From Nerds to Normals: The Recovery of Identity among Adolescents from Middle School to High School

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Extensive attention has been given to understanding the nature of adolescent identity, but little consideration has been given to the everyday social experiences and processes by which the content of teenagers' self-perceptions are formed and remain stable or change within educational settings. Since studies have focused on members of "popular" cliques or "deviant" subcultures, it is important to examine the daily lives of teenagers whose peers have labeled them unpopular "nerds" in schools to document how these adolescents are able to overcome the stigma of this label. Using intensive interviews and observations, this study delineated the impact of school activities, school social structure, and peer culture on the self-perceptions of nerds. The findings indicate that adolescents who were unpopular in middle school and who became involved in high school activities and friendship groups were able to recover by becoming self-confident and reconstructing themselves as "normal" within a changing school social system.

Popular films and television shows about adolescents and schools usually include a certain type of teenager who is frequently ridiculed and rejected by his or her peers. These adolescents are often portrayed as awkward, intelligent, shy, unattractive social outcasts with unfashionable hair and dress styles who sometimes attempt to get revenge on their peers who shun them. They are called "nerds," "dweebs," "dorks," "geeks," "brainiacs," and "computer jocks." Although these stereotypical nerds appear in films and on television, do American secondary school students use such terms to label their peers? If so, what is life like for teenagers who are so labeled? And if this experience is distressing, as many people believe, how do teenagers deal with the stigma of being labeled nerds? Terms like nerd and dweeb have been conceptualized by researchers as social-type labels that shape the content of adolescents' identity (see, for example, Brown and Lohr 1987; Larkin 1979; Schwartz

and Merten 1967). Since social scientists have characterized the teenage years as a crucial time for the formation of identity, it is important to investigate the extent to which teenagers use these social-type labels and the impact these labels have on adolescents' self-perceptions.

I used observations and in-depth interviews with teenagers in different grades and at different times to collect information regarding the everyday experiences that shape the trajectories of their concerns and identities. A recurrent theme in the data indicated that some adolescents who were labeled by their peers as unpopular nerds in middle school were able to embrace a more positive self-perception in high school that centered on defining themselves as "normal."[1] In general, although the cognitive, psycho-

[1] This focus on the nerds who become normal (their terminology) was one of the recurrent patterns found in a larger ethnographic study of peers groups and peer culture at a high school (see Kinney 1990).

logical, and physical changes that take place during adolescence have been well documented in the developmental literature, this article presents a view of changes on the social side of life. Specifically, the data show that adolescents' daily negotiation of the school social scene within and between groups produced powerful emotions that had a significant and ongoing impact on their perceptions of themselves and others. Moreover, adolescents with the opportunities and resources to take advantage of specialized high school-sponsored activities were actively able to affirm a positive personal identity.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Generally, the form identity takes during adolescence is presumed to have a significant impact on later life. Thus, social scientists have generated much research and theory designed to increase our understanding of identity formation during the second decade of life. Although these researchers are from different disciplines, they all note the importance of considering the sociocultural context of individual identity development. For example, prominent psychiatrists and social psychologists of human development (e.g., Douvan and Adelson 1966; Erikson 1959, 1963; Sherif and Sherif 1964; Sullivan 1953) have viewed a supportive adolescent peer group as the primary social arena in which adolescents develop a healthy sense of identity as they experiment with various social roles and make decisions about their present and future lives. Douvan and Adelson (1966, p. 179) captured the strong interplay between the immediate social milieu and adolescent identity development when they argued that teenagers are "about to crystallize an identity, and for this [they need] others of [their] generation to act as models, mirrors, helpers, testers, foils." Similarly, pragmatic philosophers and sociologists, who developed the symbolic interactionist framework (e.g., Cooley 1902; Cottrell 1969; Goffman 1959; McCall and Simmons 1978; Mead 1934; Stryker 1980), have stressed the importance of everyday social interaction and

symbolic communication that allows humans to think about themselves from the viewpoints of others as the key mechanism of identity formation. For example, Cooley's (1902) notion of the "looking-glass self" describes the process of imagining how we appear to others and how this appearance is evaluated by others. These imaginations develop during social interaction and produce feelings, such as delight or dejection, that are directed toward the self. Interpersonal interaction and concomitant self-feelings occur within and between groups, and these various groups constitute the relevant social structure and cultural landscape that provides fertile ground for the growth of individuals' identity.

