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Spot on Popularity Scale Speaks to the Future; Middle Has Its Rewards

By BENEDICT CAREY

The cult of popularity that reigns in high school can look quaint from a safe distance, like your 20th reunion. By then the social order may have turned over like an hourglass: teenagers who were socially invisible have emerged as colorful characters, confident, transformed. Others seem preserved in time, same as ever, while some former princes and queen bees are diminished or simply absent, now invisible themselves.

For years researchers focused much attention on those prominent teenagers, tracking their traits and behaviors. The studies found, to no one's surprise, that social dominance in adolescence often involves an aggressive, selfish streak that may not play well outside the locker-lined corridors.

The cult disbands, and the rules change.

Yet high school students know in their gut that popularity is far more than a superficial, temporary competition, and in recent years psychologists have confirmed that intuition. The newer findings suggest that adolescents' niche in school — their popularity, and how they understand and exploit it — offers important clues to their later psychological well-being.

"When you get to be a teenager, your social world broadens," said Kathleen Boykin McElhaney, a psychologist at the University of Massachusetts. "Kids may have a part-time job, be involved in a church group, a clique at school, all of which can broaden the perception of what popularity is and what it means."

Social scientists map the social topology of a school by having students rate their peers on various measures, including likeability. For instance, the question "Who would you most like to hang around with on a Saturday?" quickly reveals a list of those who are considered the best company (potential dates excluded). This is a different measure of popularity from prominence — the quarterback and the cutest cheerleader may or may not qualify — and identifies a gifted class of a different kind.

Some 15 to 20 percent of high school students fall into this category, according to Mitchell Prinstein, a professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina, and it's not hard to find them. They tend to have closer friendships, to excel academically and to get on well with most others, including parents — their own and their friends'.

In a continuing study of 185 students in a school in Charlottesville, Va., researchers led by Joseph P. Allen of the University of Virginia have concluded that this group is "characterized by a degree of openness to strong emotional experience" and optimism about their relationships, past and future. "These are very, very socially skilled kids who are really able to master the intricacies of diverse social situations," Dr. Allen said

in a phone interview.

Surveys suggest that about 50 percent of students are average — that is, they have good friends but are neither especially liked nor disliked by classmates. The remaining 30 to 35 percent are split between low-status or “rejected” students, who are on the bottom of the heap, and neglected ones, who don’t show up on the radar at all.

Yet most youngsters in any school know who their popular, likable peers are, and can learn by observation in a dynamic social situation that, after all, lasts four years. “We have evidence that the neglected kids are the ones most likely to move up, or to move between groups,” Dr. Prinstein said. “These are the ones with no established reputation, they kind of blend into the woodwork, and this can give them a kind of freedom.”

The same cannot be said of the rejected group, on the lowest rung on the ladder. In several remarkable studies, researchers have brought together students from different schools, representing different levels of the social hierarchy. Within hours, sometimes less, the children assume their accustomed places — the popular ones on top, the socially awkward on the bottom. Climbing out of the geek ghetto is hard, even if a child knows what likeability looks like.

Children outside the popular club sometimes compensate by effectively deluding themselves. A yearlong study of 164 students ages 13 and 14, published in May, found that the teenagers’ rating of their own popularity — regardless of their peers’ ratings — was a strong predictor of their psychological and academic adjustment.

A clique of misfits, with nary a prom date among them, can create their own internal definition of acceptance. “What this tells me is that we ought to be asking kids themselves where they stand,” said Dr. McElhaney, the lead author of the study. “If you feel like you fit in, wherever it is you fit in, then you’ll fare well.” If not, the road is much tougher, she said.

Popularity, even the likable kind, can have costs. In his continuing study, Dr. Allen has found that the most socially skilled students are three times as likely to be drinking by age 14 as those outside the group. Up through age 18, they are also more likely to commit vandalism, smoke marijuana and shoplift. They are, in short, seemingly more vulnerable to peer pressure and expectations.

Some of those behaviors may just be due to increased opportunity and access: you can’t sample from the buffet if you’re not invited to the party.

But that is ultimately for the teenagers who see it unfolding every day to assess. If high school is the first time young people take on a public identity, it is also the best vantage point for seeing the blessings and risks of social charm.

Maybe that’s why some teenagers can seem at once so self-deluded about their own standing and fascinated by the doings of the in group. They know intuitively that a crucial part of a high school education happens outside the classroom, in Popularity Studies 101.

Ask a few at the next reunion. The cult has disbanded, the party is open to all, and they’ll have some stories to tell.
