oppositional segments of the adolescent population, the mass media must shoulder some of the blame. So too must social scientists who, for unknown reasons, have ignored the tremendous diversity of values and interests that exists among adolescent peer groups (85). It seems easy to forget that there is as much variation in values and aspirations within the youthful generation as between young people and adults (132).

Perhaps, however, the greatest obstacle to letting go of the notion of a monolithic youth culture is the lack of a good model with which to replace it. How can one characterize and explain the diversity among adolescent peer groups? Some have argued that teenage peer cultures, like those of adults, are organized along socioeconomic lines. In Britain, for example, social class has been the major dimension delineating peer groups, including deviant subcultures (2, 33, 76, 90, 131). Adolescent peer groups seem to be made up of neighborhood rather than school associates; the socioeconomic homogeneity of neighborhoods and the British sensitivity to social position encourage youths living near one another to coalesce into crowds. Such crowds appear to incite young people to act out tensions among the social strata that adults have learned to sublimate (72).

Some have proposed a similar conceptual scheme for American peer groups. Hollingshead (80) and, more recently, Polk (108) have suggested that American youth culture can be divided into at least two segments: one located at the high school and composed mainly of middle-class, college-bound youth; the other consisting of working-class and lower-class youth who are no longer in school. There are two weaknesses to this scheme, however. One is that most American high schools boast not one but a diverse array of peer groups with quite distinctive values and interests (26, 47, 85, 92, 109). The other is that social strata are not so neatly separated by school walls, or even by peer group boundaries (38). Whereas some crowds are dominated by one social class (preppies, greasers), other are quite heterogeneous (jocks, nerds) (47, 92, 119).

There also have been efforts to characterize adolescent peer groups along two or more dimensions. Loeb proposed that adolescent peer

groups—cliques and crowds, as well as peer culture in general—could be rated according to their degree of informality and their degree of member participation in decision making (94). As it turned out, one dimension predicted the other in this scheme because both dimensions were determined by how adults socialized adolescents. Although this scheme might account for different interaction styles in various adolescent peer groups, it does not explain why certain crowds—the populars, the brains, the partyers, the nerds—keep cropping up in various ethnographic descriptions of adolescent peer culture. In this regard, Rigsby and McDill's scheme is more appealing (110). They proposed two orthogonal dimensions on which teenagers could be rated: commitment to the formal (adult-controlled) reward system of the school, and commitment to the school's informal (peer-controlled) status system. From this the authors identified four generic peer cultures: well rounded, studious, fun culture, and uninvolved.

Rigsby and McDill's conceptual scheme strikes me as particularly promising because it recognizes that orientations toward peer and parental or adult values are best conceived not as endpoints of a single dimension but as separate orthogonal dimensions. Groups of adolescents who coalesce at various points in this two-dimensional space begin to define different peer groups or youth cultures (15). The *expression* of such a culture, however, is probably mediated by other factors, including gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and community and nation of residence—not to mention historical events. Thus, peer groups are characterized not as monolithic and static but as divergent and dynamic. The relation of peer culture to other contexts of adolescents' lives is not fixed and invariant. A peer group's values may be quite compatible with, contrary to, or even independent of a young person's school and family.

In short, as we abandon the notion that youth are united in a generational culture that stands in opposition to adult society, we must seek to understand the multiplicity of adolescent peer groups and peer cultures that are constantly adjusting to historical and sociocultural circumstances. Thus, researchers must question anew how peer groups and peer cultures come into being and are transformed across adolescence; how individuals find, maintain, or adjust their place within this peer system; and how experiences in the peer group affect adolescents' attitudes and behaviors.

Setting the Stage: Conceptual Labels for the Adolescent Peer System

Before we explore what researchers have learned and identify facets of adolescent peer groups and peer cultures that need closer examination,

some clarification of my conceptual scheme is in order. One problem with previous research is that the term *peer group* has been used rather loosely. It has been applied to everything from patterns of interaction with one friend to an individual's tie with her or his entire age cohort or generation. Because of the confusion engendered by such broad use of the term, some restrictions and distinctions must be imposed. First, my discussion of peer groups will *not* include two-person relationships (for example, dating partners or a pair of friends). These interactions are better understood in the context of research on friendship and dating or romantic involvements (see Chapter 11 in this volume). Second, one can distinguish between institutionalized and informal peer groups, that is, between groups for teenagers that are set up and controlled by adults (such as formal youth clubs or sports teams) and those initiated and controlled by teenagers themselves. This chapter deals only with the latter type of peer group.

Third, small, relatively intimate groups of peers are identified and defined on a different basis from the larger clusters of adolescents to which researchers often refer. Typically the small groups are *interaction-based* entities, comprising a limited number of adolescents identified as a group because they "hang around" together and develop close relationships. This sort of group shall be referred to as a *clique*. Cliques can vary in size, intimacy, and openness to outsiders (56, 73). Generally, however, they remain small enough to allow for regular interaction of all members, to ensure that all members understand and appreciate one another better than do people outside the clique, and to permit members to regard the clique as their primary base of interaction with groups of age mates (55, 100).

In contrast to cliques are *crowds*, which are larger, *reputation-based* collectives of similarly stereotyped individuals who may or may not spend much time together. By reputation-based I mean that an adolescent's crowd affiliation denotes the primary attitudes or activities with which one is associated by peers. It can also be a commentary on one's status among peers or level of social skills. Crowd labels common among secondary school students reflect these characteristics: jocks, brains, loners, Asians, rogues, druggies, populars, nerds, Mexicans, and so on. Whereas clique norms develop from within the group (98), crowd norms are imposed from outside the group and reflect the stereotypic image that peers have of crowd members (24). Because crowd labels theoretically group together individuals with similar characteristics, clique members often may share the same crowd affiliation. Yet the distinction drawn here between a clique and a crowd is quite different from Dunphy's, in which crowds are simply an amalgam of several cliques (55).