These two bodies of literature have inspired numerous studies that have increased our understanding of identity. For example, psychologists have conceptualized and operationalized the notion of "identity statuses" to study empirically some of Erikson's ideas regarding identity formation (see, for example, Grotevant 1987; Marcia 1980; Matteson 1977). However, although the findings of these studies have highlighted the importance of two fundamental processes underlying identity formation—the exploration of alternatives and commitment to choices—this research has not systematically examined the development of identity in terms of the everyday interpersonal interactions within naturally occurring peer groups that Erikson and other influential social psychologists alluded to in their writings. Sociologists working in the symbolic interactionist tradition have demonstrated the impact of both structured role identities (e.g., Burke 1980; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1968) and more situational, impression-management strategies (e.g., Goffman 1959; Strauss 1959) on the development of self. However, these social psychologists have not seriously considered adolescents' role identities and self-presentation techniques within specific contexts, such as the social worlds of secondary schools.

In their research on homeless people, Snow and Anderson (1987) reworked earlier symbolic interactionist concep-

tions of identity (cf. Goffman 1959; McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980) that are relevant for a discussion of identity formation among adolescents. They viewed social identities as those that are "attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to place or situate them as social objects . . . [based] on information gleaned [from] appearance, behavior, and the location and time of action." Personal identities may be different from attributed social identities and are "self-designations and self-attributions brought into play or asserted during the course of interaction" (p. 1347). This distinction between social and personal identity is useful for studying adolescents, since researchers (e.g., Hollingshead 1949; Larkin 1979; Lesko 1988; Schwartz and Merten 1967) have found that teenagers frequently impute social-type labels to their peers, while searching for a sense of personal identity (Douvan and Adelson 1966; Erikson 1963).

A third relevant body of literature centers on sociological and anthropological studies of schools that have documented adolescents' pervasive use of social-type labels that place their peers within a social tracking system comprised of peer groups. These studies of adolescents for over four decades have consistently found that daily peer relations within and between groups in schools are highly salient to teenagers because they underlie the teenagers' definitions of social reality and personal identity (cf. Brown and Lohr 1987; Cohen 1979; Coleman 1961; Cusick 1973; Eckert 1989; Eder 1985; Foley 1990; C. Wayne Gordon 1957; Chad Gordon 1971; Hollingshead 1949; Ianni 1989; Larkin 1979; Lesko 1988; Lightfoot 1983; Schwartz 1987; Schwartz and Merten 1967; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985; Snyder 1972; Weis 1974). In general, these studies indicated that membership in specific crowds or categories structures adolescents' selection of friends and everyday social interactions.

Students typically rank the diverse groups in terms of prestige, and the groups' position in the school social structure denotes their members' relative peer status or "popularity." Categories or groups, such as preppies, jocks,

nerds, and burnouts, commonly exist, although the social-type labels attached to these crowds differ across communities and from school to school (cf. Brown 1990; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1985). The social-type labels are symbolic expressions invented by the students, and the labels imputed to different crowds connote the members' central characteristics and favored activities (e.g., athletics, academics, music, delinquency, drug use). Moreover, researchers of adolescent socialization (e.g., Brown and Lohr 1987; Larkin 1979; Rosenberg 1965) have found that membership in teenage crowds and participation in extracurricular activities significantly shape youths' self-evaluations. Generally, teenagers who are members of the most "popular" crowds (e.g., jocks and preppies) participate in the most valued and visible school activities (e.g., male basketball and football teams, the student government, cheerleading, and the yearbook) and express significantly higher levels of self-esteem than do their peers who are members of less popular groups (e.g., nerds and burnouts) who do not participate in widely recognized extracurricular school activities.

