Adolescence, Peers, and the Challenges of High School

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High Schools & Adolescent Development

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Two Sets of Teenagers

- **National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)**
  - 20,745 7-12th graders in 1995
  - 51% female; 52% White, 17% Latino/a, 20% African-American, 8% Asian-American; average level of parent education of “some college”

- **Identity and Social Relations Study**
  - 32 9th-10th graders in two required, non-tracked classrooms in local high school (Lamar)
  - A public school with 2,209 students roughly replicating race/ethnic composition of Texas.
  - 55% male, 45% female; 44% White, 33% Latino/a, 15% African-American, 7% Asian-American; the average level of parent education was 3.3, which represented some college
Point 1

- The Social Dynamics and Pressures of High School Life Have Always Been Intense and Always Factored into the Academic Successes and Failures of American Teenagers
The Two Sides of High School

- Formal Processes and Informal Processes

  • Oh, people I meet, definitely (are the most important thing about school)...The school is just a big building with lots of people in it (Joshua, White 9th grader)

  • But it was a picture of Friday after school after the bell rang and just down that long hallway that leads to the theatre. It’s just always packed with people. I think that’s kind of -- like, that’s just it...It’s just one big thing. That’s what kids kind of have to do. They have to be able to flow to everyone. (Christian, White 9th grader)
The Two Sides of High School

Peer Culture of High School

Personal/Interpersonal Development

Academic Progress
Point 2

- Dramatic Changes in the U.S. Demography, School Organization, Information Technology, and Economic Structure Have Intensified the Consequences of the Social Side of Schooling for How Teenagers’ Lives Turn Out
The Larger Context

- Demography of Teen Population

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
The Larger Context

- Reorganization of American Education

9th
- Biology

10th
- IPC
  - Chemistry
  - Adv. Science
    - Out
    - Physics

11th
- Out

12th
- Out
The Larger Context

- Explosion of Information Technology

### Graph

The graph shows the percent of 18-25 year olds who access various online activities. The categories include:

- Go Online
- Have Cell Phone
- Use Wireless
- Access Wireless on Phone
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Blog

Each category is represented by a bar, with the y-axis showing the percent ranging from 0 to 100. The data is sourced from the Pew Internet and American Life Project.
The Larger Context

- Restructuring of Global Economy

Source: College Board
Point 3

- Reforms and Interventions Designed by Adults to Serve Teenagers and their Schools are Hamstrung if They Do Not Recognize and Reflect The Evolving Reality of the Link between Informal and Formal Education
Adult Actions

- The Limitations of Focusing on Bad Peers
- Real Vulnerabilities of Well-Intentioned Policies

If we have to choose between focusing on the informal or formal processes of education, then we should focus on the latter in order to have the biggest impact. Yet, who says that policies have to focus on one or the other?
From General Model to Specific Topic

- Contextualize it within major macro-level trends that converge in the current historical moment
  - Intensification of social problems
  - Changing the scope of consequences
  - Filtering out of effects to long term

- Shift attention away from the “good crowd vs. bad crowd” dichotomy and towards the process of social adaptation to high school peer cultures more generally
Not Fitting In at School

- Accumulation of feelings of not fitting in at school…
  - Feeling rejected
  - Feeling unwanted
  - Having trouble getting along with others
  - Not feeling close to others at school
  - Not feeling a part of things

- Perceptions vs. Reality
Feelings of Not Fitting In, by Gender

# of Feelings of Not Fitting In

% of Teenagers

All Teenagers
Boys
Girls

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The Potential Consequences of Not Fitting In

Perceived Social Marginalization → Fewer Valued Courses and Grades → Lower Odds of College-Going
Key Constructs

- **College-Going**: Enrolled in or had graduated from four-year college in Wave III
- **Academic Progress**: By end of high school, had a cumulative g.p.a. of 3.0 or better, had accrued math credits beyond Algebra II, and had accrued science credits beyond Chemistry