To appreciate the nature and dynamics of cliques it is helpful to differ-

entiate between two types of such groups. *Activity cliques* are peer groups that adolescents are thrust into by circumstance: study groups at school, cabins at camp, and so on. A *friendship clique* is a group of associates the adolescent chooses for himself or herself. Because group functions and compatibility of members differ dramatically in these two types of cliques, differences in group dynamics can be expected as well.

A final distinction is between a *membership group*, the clique or crowd to which an adolescent belongs (or is considered part of by peers), and a *reference group*, the crowd that serves as a guidepost for determining one's values and actions or measuring one's abilities. For many adolescents the membership group is also the reference group, but it is dangerous to assume that this is always the case. A nerd who hopes to become a popular may be more heavily influenced by the popular peer culture than by the norms of the nerd culture.

Distinguishing between institutionalized and informal peer collectives, dyad and group relations, cliques and crowds, activity and friendship cliques, and membership and reference groups gives researchers a more powerful framework within which to explore the dynamics of adolescent peer groups and peer cultures. The distinctions help us, for example, to sort out the various theoretical perspectives from which researchers have addressed the question of how and why the peer group system emerges and begins to capture adults' attention in early adolescence. It is to this issue that I now turn.

The Emerging Character of Adolescent Peer Groups

It is no startling discovery that peer groups begin to appear as a key dimension of social relationships well before adolescence (105). Yet changes in the character of peer group relations that somehow occur between childhood and adolescence transform peer groups into a more prominent and, for many adults, foreboding context of adolescent development. Information on the nature, timing, and precipitating conditions of peer group transformations is remarkably limited (121), but four major changes stand out.

Changes from Childhood to Adolescent Peer Groups

First, peer interactions consume a larger amount of an individual's time, and peer associates account for a larger proportion of one's central social network in adolescence than in childhood. In a typical week, even discounting time spent in classroom instruction (23% of an average student's

waking hours), high school students spend twice as much of their time with peers (29%) as with parents or other adults (15%) (46). Same-sex peers make up the largest single category of significant others for adolescents; peers, including opposite-sex friends, account for 40% of the significant-other network (11). The corresponding withdrawal from adults occurs early in adolescence: Garbarino et al. reported that by sixth grade, adults (excluding parents) accounted for only 25% of early adolescents' primary social network—and only 10% among early maturers.

A second change is that adolescent peer groups function more autonomously—that is, with less adult guidance or control. (Remember that we are talking about informal peer groups, not youth organizations controlled by adults.) Childhood peer groups are anchored in the neighborhood, where they can remain under the close supervision of parents (105). Adolescent peer groups are more likely to be anchored at the school, under the less watchful supervision of teachers. Membership cuts across neighborhoods, and teenagers make a more conscious effort to escape the presence of adults when interacting with peers. Even at home, parents watch with amusement as their adolescent children transform closets and bathrooms into makeshift phone booths to ensure that conversations with peers remain private.

Third, as adolescents distance themselves from adults, they draw closer to peers of the opposite sex. The proportion included among significant others grows steadily throughout adolescence (11). Strict gender segregation, a hallmark of childhood peer groups (77), stands in sharp contrast to the mixing of sexes that appears to be a major rationale for the restructuring of peer groups in adolescence (55).

Finally, peer interactions expand beyond dyadic and clique relationships to acknowledge the presence of the larger peer collectives that I label crowds. Adolescents seem to agree more on the norms or stereotypic traits and behavior patterns of crowds than on precisely who belongs to each one. Nevertheless, the emergence of crowds marks the appearance of peer cultures, which are often the focus of adult concern about peers as a context of adolescent development.

Sources of Change

Collectively these four changes transform peer groups in adolescence into an increasingly complex heterosexual social system that is a central component of teenage social relations and increasingly autonomous from the adolescent's other social spheres. What precipitates these changes?

Quest for identity. One factor is teenagers' need to crystallize a sense of

identity. As adolescents strive to relinquish psychological dependence on parents, peer groups become a temporary replacement until fully autonomous (psychological) functioning is possible (27, 62). Some regard the central psychological task of early adolescence to be locating a peer group that is not only accepting and supportive but also compatible with one's dispositions and interests (100). It is sensible, then, to expect cliques to become more salient and also distant from parents in adolescence, as they take on the role of substitute source of psychological dependence. It is equally sensible for crowds to emerge as identity prototypes with different life-styles and value systems for teenagers to explore.

Some research evidence supports this psychological agenda: clique membership is a significant predictor of adolescents' psychological well-being and ability to cope with stress (75). But tight-knit cliques are more characteristic of girls at moderate levels of ego development who are still struggling to achieve an autonomous sense of identity (74). In addition, the importance attached to belonging to a crowd peaks in early adolescence, then drifts downward with age as dissatisfaction with the demands for conformity associated with crowds intensifies (21).

Puberty. In addition to this psychological agenda, biological factors contribute to the transformation of peer groups. Certainly puberty prompts a heightened interest in the opposite sex and a need to adjust peer relations to allow for more heterosexual interactions; thus, the opposite sex is incorporated into one's cliques and crowds. But pubertal development also seems to prompt teenagers' withdrawal from adults and their increasing focus on peer relationships (70, 114). In fact, females who mature early may be drawn into heterosexual peer relations before they are psychologically ready for them; they often associate with cliques of older peers, who encourage their participation in sexual and delinquent activities (95).

