

Teenage Behavior: It's Not Biology, Psychology, or Family Values

by Murray Milner, Jr.

Why do American teenagers behave the way they do? Why are many obsessed with the brands of clothes they wear, their lunchtime seatmates, the parties they are invited to, the latest popular music, the intrigues of school cliques, and who is hooking up with whom? Why do students in some schools rigidly segregate themselves by race and ethnicity and yet get along amicably? What causes castelike divisions? Why are teenagers often mean and even cruel to one another?

The usual explanations focus on the importance of hormones, psychological development, parenting styles, social background characteristics (for example, class, race, or gender), or poor schools or teachers. Those factors are much less important than is usually assumed. A clearer understanding of adolescent behavior must focus on the way adults in the society have used schools to organize young people's daily activities. The key unintended result is the centrality of teenage peer-status systems.

A related set of questions concerns the link between teenage status systems and consumerism. Teenagers have long been preoccupied with the clothes they wear, the cars they drive, and what constitutes being "cool." Why have the numerous attempts at school reform and various youth programs had so little impact on those patterns? Why do adults both bemoan the consumerism of teenagers and yet encourage it in many ways? The answer has relatively little to do with family values, liberalism, progressive education, or what teachers do or don't do. Rather, change is difficult because adults, especially parents and businesses, benefit from the present ways of organizing young people's lives. Let me elaborate.

Why Peer Status Matters

Status is important to adolescents because they have so little economic or political power. In earlier times fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds were often considered adults, sometimes with their own jobs and families. In contrast, today's high school students have little control over the

basic structure of their lives. They must attend school. Seldom can they choose which school they attend. They cannot hire or fire the teachers or change the curriculum. They are pressured to learn complex and esoteric knowledge such as algebra, chemistry, and European history, which rarely has an obvious relevance in their day-to-day lives.

Teenagers do, however, have one crucial kind of power: the power to create an informal social world in which they evaluate one another. That is, they can and do create their own status systems—usually based on criteria quite different from those promoted by parents or teachers. Predictably, their status in the eyes of their peers becomes very important in their day-to-day lives. But why do their status concerns seem so obsessive, superficial, and often mean-spirited? The answer has to do with the nature and sources of status. Let me provide three examples of characteristic behaviors and briefly explain why they occur.

Dating and Eating. A teenage girl from northern Virginia says, “Another huge part of association . . . is dating, the importance of which cannot be overstated.” She continues:

Where and with whom one ate was [also] a huge decision to make, particularly during one’s freshman year [when] status roles were so uncertain. The cafeteria was a decent place to eat if one was eating with “cool” people, as everyone could see you, . . . but if one was eating alone or with those who were not deemed “cool,” then eating outside or some other place not so in view was preferable. . . . Eating maintains its importance throughout [the] high school years. . . .

Adolescents are concerned about who “goes with” whom and who eats with whom because they intuitively know that intimate associates in expressive relationships directly affect status. In all societies food and sexuality are key symbols of expressive intimacy. Where status is important, people try to avoid eating with or marrying inferiors—as executive dining rooms, upper-middle-class dinner parties, debutante balls, and the marriage and eating restrictions of the Indian caste system all indicate. In contrast, status concerns are much less important if the occasion is primarily instrumental: the beautiful cheerleader can work with a bright nerd on a class assignment, the Brahmin can supervise Untouchables working in the field, the company president meets with subordinates and even shares a “working lunch”—but when work is done they go their separate ways.

Clothes and Fashions. A New Jersey girl comments, “Clothes during high school were extremely important. Clothes measured how much money a person had, and how well that person could keep up with the

ever-changing fashion world. It was always important to know brand-name clothes if you were popular.”

To gain status in any group, members must conform to its norms. But that means insiders, and especially those with high status, have an interest in making conformity difficult for outsiders; they frequently elaborate and complicate the norms. The intricate social rituals and dress styles of aristocracies and upper classes are obvious examples. In premodern societies copying one's social superiors was often forbidden. Woe to the commoner who dressed like a nobleman.

In contemporary societies, however, formal constraints on copying superiors have been removed. Hence those at the top constantly alter norms and fashions. Among teenagers the result is rapidly changing fashions in clothes, music, and the “in” words and phrases. The obsessive concern to have “the latest” is not adolescent irrationality but a very reasonable response to the power structure within which they must live.

Putdowns and Meanness. A male from a small Texas town says, “[G]ossip was either bashing some jerky guy, someone of the lower economic status, or even backstabbing one of their own. . . .” At another



school 1,500 miles away, Robert, the only Latino in the group, becomes the target: “First [Kate] asked him [in a snide voice] if they had chairs in Mexico, and then she made a similar comment concerning pizza. Robert shrugged off the chair comment, but when Kate brought up the pizza comment he seemed irritated.”

Teenagers are frequently mean and petty toward one another because status is relatively unexpandable. If someone moves up, someone else will have to move down. Cell phones or A's have little value as status symbols if everyone has them; that is why “popular” groups exclude others and only reluctantly admit new members. The reverse is also true; one can move up or stay on top by putting others down. Consequently, because adolescents have little real economic or political power and can only divide up an unexpandable resource like status, it is not surprising that exclusion, putdowns, and small cruelties are common.

The telegraphic explanations above are based upon a systematic theory of status relations. The theory helps to understand a much wider array of teenage behaviors. Though the theory is not technical or esoteric, space limitations prevent further discussion here. Now we turn to how teenage status systems affect the larger society and vice versa.