Overall, although they have outlined the enduring existence of a stratified system of teenage crowds in schools that serves as an important arena for adolescent socialization these studies have generally been conducted at one point in time and have focused on explicating the characteristics of the members of different cliques, crowds, or categories. Thus, we know little about how teenagers experience change or stability in their perceptions of self and others as they move through middle school and high school. Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1985) and Eckert (1989) presented detailed data on teenagers' social identities and peer relations in both junior high and senior high school, but they were primarily concerned with delineating the development and differentiation of students in the "popular" (socialite and jock) crowds and members of "delinquent" (street-corner and burnout) categories. The study reported here focused on the middle school and high school social experiences of nerds and

normals, who did *not* view themselves and were not categorized as members of "popular" or "delinquent" crowds.

Two studies have examined teenagers who were labeled nerds or brainiacs—terms that connote being intelligent and social outcasts. Fordham and Ogbu (1986, p. 220) documented that Black high school students cope with the burden of "acting White" (working hard to get good grades and getting good grades) and avoid being negatively labeled brainiacs by "diverting time and effort into strategies designed to camouflage" their high levels of academic achievement. For example, teenagers who got good grades often engaged in "lunching" activities that centered on clowning, which prevented their peers from becoming hostile toward them because they received high grades. Brown's (1989) preliminary data analysis suggested that bright students in several high schools also used strategies, like clowning or underachieving, to avoid the negative labels of brain and nerd. Although these two studies have increased our understanding of how some teenagers distance themselves from negative social-type labels, they focused primarily on students' social identities and did not investigate the content of the teenagers' personal identities over time. Also, given earlier studies' focus on adolescent crowds at one point in time, these investigations did not seriously consider if the peer group social structure they documented was the same system that the teenagers perceived to "exist" (viewed as salient) throughout their secondary school careers. To extend the findings of earlier studies, I observed and interviewed students over a two-year period to investigate the nature of their school social experiences and perceptions of self, others, and the school social structure over time.

SETTING AND METHODS

The research was conducted at a high school that enrolled students from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, including a large group of students from working- and lower-class families. The school is located in a small Midwestern city (population about 60,000) and is attended by students from the city and surrounding rural areas. Although most of the students are White, a small number of African Americans also attend. The school itself is relatively large, with approximately 400 students in each grade (9–12). This school was selected because some of the students had participated in an earlier study of social interaction and peer culture in a local middle school (grades 6–8) conducted by Eder and her colleagues (Eder 1985; 1988; Eder and Parker 1987; Parker 1991; Sanford and Eder 1984). This research did not follow up all the students who were studied in the middle school, but the extensive data regarding the peer culture of the middle school from Eder's study provides an informative point of reference for understanding the students' later social experiences in high school.

Beginning in March 1987, I observed social interaction at the school between classes, at lunch, and after school. I also attended the various after-school extracurricular activities to observe peer relations among the participants and fans. These activities included football games; cross-country meets; girls' volleyball games, gymnastics, and swimming meets; boys' and girls' basketball games; wrestling and tennis matches; baseball games; academic decathlon competitions; academic- and athletic-award banquets; musical and theatrical performances; talent shows; and "battles of the bands" (competitions among students' rock and roll bands). These frequent observations of adolescents in natural settings provided information about everyday social interactions and behavior at various events that served as data to be compared with material from the in-depth interviews.