Social-cognitive development. Erikson (62) and Newman and Newman (100) argue that adolescents seek out the peer group best suited to meeting their needs for emotional support and exploration or reaffirmation of their values and aspirations. This presumes that adolescents can evaluate crowds on the basis of not only their behavior but also their normative values and styles of interaction. Crowds are essentially categories of individuals based on intentions and personality dispositions as well as on typical activity patterns. It is doubtful that these social-cognitive characteristics emerge much before adolescence (4, 104, 117), and their appearance may contribute substantially to transformations in the peer group system.

Of course, not all adolescents develop these social-cognitive skills at the

same time or to an equal degree (79), which may account for differences in teenagers' ability to fit into a crowd or draw on its resources to promote adaptive behavior (75, 95, 100). Furthermore, because the character of crowds involves subjective evaluations, individuals with equivalent perception or group-perception skills may perceive the peer group system in quite different terms. Brown and Mounts reported significant ethnic differences in which groups students named as the major crowds in their high school and how they distributed classmates among these crowds (25). For example, whites were more likely than blacks to mention a black crowd and to assign a large proportion of students to this crowd.

Social-structural perspective. Major changes in the structuring of peer groups may result not only from these facets of *individual* development but also from adolescents' attempts to adapt to the new *social* world to which adults subject teenagers. With the transition into middle school or junior high school, students generally move from a structure based on self-contained classrooms (in which most of their time is spent with the same small number of age mates) to one in which they confront a much larger, constantly shifting array of peers, many of whom are strangers. It becomes hard to know all one's classmates personally, and it is difficult for old friendships to survive if conflicting class or activity schedules prevent associates from seeing one another often (9). Bonds with adults at school also begin to dissipate. Students typically spend just one hour a day with each teacher, and adult supervision is looser than in grade school as teachers and administrators move to encourage some sense of autonomy and personal responsibility among students (58, 81, 112).

Moving into this environment, early adolescents seek strategies for negotiating the rush of new peer relationships. Securing one's place in a clique prevents a student from having to confront this sea of unfamiliar faces alone. Including members of the opposite sex in one's circle of friends ensures participation in the heterosexually oriented series of school-sponsored social activities (mixers, proms). And developing a categorization scheme for peer crowds or peer cultures helps one to negotiate relationships with peers who remain acquaintances or strangers. In other words, most major changes in peer groups can be seen as efforts to cope with the new school structure thrust on youngsters at adolescence. The depersonalized and complex routine of secondary school increases the young teenager's need for sources of social support and informal exchanges.

Of course, the notion that schools form the locus of peer group interaction, and therefore the major social-structural influence on the adolescent peer system, is both culture bound and class bound. In other nations in

which secondary schooling is highly selective or segmented by ability or social status, as well as in portions of the American population in which dropout rates are high, the influence of school structure may be sharply reduced. The point here is that changes that endow the peer system with a distinctive character in adolescence probably happen more because of than in spite of the nature of other major contexts in adolescents' lives. So, in studying adolescent peer groups researchers need to remain mindful of how they affect and are affected by teenagers' participation in school, family, work, and other large social situations.

Thus, the unique character of adolescent peer groups and peer cultures seems to be a response to forces of change within the individual as well as changes in the social environment. Teenagers construct a peer system that reflects their growing psychological, biological, and social-cognitive maturity and helps them adapt to the social ecology of adolescence. Of course, not all cliques and crowds are healthy environments for adolescent development. Let us now turn to the question of what determines the type of peer group and peer culture in which a teenager will become involved.

Finding One's Peer Group Niche

In a fashion similar to Erikson's depiction of late adolescents seeking an "occupational niche" to help consummate identity development (62), one can speak of a teenager's need to locate her or his "peer group niche"—a position among peers that is uniquely one's own but that fits into the larger fabric of peer social life. To date, however, there has been little research to guide our understanding of this process. The extensive literature tracking childhood cliques and exploring the consequences of children's sociometric status on peer relations (see, for example, I, 64, III) stops short at adolescence. A major reason is that the observational and sociometric methods employed to assess children's social skills, peer acceptance, and cliquing patterns were developed for small, circumscribed populations of peers (such as elementary school classrooms) and are unsuitable for the larger network of peer relations that adolescents confront in comprehensive secondary schools. Deriving new methods applicable to larger peer collectives is a hurdle that researchers still must surmount.

Factors governing adolescents' selection of friends (proximity, similarity, and so on) will probably figure heavily in their integration into a clique (see Chapter II). It is also probable that an adolescent's level of social skills will influence the ease with which he or she locates a circle of friends and comes to occupy a central position within the clique. Thus,

there should be considerable congruence between what is to be learned about adolescents' entry into cliques and what has been learned from work on adolescent friendship patterns and studies of childhood clique relations.

Another issue seems to be how adolescents fit into a crowd. Erikson's suggestion that the identity crisis be negotiated by "trying on" various identities (62) implies that adolescents should shift their affiliation from crowd to crowd, sampling the prototypical identity each crowd offers. In reality, adolescents' ability to choose and change crowds may be too constricted to accommodate Erikson's ideal process. This is because, in a sense, adolescents do not select a crowd to join so much as they are thrust into one by virtue of their personality, background, interests, and reputation among peers. The preadolescent whose life is dominated by sports seems destined for membership in the jock crowd. The Mexican-American who typifies to peers the characteristics of Hispanic culture can hardly escape being labeled as part of the Mexican crowd.