- **Observable Confounds**
  - Objective social status (e.g., number of peer nominations)
  - Academic background (e.g., PVT, entry level academic status)
  - Prevailing peer values in school (e.g., mean g.p.a.)
  - Developmental stage (e.g., age, grade)
  - Demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, immigration status)
  - Parents’ characteristics (e.g., marital histories, educational attainment)
  - School structure/composition (e.g., sector, size, racial composition)

- **Unobservable Confounds**
Lower Odds of College-Going by Feelings of Not Fitting In

- Boys
- Girls

Lower Odds of College Enrollment (Relative to Teenagers with No Feelings that They Do Not Fit In)

Number of Feelings of Not Fitting In

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Lower Odds of College-Going by Feelings of Not Fitting In

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Number of Feelings of Not Fitting In

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Understanding Why Fit is Linked to Academics

Perceived Social Marginalization → Fewer Valued Courses and Grades → Lower Odds of College-Going

Counterproductive Coping Mechanisms
- Internalization
- Self-Medication
- Disengagement
General Patterns of Findings

- **Perceived Social Marginalization**
  - Depression
  - Marijuana Use
  - Truancy

  - **Boys**: 69%, 72%
  - **Girls**: 57%, 54%

- **Fewer Valued Courses & Grades**
  - **Lower Odds of College-Going**

Declining Self-Esteem
Who Feels As Though They Do Not Fit In

- Stigma as a Theoretical Starting Point

- Historically Stigmatized Segments of Teenage Population
  - Obese youth (11% of sample with BMI for age/gender > 95\textsuperscript{th} percentile)
  - Gay/lesbian youth (7% of sample reporting same-sex attraction)
Lower Odds of College-Going Associated with Girls’ Obesity

![Graph showing lower odds of college enrollment associated with girls' obesity in different school types.](image)
Digging Deeper

- How are Feelings of Not Fitting In Activated in School?
- Why Does the Activation of Such Feelings Matter?
How Feelings of Not Fitting In are Activated in School

- Externally Generated Sources of Information
  - Peers
  - Family
  - Media

- Self-Generated Sources of Information
  - Social comparison with idealized peers, LCD peers, and siblings
Why Activation of Feelings of Not Fitting In Matters

- Identities as Social and Multifaceted
- Actual/Ideal and Actual/Ought Discrepancies
- Spoiled Identities
Who Lizzie Is
Who Juanita Is

- Amazing
- "Nice"
- "Sweet"
- "Smart"
- "Cool"
- Family
- Mexican
- "Never forget where you come from."
- "Be true to who you are."
- Dream Big
- Athletic
- "We are who we are."
- "Goofy"
- "Funny"
- "Laid back"
- Good friend
- "Don't change for anyone."
- Friendly

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Social Feedback in Friendship Group

- **Idealization**
  - We’re all different, like I said, but we complement each other and we’re all just fine with each. It’s like, don’t change who you are. (Juanita, Latina 9th grader)
  - They know who I am. I don’t have to worry…they know who I am. So, I don’t have to try to like show anything or prove anything. (Ali, Middle Eastern 10th grader)

- **Backdoor Feedback**
  - They would get their point across] joking about it, like making it seem like good fun. (James, Latino 10th grader)
  - If my friend says “You can do better”…then that is more helpful. That helps a lot. (Madeline, White 10th grader)
That Larger Band of Peers

- Bigger than Cliques, Smaller than Student Body
  - Crowds, status groups, etc.
  - The “hey, how are you, nod in the hallway group of people” (Madeline, White 10th grader)
  - PLUs

- The Danger Zone
Tools of the PLUs

- Subtle Yet Intentional Actions
  - Private talk directed outwards
  - Double speak
  - Compliment implying the opposite
  - The Look or lack thereof
  - Because you can know in your head, like you have a feeling that they are talking about you like that, but you might not know. With a guy, he’s telling you straight up. Like, you know he told you that. But with a girl, it’s like, did she just say that? I mean, wait a minute. (Miguel, Latino 9th grader)

- Non-Targeted Actions that Hit Bullseye
  - Overheard conversation
  - Comments to third person
From Cooper, a White 9th Grader

**Subject:** I guess… I have an idea of something, but I can’t really put it into words. Hmm.

**Interviewer:** Would it be in relation to family or friends?

**Subject:** I think my parents want me to be something a little different, but I’m not sure what.

**Interviewer:** So you somehow get…

**Subject:** I don’t know. Something. I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** But you’re not sure what exactly it is that they would want.