Overall, I conducted and audiotaped 81 interviews with both male and female members of all the peer groups that the students perceived to exist at the school.[2] About half these interviews occurred

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[2] With the following exceptions: a crowd of youths from nearby rural areas (called the "grits") and isolates who were beyond the scope of this study and the female athletes who were studied by another researcher.

with individuals and the rest with small groups. The small-group interviews resembled informal peer conversations that I frequently observed during and after school in natural settings and are vital because discussions that emerge parallel the collective processes that are crucial for identity development (Davies 1982). The adolescents' emotional and free-flowing language in these natural conversations and group interviews transmits information about themselves and others, but also serves as a "tool for establishing (i.e., maintaining, creating) social and psychological realities" (Ochs 1990, p. 288; see also Berger and Luckmann 1967). These group interviews are also important, since concerns that were agreed upon or argued about during these conversations provided useful data that I compared with the data from the intensive individual interviews and observations (Becker and Geer 1960).[3] Fourteen interviews were follow-up interviews conducted three months to a year after the first interview. Altogether, through the interviews and social encounters at school and at their hangouts, I had contact with approximately 120 adolescents. The interviews ranged in length from 40 to 120 minutes and took place in natural settings that the adolescents normally frequented after school and on the weekends, such as pizza and fast-food restaurants or coffeehouses in the community. Several interviews were conducted in a conference room in the school library, and some took place at local parks during April and May.

I attempted to carve out a neutral identity for myself at the school by making and maintaining connections with students in a wide variety of peer groups and by being open to their different viewpoints (Lesko 1988). During my initial contacts with the students and before I conducted interviews, I stressed that I would be the only one to listen to the audiotapes and that neither the school nor any individual students would be identified. Moreover, I consistently and successfully used interviewing techniques and strategies (e.g., various probes and displaying sympathetic understanding) outlined by Raymond Gordon (1980) that facilitate communication and promote positive relations between the respondents and the interviewer. In addition, the interviews served as a catharsis (Raymond Gordon 1980, p. 113) because the adolescents frequently opened up and shared their feelings about their everyday experiences. I also distanced myself from adult authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers, the principal, and the school security guards) by dressing in jeans and casual shirts and by emphasizing my status as a college student writing a paper about teenagers' high school experiences. By showing my genuine interest in their daily lives and distancing myself from adults, I developed a high level of rapport with these adolescents,[4] which was reflected in the students' willingness to discuss discrediting information about themselves and to invite me to their private activities (see Sherif and Sherif 1964). The following sections represent recurrent themes from the overall data base that delineate how mostly middle-class[5] teenagers who were labeled nerds came to view themselves as normals. About one-third of the interviewees fit this pattern.

RECURRENT THEMES

Interview data from members of all the different peer groups indicated that the

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[3] The ability to draw on observational data and having small-group interviews that resemble natural peer conversations are important, since data from individual interviews are the adolescents' reflective identifications of the collective processes and public events within which identity formation occurs.

[4] In addition, I have frequently been told by colleagues and friends that my youthful appearance probably helped me build rapport. On a number of occasions I was mistaken for a student at the high school by teachers, counselors, and students, to whom I had not yet had a chance to introduce myself as a researcher from the university.

[5] Other unpopular middle school students who were from working-class homes typically became involved in either the heavy-metal rock music crowd ("headbangers") or the group of primarily rural teenagers ("grits") at this high school, but an analysis of these students is beyond the scope of this article.

adolescents consistently and vividly recalled their middle school experience as being divided into two distinct crowds: the unpopular nerds or dweebs and the popular trendies. Members of the trendy crowd were also referred to as the preppies, jocks, or the in-crowd and consisted of roughly 20 percent of the middle school population. Male athletes, cheerleaders, and their best friends make up the vast majority of the trendy crowd and are the most popular among their peers in the school because of their visibility (Canaan 1987; Eder 1985).