How well can one predict adolescent crowd affiliation from preadolescent characteristics is a fascinating but virtually untouched area of research. Investigators have discovered significant associations between crowd affiliation and a set of personality traits (82) as well as patterns of family interaction (57), but longitudinal studies are needed to establish the causal direction of such associations. Recent sociometric studies of children (see, for example, 66) have found it useful to differentiate between aggressive and nonaggressive rejected boys. The distinctions drawn between the two groups are remarkably similar to adolescents' discriminations between druggies (or toughs) and nerds (24), but determining how well childhood sociometric status predicts adolescent crowd membership also requires longitudinal studies that simply have not been conducted. The need for such research is unquestionably high: if researchers can determine childhood precursors of entry into dysfunctional peer groups, interventions can be designed to help redirect children into healthier peer environments in adolescence.

Constraints on adolescents' choice of crowd affiliation include other less malleable personal and environmental factors. Adolescent peer cultures may not simply mimic the adult socioeconomic system, as Hollingshead claimed (80), but social class does seem to figure heavily in membership in certain crowds—especially higher-status groups among girls (40, 56). In schools with a diverse ethnic composition or a visible ethnic minority group, ethnicity can become a major dimension along which crowds are defined (25, 92). In Brown and Mounts's study of multiethnic high schools, between one-third and one-half of minority students were associ-

ated by peers with ethnically defined crowds—rappers (blacks), Asians, Hispanics, and so on—but the rest were classified into reputation-based groups such as populars and nerds (25). It remains to be seen why ethnicity is the major defining characteristic in the eyes of peers for some minority students, whereas activities, interests, or social standing among peers stands out for others. Also, although the mixing of genders that characterizes adolescent peer relations in general is apparent in most peer crowds or cultures, there are still some crowds (including high-status groups) in which the membership is predominantly male (for example, jocks, farmers) or female (for example, populars). More broadly, adolescents are restricted to crowd categories recognized by peers. In one rural school, students had no difficulty assigning their classmates to crowds until they came to one boy. “He’s sort of in a crowd by himself,” they mused. “At other schools you’d call him a punker, but we really don’t have any punkers here—except for him” (18).

Some might suppose that because crowd labels are little more than vague, stereotypical categories, and because the constraints on selecting a crowd for oneself are substantial, the crowd niche would matter less to adolescents than their clique niche. Remember, however, that clique affiliation indicates merely who an adolescent’s close friends are; crowd affiliation indicates who an *adolescent* is—at least in the eyes of peers. It is a very personal evaluation of the adolescent by those whose opinions matter. Thus, it is not surprising that adolescents resist being labeled or pigeonholed as part of one crowd (128).

Teenagers must struggle with the tension between having no crowd affiliation—no clear image or identity among peers—and suffering with an image they dislike. Ianni discovered this tension in his observations of jocks and freaks in one upper-middle-class suburban high school (81). Freaks appeared to resent being labeled freaks by the jocks because of the implicit hostility inherent in the label as the jocks used it. Nevertheless, they seemed to appreciate being called a freak by fellow freaks. As Ianni noted, “If a freak did not want to be recognized as a freak, he would not adopt the dress, manners, and loose lifestyles of the freaks” (81, p. 20).

One finds, however, that a teenager’s crowd affiliation is not always obvious or clear-cut (128). For some teenagers there is widespread consensus among peers about their membership in a particular crowd, and they seem happily ensconced in the group. Others understand that peers associate them with one peer culture (their membership group) but seek desperately to be accepted by another culture (their reference group). Still others defy labeling, by either peers or themselves, as they float among crowds with opposing interests and images (20). Rather than struggling to pin

down each teenager in one or another group, researchers might choose to regard these cases as alternative responses to the task of finding a peer group niche.

For teenagers who successfully locate an acceptable niche, who form a supportive network of clique mates and settle into a crowd whose image is compatible with their activities and aspirations, peer groups promise to be a highly adaptive context in which to negotiate adolescence. For those who either falter in these tasks or choose a dysfunctional crowd, peer groups can have maladaptive consequences. The processes are not simple and are certainly not well understood by researchers. To make matters more complicated, they do not appear to be stable, in view of the dynamic features of adolescent peer groups to which I now turn.

Transformations in Peer Groups and Peer Group Relations

Those who have described the adolescent peer group system often have regarded it more as a painting than as a moving picture—a stable, enduring social system through which each generation of teenagers dutifully passes. The actors change, but the play remains the same. At a broad level of abstraction this is quite true. But individuals change during adolescence, and this change may precipitate transformations in the structural or interpersonal aspects of their environment. There is growing evidence of transformations in family relations during adolescence (78, 97, 124). Researchers need to explore whether or not a similar process takes place in the peer context. Do patterns of interaction within and between cliques or perceptions of crowds remain stable during adolescence, or are there systematic transformations throughout the teenage years?

Transformations within Cliques

Although, theoretically at least, cliques are founded on principles of reciprocity and equality, members’ positions and interrelationships are not all alike. Dunphy pointed out that cliques often have multiple leaders, each serving different functions (55). Others have differentiated between levels of centrality in clique membership, such that some members occupy core (leadership) positions, others are at the periphery of the clique, and the rest occupy a middle ground (73, 75, 119). Differential positions within cliques and the existence of peripheral members (“hangers-on” or “wannabe’s”) mean that clique membership is always in a state of flux. In this respect, adolescent cliques are inherently unstable entities.

In research on adolescent cliques, concern with stability and change has

focused on the microanalytic level, charting the degree of stability in relationships among members over a short period of time (several weeks or a few months). Two classic observational studies of early adolescent boys in summer camps examined the formative stages of cliques (114, 120). Both studies found that much of the group's earliest interaction was oriented toward establishing a dominance hierarchy. Within the first few days of camp, occupants of the highest and lowest rungs of the hierarchy became apparent; the positions of all other group members were settled soon after. Past this formative stage, relations within the clique (both dominance and friendship patterns) remained quite stable.