**Subject:** Right. I just think they think I’m too… I’m not even sure what they think I’m too much of, but it seems like it. I have a feeling. I’ve got a gut feeling.

**Interviewer:** Like you kind of sense something?

**Subject:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Huh. That’s interesting. Like you sort of sense something is there.

**Subject:** Mm-hmm.

**Interviewer:** But it’s not like they’ve ever said to you…

**Subject:** Right.
Why Information about Fit Matters

Layers of Social and Institutional Identity
- They, like, make up me…it’s basically, like, they’re, like, they make me who I am. (Madeline, White 10th grader)
- Digame que sus amigos sean y le dire que usted sean. (Juanita, Latina 9th grader)

The Trouble with Talking about Identity
- I always be myself. I don’t try and be anyone else…it never works out. So, it is, like, it doesn’t really matter, because then you won’t be happy if you try and be someone else. (Wes, White 9th grader)
- Just confident in who I am. Able to stand up and say, “Yeah, this is me. Take it or leave it. (Juanita, Latina 9th grader)
- I…what I believe in is just be who you are…I just don’t feel that I should I be somebody else that other’s want me to be. I just like to be who I am and if nobody likes it, then oh well. (Sylvia, Latina 10th grader)
Identity Conflicts and Crises

- Actual/Ought Discrepancies
  - Feeling off in school
  - Blame vs. doubt

- Spoiled Identity
  - Efficiency within a vast market of relationships
  - Ali

- Coping
  - “Painful”, “awful”, “torture”, “unbearable”
  - Active responses
  - Self-selection
The Final Picture

**Membership in Stigmatized Group:** Obesity & Same-Sex Attraction

**Information Processing:** Social Feedback & Social Comparison

**Perceived Social Marginalization:** Feelings of Not Fitting In

**Identity Discrepancies:** Actual/Ought & Spoiling

**Counterproductive Coping Mechanisms:**
- Depression
- Marijuana Use
- Truancy

**Fewer Valued Courses & Grades**

**Lower Odds of College-Going**

**Life Course Outcomes**

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The Social, Agentic, & Short-Sighted
A Timeless Universal with Amplifiers

NEW YORK

Why You Truly Never Leave High School
New science on its corrosive, traumatizing effects.
By Jennifer Senior Published Jan 20, 2013

Throughout high school, my friend Kenji had never once spoken to the Glassmans. They were a popular, football-playing, preposterously handsome set of identical twins (every high school must have its Winklevii). Kenji was a closeted, half-Japanese orchestra nerd who kept mainly to himself and graduated first in our class. Yet last fall, as our 25th high-school reunion was winding down, Kenji grabbed Josh Glassman by his triceps—still Popeye spinach cans, and the subject of much Facebook discussion afterward—and asked where the after-party was. He was only half-joking.
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For the past three years, Argentine photographer Irina Werning has been staging reenactments of old snapshots. The project, “Back to the Future,” includes 270 photographs made in 29 countries.

(Photo: Irina Werning)
Sources of Protection

- Peers
- Family
- Adult Mentors
- Religion
- Sports and Activities
- Special Interests
- Future Orientation

Patterns of Resilience (exception rather than rule)

- Girls derived more protection from peer world and in relation to socioemotional rather than academic risks
- Boys derived more protection from families and in relation to academic rather than socioemotional risks
- Both derived some protection from school-sponsored programs
Acting

- Decomposing Population by Risk
  - Who is at risk when?
  - Reconceptualizing targeted groups

- What Schools Have to Offer
  - Getting services where they need to go
  - Expanding breadth of services
  - Making connections
  - Rethinking organization