This visibility is generated and maintained by athletes' and cheerleaders' frequent public performances at well-attended school sports contests and pep rallies. For example, many teenagers noted that "everybody knows" who the popular people are and what they do; they are the ones who are "noticed" or "recognized" by everybody. Teenagers who were unpopular in middle school described their popular counterparts as having "the ability to gain recognition from everybody else, and you more or less get your choice of what to do or who to go out with. It's just, everybody would like to be like that." In addition to having a choice of activities and dating partners, both trendies and nerds noted that popular people "have the most fun" and are always invited to private parties on weekends. In short, the peer culture[6] of this middle school was defined primarily by the activities and concerns of the leading crowd of male athletes, cheerleaders, and their best friends. These teenagers emphasized traditional gender roles (achievement, competition, and toughness for boys; attractiveness, appearance, and interpersonal relations for girls) and maintaining their high peer status, which required limiting the size of their group by excluding peers who did not meet their standards (Eder 1985; Eder and Parker 1987; Parker 1991).

Nerds in Middle School

Adolescents who were not trendies ended up by default in a large mass of students who were labeled "unpopular." As one young woman, Sarah, who was not a member of the elite group in middle school, recalled when she was a junior in high school:

Example 1
Middle school was very different from high school for me. I had a horrible time in middle school—I hated it! . . . I didn't like myself at all and therefore I really had trouble kind of interacting with other people, too, and you know when you're trying to surround yourself with one little group to feel secure sometimes that works and sometimes it didn't. For one thing there is a lot of stereotyping going on, and people are very narrow-minded . . . in middle school and judgmental, too, and so if you are different in any way . . . there is almost some kind of "in" person you should be in middle school. . . . You know, it's a certain look and a certain life-style, and I just never fit into that, and so I always felt like people were coming down on me and on my other friends, too; it was a lot more chaotic. I feel like it has toned down a lot in high school—like my classes are a little more calm; it could be that they are all stoned but ahh—[7]

As Sarah recalled, middle school was a difficult time, characterized by not liking herself, problems interacting with her peers, and frequent experiences with stereotyping. (Rosenberg 1965, using different research methods, found similar characteristics to be strongly related to low levels of self-esteem among adolescents.) She also discussed being strongly aware of "some kind of 'in' person" who she thought she was expected to be, but never became, and she related this perception to people "coming down on" her and her friends.

Although Sarah did not label herself a

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[6] "A stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro and Eder 1990, p. 197).

[7] All quotations are from tape-recorded interviews. Material in brackets is for clarification, and pseudonyms are used to refer to people and places. The quotations have been edited slightly to remove extraneous material, indicated by dots (. . .); hesitations, indicated by dashes (- - -); false starts, and the interviewer's frequent use of "back-channel" remarks ("uhm," "yeah").

nerd or a dweeb (terms that connote being unpopular), these terms were used frequently in natural-group conversations in high school and when the youths reflected back on their middle school experiences. For example, two former unpopular young men said:

Example 2
  Ross: And middle school—.
  Ted: We were just *nerds*. I mean—.
  Ross: Yeah—
  Ted: people hated us.
  Ross: Well, they didn't hate us, but we weren't—
  Ted: popular. Which was either you were popular or you weren't.
  Ross: In middle school it's very defined. There's popular people and unpopular people. It's just very—rigid. You were popular or unpopular. That's it.
  Ted: And there wasn't people that were in between.
  Ross: Oh no!
  Ted: You just had one route [to becoming popular], and then there was the other. And we were the other, and—basically you were afraid of getting laughed at about anything you did because if you did one thing that was out of the ordinary, and you weren't expected to do anything out of the ordinary, then you were laughed at and made fun of, and you wouldn't fit the group at all, and then, of course, you were excluded and then you didn't even exist.
  Ross: You got "nuked," so to speak.