Curiously, however, observations of *girls* in summer camp revealed no evidence of a stable dominance hierarchy, but instead showed a pattern of shifting coalitions across the clique's natural history (113). There are three reasons why studies of boys in summer camps may overstate the stability of cliques. First, they deal only with activity cliques, which are undoubtedly more stable in membership and probably more susceptible to dominance hierarchies than friendship cliques, where voluntary, mutual selection breeds more of a norm of equality and reciprocity.

Second, the summer-camp setting contrasts sharply with the more typical social ecology of adolescence, in which teenagers encounter constantly shifting clusters of peers throughout the day—from class to class in school, between different school settings (classroom to lunchroom to extracurricular contexts), and between school and family or other community settings. In each case somewhat different social skills predominate (academic abilities, finesse in social interchange, athletic prowess), and the authority structure within the group may shift as the talents necessary to succeed in the setting change. Sherif and Sherif, for example, observed one clique in which the leader temporarily relinquished his position when the group played basketball (119). Consciously or unconsciously, the leader recognized the superior talents of another member in this activity. By contrast, a dominant member who tries to push authority beyond the limits of his or her abilities risks censure or ostracism from the clique. Cusick recounted a case in which the leader encouraged off-task, frivolous behavior from his clique mates during class time that they were supposed to be spending on a group project (47). Everyone in the group received a poor grade on the assignment; when the teacher's comments seemed to confirm the group members' sense that the leader had acted irresponsibly, they effectively ousted him from the clique.

The leader's fate points up a third shortcoming of the activity cliques that are the focus of summer-camp studies: they do not allow individuals to shift membership between cliques, or to belong to none at all. Develop-

mental patterns of clique membership are becoming a hotly debated issue. On the one hand, an investigation found that the proportion of adolescents claiming membership in a clique increased between sixth and eighth grade (45). On the other hand, sociometric analyses of clique structure in one school revealed a sharp decline from sixth to twelfth grade in the proportion of students who were definitely clique members and a corresponding increase with age in the percentage labeled "liaisons" (121). These were students whose primary social ties were to peers in a variety of cliques, or for whom most close associates also existed at the margin of one or more cliques. Similarly, unpublished Scottish data indicated an increase with age in the proportion of girls preferring to organize their social life around one close friend rather than a clique (see 122). As researchers pursue this debate, they may encounter a set of mediating factors. For example, Eder's data imply that membership may be more firm and loyal among adolescents in certain crowds (such as populars) than others (for example, the average crowd) (56).

Transformations between Cliques

Dunphy's study of Australian adolescents remains the classic work on structural changes in relationships between adolescent cliques (55). In a five-stage model Dunphy described how isolated, single-sex cliques characteristic of early adolescence build closer relationships with opposite-sex cliques. Then they tie into a loose association of several cliques to allow for larger social activities, only to dissipate again at the end of adolescence into isolated but now fully heterosexual cliques. The validity of Dunphy's stage model is rarely questioned, even though his work has never been formally replicated. Understandably, the environment that Dunphy studied differs from the social ecology of today's American peer cultures, which leaves several important issues in need of further research. For example, are the sequence and timing of structural changes in clique interrelationships consistent across peer crowds or cultures? Do brains and nerds traverse the sequence in the same way as blacks and populars? Are cliques constrained from combining with groups in other crowds, as playwrights would have us believe (in, for example, *Grease* and *West Side Story*), or are such integrations possible provided the "social distance" (difference in perceived norms and actual activities) between crowds is not too great? Is the integration of opposite-sex cliques determined strictly by the heterosexual attraction between certain members, as Dunphy implied? When someone from the popular crowd starts dating someone from the average crowd, do both entire cliques begin to merge, or does one partner

have to abandon his or her clique mates to legitimize his or her image as a new member of the other one's crowd? What determines who makes the move: the status of the crowd? the gender of the individual? Elaboration of Dunphy's basic developmental scheme is sorely needed.

Transformations in Crowds or Peer Cultures

I have argued that whereas cliques are behavioral phenomena, defined by observable interaction patterns, crowds are more cognitive phenomena, in which assignments are determined by judgments about someone's personal characteristics. It is not surprising, then, that transformations in teenagers' conceptions of crowds are reminiscent of the sequence of developmental changes in social-cognitive skills. Early adolescents seem to focus on concrete behavioral components of the peer group system. They can readily identify the membership of major cliques among classmates (32), but they have a more primitive understanding of crowds. In one study, sixth-graders who were asked to name and describe the major crowds in their school gave labels that focused on group leaders or recess activities (Aimee's group, "jump rope" crowd, "play kill" crowd); by contrast, most students in eighth and ninth grade labeled crowds by their general dispositions or interests (jocks, nerds, and so on) (18).

More careful and comprehensive interviews also showed that, from preadolescence to middle adolescence, the focus of teenagers' open-ended descriptions of crowds in their school shifted from behavioral patterns to dispositional characteristics (101, 117). In O'Brien and Bierman's sample, making abstract and relative comparisons among crowds (such as arranging crowds into a status hierarchy) was quite common among eleventh-graders but rare among fifth-graders (101). Students' sensitivity to their place in the crowd system—that is, their ability to predict accurately which crowds peers would place them in—also seems to increase with age, although this is more true of members of certain crowds (such as jocks and druggies) than others (such as unpopulars) (20). It remains to be seen in future studies whether groups such as unpopulars lack the social-cognitive sophistication of other groups or simply prefer to ignore the undesirable label placed on them by peers.