Consumerism

A sociologist, Amy Best, who has studied proms says:

Proms are not what they used to be. The prom has gradually moved from the high school gym to the luxury hotel. Many students now rent limousines or expensive luxury cars (e.g., BMWs, Porsches, or Range Rovers) to go to the prom. . . . Proms epitomize the expansion of a distinct youth consumer culture and the spending power of youth. . . . [C]onsumerism has become part of the everyday dynamics of school life. (Best 2000)

Consumerism in high schools involves not only clothes but also a broader array of expensive items such as the limousines and hotel suites, or where one will fly for spring break.

Teenagers are targeted as an important market by businesses. Enormous marketing efforts are aimed at what teenagers spend—about the same amount the federal government spends annually on the war in Iraq. Advertisers also try to create future customers. As an article in the *Economist* put it, “Hook them on a brand today, and with any luck they will still be using it in the next century” (*Economist* 1997). At the same time, the success of many businesses can hinge upon predicting the fashions that will appeal to teenagers—who are often style setters for those either younger and older.

The links among the organization of secondary education, the resulting youth culture, and American consumer capitalism are not trivial matters: they are key features of American consumer capitalism. By “consumer capitalism” I mean the kind of society characteristic of the contemporary United States and most developed countries. One implication of the phrase is that although innovative and efficient production is still important, much of the energy of business and government is focused on stimulating consumption.

Secondary school is an important mechanism in a culture of consumerism. Perhaps the thing that American secondary education teaches most effectively is a desire to consume. That goal is accomplished not primarily via the formal curriculum, but through the status concerns and peer groups that intensify during adolescence. The teenage preoccupation with status and status symbols creates inclinations essential to contemporary consumer capitalism. Of course, not all teenagers are equally concerned about fashions and consumption; many are thoughtful, hard-working students. Nonetheless, as cultural stereotypes in movies and humor indicate, the prevalence of such concerns is taken for granted. At the stage in the life cycle when psychologists say identity formation is central, strivings for status and consumerism are made central and “normal” components of the experience. We cannot adequately understand the contemporary world of high school teenagers apart from the context of consumer capitalism. Conversely, we cannot understand the dynamics of twenty-first-century American capitalism if we do not see the important role that secondary-school status systems play in stimulating consumer demand.

Educational Reform

Michael W. Apple says:

Unfortunately, too many current school reform efforts are beside the point. They are often based on a fundamental misrecognition of the realities both of schools' and teachers' lives, and even more damaging on an ignorance of the daily realities of the children who come to these schools. (Apple 2002)

Why is it so hard to change things? If both teenagers and adults often express dissatisfaction with many aspects of adolescent life—and they have done so for many years—why does little change? The basic answer is relatively simple: segregating young people into schools until they are at least seventeen or eighteen and greatly limiting the kind of power they have produce teen cultures. Adults and most young people enjoy this age-based form of segregation. Young people are less subject to parental supervision. Parents have the time and energy to do other

things with their lives other than watch the kids. Competition in the full-time job market is reduced. The direct cost to businesses of training employees is lowered. Students also form a large pool of low-wage, no-benefits, part-time laborers; moreover, they spend nearly all their money on items for immediate consumption.

Certainly, extended schooling and the related social arrangements provide important benefits, and hence they are not easily changed. They also create the structural basis for an oppositional youth culture. Reforming the curriculum and teaching techniques and testing more extensively—however much those may be needed—will not change the basic patterns of behavior we associate with teenagers. That is the case for well-to-do students in good schools; it is even truer for young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods and families.

So what is to be done? Teachers are not the main problem. Many of the changes required are outside their purview and power (and I have written a great deal about this elsewhere). Here I will make only two deliberately provocative suggestions, both within the power of high school teachers: 1) to foster civility and 2) to assign study teams and give collective grades.

Fostering Civility: Teachers and administrators tend to see peer culture as largely outside their realm of responsibility unless school rules or laws are clearly violated. Schools rarely create specific educational programs to discuss the different informal crowds and cliques and how they should treat one another. Even some of the most able and sensitive teachers we observed or interviewed noted which kids were “cool” and which were not, as if it were a given “fact of life” similar to gender or age.

That hands-off attitude concerning status-group inequalities is quite different from contemporary policies toward gender and racial inequality. Not many years ago open racism and sexism were accepted aspects of high school culture. Blatant putdowns of those of another race or gender are now considered inappropriate and worthy of censure; many schools, for instance, observe Black History Month and organize discussions of date rape and sexism. Why not similar programs dealing with informal peer groups? Of course, some students’ surreptitious behaviors and attitudes will still exhibit elitism and snobbery. But the public expression of such attitudes should be considered as unacceptable as open sexism and racism. The public expression of norms—whether concerning academic excellence, racism, sexism, or snobbery—is only a beginning. Norms can, however, play a constructive role in creating a better educational system.

Assigned Study Teams and Collective Grades: Americans assume it is “perfectly natural” that even the most outstanding athletes do not proceed to the playoffs if their teams have losing records. Some firms base bonuses on the measured productivity of particular teams or departments; all gain or lose depending on the success of the whole. In the

“real world” adults learn that their welfare often depends upon cooperating productively with people they may not like or choose to work with. Why not a course or two with assigned study groups and a portion of the individual grades dependent upon the average grade of the study group? Students would have an incentive to help and coach one another. Such an experience would not only introduce students to a reality they will soon confront but would also teach them to engage and cooperate with others who may be quite different than they are.

Educational reform will require cooperation among teachers, government, and community groups. Much can be done, however, within the context of existing institutions. First and foremost, teachers and administrators need to take the significance and power of peer cultures more seriously and to understand that part of their job is to influence the social context within which their students live.

References

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