Ross and Ted used the label nerd in retrospect and clearly perceived "very rigid" boundaries between popular and unpopular youths in middle school. Independent data from some trendy young men about Ted corroborate Ted's recollection of himself as a nerd. These popular athletes excitedly described him in the following terms: "He had real short hair like a nerd. He was the biggest nerd of the school." These trendies also expressed the importance of avoiding unpopular students in middle school, saying:

[We] always had that one group—we had all the good-looking girls and that is the one [group] that everybody wanted to be in. At lunch we sit at our own table [but] if you go out to lunch with the wrong person, rumors would go around that you went to lunch with a *geek!*

It is important to note that both Sarah

in Example 1 and Ross and Ted in Example 2 mentioned that being "different in any way" or acting "out of the ordinary" was a sure way to draw negative attention ("getting nuked") from their peers. These comments reflect unpopular adolescents' awareness of the expectations of the popular group, whose members were described as being quick to "make fun of" and "exclude" those who are different in middle school.[8] Many high school students distinctly remember being ridiculed, shunned, and ignored by their more popular peers in middle school. Since the popular crowd served as a reference group for many of the unpopular students, the ridicule and rejection that the nerds experienced from the trendies was highly salient. Specifically, in terms of Snow and Anderson's (1987) writings about identity, the unpopular teenagers' social (imputed) and personal (self-attributed) identities were not distinct. These ostracized and isolated teenagers incorporated their popular peers' perceptions of them into their own thoughts and feelings about themselves. This finding is consistent with writings by developmental psychologists, who have noted that early adolescents have difficulty distinguishing their own identities from others' views of them (see the review by Harter 1990).

Outsiders' and Insiders' Views of Nerds

Some nerds were singled out for their superior academic performance. Others were viewed primarily as having low levels of social skills (e.g., being shy, nervous, or embarrassed around others) and dressing out of fashion (e.g., "real straight," "square," and "goody-goody").

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[8] The readiness and cheerfulness with which the two trendies negatively described Ted and their fervor about avoiding unpopular peers expressed in Example 3 closely corresponded to the nerds' perceptions and experiences presented in Examples 1 and 2. Moreover, this small-group interview with the trendies paralleled their natural conversations, which are important for identity formation.

Many of them were believed to have some combination of these characteristics. As Mary, who was a high school junior, noted:

> *Example 4*
> They go home and do their homework, they watch TV and they go to bed and they go back to school and do their homework. I mean they probably don't even talk on the phone! They just, they don't have any life outside of school, and I just can't relate to them!

Similarly, Isaiah, a star male athlete who was a high school senior, discussed his view of the nerds, whom he called the "geeky" crowd:

> *Example 5*
> Then there is kind of a geeky crowd, I guess you could say, the really smart kids. They really have sort of a screwed-up value system as far as I'm concerned. I mean they put so much emphasis on studying and doing homework and getting really great grades that they . . . are missing a lot of the fun. They really are; I mean they don't do anything but study. I guess there is nothing really wrong with that, I mean studying is good, but I can't imagine going home and simply studying all night long and doing nothing else, which is basically what they do, and they get great grades. But, as far as I'm concerned, their whole value system is messed up 'cause they've missed high school. High school is doing your work and studying, and there is a time for studying and a time for having fun!

These statements reflect the common view that nerds focus so much on their academic achievement that they do not have a social life. In middle school nerds tended not to date or attend parties.

Unpopular teenagers recalled feeling like "outsiders" or "social outcasts" in middle school on the basis of their social encounters and comparisons with members of the trendy crowd, who had many friends. For example, one young man noted: "I was just a loser, I didn't have friends." Another unpopular teenager in middle school remembered worrying that "no one" would like him in the "big, vast high school." Boundaries between trendies and nerds were described as being "pretty thick" or like "huge barriers" that kept popular and unpopular people "really separated."[9] The following two quotations (from a male high school senior and a female high school junior, respectively) sum up the middle school experiences of the nerds:

> *Example 6*
> Middle school was not too fun—just like me and Jeff were friends. I had glasses and I had—I guess I was like a "nerd" you know. We both had glasses, we both had the same kind of (real short, funny-looking) hair, and people kind of picked on us and stuff. Pushed us around—

> *Example 7*
> I wanted to [be in the trendy group] but I wasn't; I never had a lot of friends. I always had one or two friends, and we were always dressing pretty trendy and stuff like that, but we never really had trendy friends.