Not all changes in the conceptualization of crowds are linear. Brown and Clasen found that, when students were asked to name the major crowds in their school, the proportion of responses that fell into typical crowd categories (that is, those excluding hybrids and uncodable crowd names) climbed from 80% in sixth grade to 95% in ninth grade, then fell

steadily through twelfth grade (18). Interestingly, this pattern parallels age differences in susceptibility to peer pressure (7, 19).

Along with the changing conceptualization of crowds, there are shifts in students' assessments of the salience of crowd membership. Both J. C. Coleman (39) and, more recently, Brown, Eicher, and Petrie (21) found a steady decline in adolescents' ratings of the importance of belonging to a crowd and a mounting concern with age about the ways in which remaining close to a crowd stifles self-expression and identity development. In addition, many ethnographers have commented on the tendency of high school seniors to develop a sense of unity that dissipates or transcends crowd boundaries (92, 128). It is therefore unfortunate that most ethnographies have focused on samples of seniors, who may underestimate the degree to which crowd affiliation separates students.

Information on transformations across adolescence in individuals' crowd affiliation is more limited, but it seems doubtful that Erikson's notion of "trying on" various identities through shifting crowd affiliation is a common practice. First, there are constraints on movement among crowds (17): not all crowds are equally receptive to new members (56, 92), and peers may resist a student's efforts to change his or her image radically. For example, druggies who have gone through a rehabilitation program may not win acceptance by other crowds despite apparent changes in attitudes and behavior. They must live down their reputation and suffer the skepticism of peers in other groups, as well as their own crowd, that their conversion is only temporary. Second, there is considerable individual variability in how closely a teenager is associated by peers with just one crowd. True consensus on someone's crowd affiliation is rare (18); more often, students are located by peers in two or three crowds, although one crowd may be mentioned more frequently than others. Because crowd affiliation is so subjective, charting changes in crowd affiliation is a difficult and inherently imprecise task.

It is also worth noting that the range of crowds available to adolescents also may shift across time. Historical events may give birth to novel crowd types (the beats of the 1950s or hippies of the 1960s) or cause the reputation of certain crowds to undergo a metamorphosis, such as the transformation of the "politicos" in one high school from an antieestablishment, radical group in the late 1960s to one remarkably supportive of the school administration several years later (92). Curiously, however, a standard set of crowds seems to flourish in all historical eras, including, as I have already mentioned, jocks, populars, brains, delinquents or alienated youth, and nerds. Their constant presence in listings of peer cultures is an issue that warrants investigation.

Consequences of Peer Group Affiliation

Of course, for many adults the primary concerns about peer groups are the ways in which, and the degree to which, they influence the behavior and well-being of adolescents. A common image seems to be that of adolescents enduring a constant and rather overwhelming barrage of peer pressure to conform to group norms, with this pressure serving to impede rather than assist personal growth. Yet, given the diverse and dynamic nature of peer groups and peer cultures, this image of steady and uniformly negative pressure does not seem valid. There is no denying that peer pressure figures heavily in the lives of American adolescents, but questions abound about the details of peer pressure and other types of peer group influence, including their source, magnitude, direction, mode of expression, and impact on teenagers.

Conceptualizing and Measuring Peer Influence

A vigorous advertising campaign to combat teenage drug use has been waged by encouraging adolescents to "just say no" to drug use, or profess, "Drugs are not my style." Implicit in this campaign is the misguided notion that peer pressure to use drugs is direct and overt. Empirical evidence suggests, however, that peer influence usually operates in a much subtler fashion (119). When asked to describe pressures to use drugs (especially alcohol) at parties, teenagers' responses are very consistent: "It's there if you want it, but nobody gives you a hard time if you don't. Like, no one comes up and shoves a beer in your hand and says, 'Here, drink it!' Of course, if everybody else is drinking you may feel a little weird just sipping a soda."

In struggling with the task of conceptualizing peer influence on adolescents, a number of researchers have concluded that there are two influence processes, although the two they articulate are not always the same. Deutsch and Gerard distinguished between *normative* influence, or pressure to conform to the positive expectations of another, and *information* influence, or pressure to accept information from another as evidence of reality (49). It appears that, in peer groups, normative influence is stronger, but only among those who are motivated to be part of the group. Kandel differentiated *modeling*, in which adolescents imitate peer behavior, from *reinforcement*, in which adolescents adopt the values of peers, which then affect choices of behavior (85). In examining influence patterns in friendship dyads, Kandel found that modeling was a stronger influence with reference to drug use. Berndt argued that whereas past research has

focused on *normative* influence (a teenager encouraging a friend to adopt her or his values and attitudes), the stronger source of influence (especially toward positive behaviors) is *informational*; that is, we are influenced most by friends who provide support and avoid conflicts (8).

Beyond recognizing that we have yet to settle how peer influences work, the lesson to be learned here is that peer influences are multidimensional, more often subtle (through modeling behaviors and being supportive or establishing group norms) than direct, and contingent in their impact on the adolescents' willingness to be influenced. Finally, it appears that peer influence takes different forms in each major arena of peer interaction (54, 73): close friendships, cliques, membership groups, and reference groups.

Regrettably, most investigators have ignored the challenge of properly conceptualizing peer influence and have adopted instead a wholly unacceptable measurement strategy, namely equating degree of similarity between friends with peer influence. The assumption is that the more similar teenagers are to their friends, the more they have been pressured to adopt the friends' attitudes or behaviors. But researchers have consistently shown that similarity stems primarily *not* from processes of peer influence but from adolescents' inclination to choose like-minded peers as friends and the tendency of peer groups to recruit as new members individuals who already share the group's normative attitudes and behaviors (37, 54, 84, 85, 96, 99).

Key Findings from Past Studies

A few efforts have been made to measure peer group influences in a more sophisticated fashion. In these, four basic findings stand out. First, teenagers are not uniform in their susceptibility to peer influence. In submitting subjects to contrived or hypothetical situations of peer pressure, investigators have found rather consistently that susceptibility is higher among early adolescents than younger or older age groups (7, 10, 41, 44). Gender also has been a factor, but not with a definitive pattern: studies using contrived situations to examine implicit pressure from a general set of peers suggest that girls are slightly more susceptible to peer pressure than boys (44, 91), whereas those using hypothetical situations to gauge explicit pressure from friends report higher susceptibility among boys, especially in antisocial situations (7, 19). Also, Costanzo found susceptibility to peer influence to be negatively correlated with adolescents' confidence in their social skills (43). Even at the height of susceptibility (that is, in early adolescence), the inclination to follow friends is much weaker in antisocial than neutral activities (7). Yet to be examined are many crucial

factors, such as how susceptibility relates to dominance or leadership status, social-cognitive abilities, and crowd affiliation. But the clear implication of work to date is that the inclination to conform to one's peers is subject to significant individual, developmental, and situational variability.

Second, adolescents' perceptions of the peer pressures they encounter are also quite variable. In asking teenagers to describe the degree and direction of (rather explicit) pressures from friends, Brown and his colleagues found that, whereas reports of pressure toward peer involvement and conformity to group norms were quite consistent, pressures in other areas (misconduct, involvement with school and family) varied substantially by age, peer group affiliation, and even community of residence (14, 23, 34). Although pressure toward misconduct (drug use, sexual activity, minor delinquency) increased throughout adolescence, it remained substantially lower than pressures in all other areas. In fact, pressure to finish high school was the single strongest influence from friends that respondents reported. In the most general terms, however, perceived pressures seemed to reflect the diversity of norms inherent in the adolescent peer group system, and they followed a developmental trajectory different from that observed in studies of susceptibility to peer influence.

A third finding is that even among adolescents inclined to accede to peer influence, peer pressure does not seem to *dictate* adolescents' behavior. One study indicated that susceptibility to peer pressure and the degree of pressure adolescents actually perceived from friends accounted for less than half of the variance in self-reported peer involvement (7%) and misconduct (43%) (19). The authors conceded that their means of measuring peer pressure may have underestimated its impact on respondents' behavior. Yet, even with measurement strategies that overstate peer influence, correlations with individual behavior are not overwhelming. For example, studies of tobacco and alcohol use routinely present the smoking and drinking habits of close friends as a valid measure of peer pressure, even though similarities in patterns of drug use probably result from selection of friends as well as pressure from friends. Measured this way, peer pressure accounts for between 10% and 40% of the variations in teenagers' smoking and drinking behavior (5, 89).

Finally, we have learned that peer influence does not operate independently of experiences in other contexts. Susceptibility to peer pressure varies among adolescents exposed to different family structures and parenting styles (125). There are also significant differences across communities in levels of perceived pressures, even among adolescents in similar types of crowds (34).

Debating the Direction of Peer Group Influence

All four findings suggest that peer group influences are neither uniform nor overwhelming, but the question remains whether peer pressure and peer group affiliations are primarily limiting or liberating forces in teenagers' lives. The tendency has been to view them as dysfunctional or as sources of constraint. A controversial ethnographic work on black teenagers' efforts to avoid the crowd label "brainiac" illustrates this stance. Fordham and Ogbu argued that among lower-class blacks, high academic achievement was equated with "selling out" one's ethnic identity (65). In response to intense pressure from peers not to "act white," bright students in the all-black school they observed either became underachievers or hid their achievements from peers by becoming a comic or curup in class in front of peers. Fuller reported a similar phenomenon among black girls in a British school (69). Of course, "brain" is a label avoided by most white students as well because of its association with "nerdish" characteristics (16), but the larger issue here is how peer groups serve to enhance the opportunities and self-concept of certain adolescents at the expense of others. In addition to the dominance hierarchy within cliques (114), there is a status hierarchy among crowds that helps account for the uneven distribution of privileges and resources among students in high schools (15). Larkin, for example, recounts how a popular crowd running a school's talent show rejected acts from lower-status crowds in favor of crowd mates whose auditions exhibited clearly inferior talent (92). In the face of such uneven access to social recognition, it is not surprising that self-esteem varies directly with the position of an adolescent's crowd in the status hierarchy (22).

Of course, such an example pales by comparison to the images most adults have of antisocial peer groups—images, of course, that are emphasized by news media: rival inner-city gangs maiming one another to protect their turf, "skinheads" attacking members of minority groups, boys on a rampage of assault through city neighborhoods. We realize now that serious delinquency, along with heavy drug use, is concentrated in a small number of adolescent cliques and crowds (31, 109, 119, 126). Yet, although they make up a small proportion of the teenage population, such antisocial peer groups are a matter of grave concern. In most cases, however, it does not appear that they are composed of "all-American kids" turned bad by peer influence. Instead, aggressive children, who are readily labeled as such and rejected by most of their peers, gravitate toward one another and coalesce into cliques well before adolescence (29, 30). Group norms reinforce members' antisocial behavior patterns (102), but the group also pro-

vides emotional and instrumental support so that members do not necessarily suffer from low self-esteem (99). In other words, antisocial peer groups do not redirect members' behavior patterns but reinforce pre-dispositions that predated group membership. Peer influences contribute to the antisocial behavior of these adolescents, but they do not cause it. Of course, the same can be said of peer influences in more positively oriented groups.