Nerds' Transition to High School

Although the nerds reported having troubling social experiences in middle school, they viewed their transition to high school as being accompanied by some positive changes. Along with the transition came increased opportunities for membership in a greater variety of groups and a lessening of the desire for achieving schoolwide popularity that was so pervasive in middle school. These themes are illustrated in the following comments by two juniors, Bob and Ellen:

> *Example 8*
> Bob: You had popular people—
> Ellen: and unpopular people—in middle school—either you were considered a nerd and nobody liked you or else you were hanging out with the cheerleaders and the football players and stuff like that, and that was the most important . . . and then when you get into high school, it really doesn't matter anymore because people don't care [whether they're not in the popular crowd]—

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[9] Overall, these findings from the high school students' recollections of middle school are highly consistent with the results of sociometric and observational studies of peer relations and peer culture at the same middle school (see Eder 1985; Eder and Kinney 1988; Parker 1991).

Bob: and there's more groups [in high school]. . . .

As these students observed, the transition to high school was characterized by a more highly differentiated social scene, based on a larger number and greater variety of groups and students. Many students commented on the diversity of the high school, noting the existence of groups like the headbangers and punk rockers—two groups that did not exist at the middle school. Moreover, other interviews and observations indicated that the trendies felt challenged by members of these new groups, who were visible (because of their "outrageous" appearance and "rowdy" behavior) at the school. Along these lines, some of the trendies ostracized members of the headbangers and punk rockers, which seemed to reduce the amount of negative attention they directed at the nerds. Members of the subcultures, especially the headbangers, criticized the trendies and competed with them for schoolwide popularity. In general, students entering high school confronted a more diverse social structure that consisted of a greater number of peer cultures and peer groups and in which the trendies' earlier monopoly on visibility and popularity was diminishing.[10]

In addition to the growing diversity of the social structure, many juniors and seniors believed that this stratification system was becoming more open relative to their experiences in middle school and early in high school. Juniors and seniors discussed this change in terms of the "disintegration" of earlier "rigid" group boundaries and that things "evened out" between crowds as they moved through high school; freshmen and sophomores did not note such changes, but expressed how "happy," "glad," and "relieved" they were to be in high school.

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[10] In addition to the headbangers and punk rockers, the students described other groups, labeled "hippies," "skateboarders," and the "grit-headbangers," who represented the diversification of the social structure and the development of alternative peer cultures (see Kinney 1990).

Nerds' Increased Confidence

Along with the more open and diverse social structure, another recurrent pattern in the data was some adolescents' lessening concern with obtaining school-wide popularity, which was facilitated by their involvement in school-sponsored activities in which participation by juniors and seniors created a supportive social environment. Many noted that as freshmen and sophomores, they had the opportunity to feel secure and gain confidence in themselves because of their acceptance by and approval from their older teammates. Regarding this theme, Ross and Ted stated:

Example 9
Ross: We were goons in middle school— We're not as shy [anymore]—.
Ted: Exactly. I got the attitude when I moved from middle school to high school that I don't give a damn what people are gonna think. Because in middle school you're always afraid of offending someone.
Ross: And there wasn't any way for us to get out of it anyway—.
Ted: And once you get to high school, if you can find some crazier upper-class people and hang around with them, the possibilities are limitless. I mean we got here; we met some crazier upper-class people [through participating in a "minor" sport], who just basically gave us the idea, "Go ahead. Go for it!"
Ross: . . . Don't worry about it so much. Stop being so self-conscious!

These comments (e.g., "afraid of offending someone") illustrate the salience of the popular group's norms regarding proper behavior and appearance in middle school. However, making new friends through participation in a school activity provided both a supportive group and a new reference group that served as a haven from the trendies' expectations and evaluations, where these former nerds did not have to be "so self-conscious" or "give a damn what people are gonna think."