There are those who maintain an optimistic perspective on peer influence. Newman and Newman contend that peer group expectations "may be perceived by the adolescent as a force drawing him to be more than he thinks he is, to be braver, more confident, more outgoing, etc." (100, p. 269). Clasen and Brown emphasize that adolescents perceive more pressure toward self-enhancing activities (school achievement, peer socializing) than antisocial or self-destructive behavior (35). Johnson found that crowd affiliation in junior high school predicted students' subsequent vocational identity in college, a fact that suggests that peer group membership or pressures may nurture adolescents' future occupational inclinations (82).

Directions for Future Studies

The question, then, is not whether peer pressure and peer group affiliations are basically positive or negative forces in teenagers' lives, because they are obviously a mixed blessing. The challenge for researchers is to clarify how and in what circumstances peer groups aid in or detract from healthy development. In pursuing this challenge, investigators should be mindful of three insights gleaned from previous studies. First, in charting the nature and extent of peer group influence, it is unwise to rely heavily on either adolescents' assertions or adults' impressions. The American emphasis on individualism and developmental press toward autonomy may encourage teenagers to underrate peer pressure, and parents' preoccupation with deviant activities may cause them to overlook more positive aspects of peer group affiliations. It is imperative to develop more sophisticated and sensitive measures of peer influence, perhaps through greater reliance on ethnographic or observational methods.

Second, conceptual and measurement schemes must allow for multiple forms of peer influence. The same form may not predominate at all levels of peer group interaction.

Finally, concern over the impact of clique or crowd affiliation must be tempered by the recognition that peer groups sort adolescents according to personality dispositions and behavior patterns. In other words, peer

group differences are not wholly a function of peer influence but are partially a reflection of preexisting individual differences. The question of interest, then, is how peer influence reinforces or redirects adolescents' behavior, and how it fosters continued growth or impedes development.

The Place of Adults in Adolescent Peer Groups

From time to time researchers and policy makers have debated whether or not adults should intervene and attempt to exercise some control over adolescent peer groups (40, 47). Once the myth of the monolithic youth culture is debunked, this debate becomes moot. For better or worse, adults and adult institutions *do* intervene in teenage peer cultures. Evidence showing that child-rearing practices can predispose children to choose certain peer groups has already been presented (51). Adults have a vested interest in perpetuating peer groups that fulfill particular functions at school (100). Larkin observed the collusion between one crowd and the school administration that helped maintain the crowd's power base in the peer system (92). Ethnographers have recorded parents' complaints that certain crowds get preferential treatment or a disproportionate share of resources from the school or adults in the community (48).

We are beginning to understand how the organization of schools affects preadolescent peer group relations. Hallinan found that the size of cliques varies as a function of the size of elementary and middle school classrooms (73). Schwartz observed differences in peer-interaction patterns between students in high-ability versus low-ability classes—differences that were consistent across schools that varied in socioeconomic and ethnic composition (115). High-track students emphasized their shared group status and collective identity, whereas the lower-track children engaged in competitive, derogatory interactions. Cliques emerged within rather than across tracks, so that students of low ability were effectively cut off from the healthier peer-interaction patterns of high-ability students. Because these were the formative stages of adolescent peer group formation, it is likely that these differences were carried forward to secondary school; but just how secondary school structure affects teenage peer groups remains to be seen. For example, the relative emphasis that teachers and administrators give to sports, academics, or particular extracurricular activities may help define the types of crowds that emerge in the school, or at least their relative status. Adults' efforts to break down or maintain racial barriers may also influence the degree to which ethnicity becomes a major defining characteristic of crowds (for example, whether or not blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and so on form readily identifiable peer cultures).

Strong parental investment in activity-based crowds—booster clubs for sports teams that help define the jock crowd or for performing groups that define the “band fags”—should alter these peer groups’ behavioral norms and orientation toward adults.

Yet, adolescents’ quest for autonomy and their need to construct a peer environment that is somewhat distinct from the adult world (62, 133) limit the degree of adult intervention that is acceptable. By examining how adults attempt and manage to influence crowds from a distance, researchers can increase our sense of how peer groups and peer cultures fit into the more adult-oriented contexts of teenagers’ lives.

For some time, the tendency among researchers, educators, and policy makers has been to regard peer group relations as a disparate dimension of the adolescent experience—the locus of deviance and daring amidst other contexts that emphasize stability and conventional wisdom. But as information on peer groups accumulates, the similarities between this and other contexts of teenagers’ lives become more striking than the differences. Like families, peer groups are best conceptualized not as a unitary entity but as a complex network of relationships. Cognitive and pubertal changes that transform family relations in adolescence also seem to have a major impact on the structuring of peer groups and the emergence of peer cultures. Social class and ethnic background not only influence students’ academic orientations and opportunities in high school, but also shape the peer group system and delimit an individual’s potential clique and crowd affiliations.

Beyond these superficial similarities there is evidence that other contexts have a more direct impact on peer groups. Parenting practices affect adolescents’ orientations to peer cultures (51, 125), and the school environment helps define the array of peer groups that emerges in a community (34).

In other words, the false image of a universal, monolithic youth culture is giving way to a picture that is far more exciting: peer groups and peer cultures form a complex and dynamic context for adolescent development, one that is responsive to developmental changes characteristic of adolescence, and one whose structure and influence on adolescents is mediated by their gender and ethnic background, by their experiences in school and family, and by historical forces that shape their environment. By abandoning simplistic notions of peer groups, researchers and policy makers are in a much better position to discover the reality of teenage peer relations and recognize the potential for peer groups to serve as a crucial context for personal growth during adolescence.

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