The comments presented in Examples 8 and 9 (and in Example 2), along with other numerous stories told in these small-group interviews, flowed one after the other as these teenagers talked rapidly and emotionally about their present and past experiences. Their quick deliv-

ery, discussion of discrediting information, and frequent smiles and warm glances at each other suggested that they were close friends. Moreover, I frequently observed them hanging out, talking, and laughing together and with their friends in and out of school. Members of these two different small groups openly discussed their hopes and concerns in a supportive group environment where they received unqualified acceptance. From the perspective developed here, the spontaneous, cheerful, and caring nature of their comments and nonverbal expressions both reflect and continually construct their positive and confident self-perceptions (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Davies 1982; Ochs 1990). Alternatively stated, these ongoing interpersonal interactions emanate from and continually support these teenagers' recovery of identity from their previously stigmatized state. From a methodological standpoint, the small-group interviews were successful because the discussions that emerged closely resembled the form and content of the everyday peer-group conversations.

These social changes appear to parallel the psychological growth in adolescents' cognitive capacities. Developmental psychologists (e.g., Selman 1980) have suggested that early adolescence (roughly the middle school years) is characterized by an increased ability to reflect about oneself and to take the perspective of others. However, these new skills may not be used effectively or controlled adequately. As Elkind (1967) argued, many young teenagers are unable to differentiate their own frequent self-reflections from what they think others are thinking about them. He termed this exaggerated egocentrism the "imaginary audience," since adolescents imagine that others are as absorbed with their appearance and actions as they are. This notion captures the nerds' middle school experiences, in which their high hopes but frustrating quest to be popular ended up paralyzing them socially because they were so scared of "offending someone" that they became shy and felt "there wasn't any way for us to get out of it." In other words, the social scene of

the middle school appears to accentuate the insecurity and confusion that early adolescents normally experience.

With continued cognitive development and the transition to high school, the nerds' relevant social and psychological reality changed because they were able to surround themselves with peers who provided positive reflected appraisals and more favorable social comparisons. These supportive relationships were the basis for the nerds' construction of more positive self-conceptions, since they collectively reduced the contextual dissonance (Rosenberg 1979) that earlier had a negative effect on their self-perceptions.

Other students also recalled that the transition to high school allowed them to explore a number of activities, such as journalism, the yearbook, music, theater, the chess club, academic competition teams, science and language clubs, tennis, and cross-country and swimming teams, that were not offered at the middle school. These activities provided alternative domains to achieving school-wide popularity in which students could feel adequate and successful. Specifically, many students who participated in these activities said that they had "more confidence" in themselves and felt less "self-conscious" about how the popular people viewed them. As one young man who was unpopular in middle school noted:

Example 10
I like high school a lot better than I liked middle school. I was very uncomfortable with myself in middle school—I wasn't comfortable around people unless I just knew them very well. I wasn't outgoing—I'm not a trendy, but, I'm not a punk; I'm sort of a "normal" guy.... I always wanted to be, you know, popular and have people call me and stuff like that. I didn't want to be the trendy person that had to listen to the music and . . . wear this on the same day as that, but I wanted to—you know, go to the parties—be with the in-crowd, maybe not dress just like them, but, you know—have the four-way phone conversations [and] that kind of shit. Tenth grade was different. [It] was kind of cool; I liked it. I probably grew four inches and. . . . I guess I just got confident and . . . there were still the groups, but, the lines were

not quite as rigid—I guess things evened out. I had a great time my sophomore year. . . . I am sorta a hacker on the computer; my dad . . . had an experimental computer [and] I got put on the yearbook staff to work on the computer and I met all these seniors. I was in a room with four senior women, which is a sophomore's dream! They were nice and they gave me sort of a mature outlook on the world.

This young man wanted to be popular, but now describes himself as "sort of a 'normal' guy," who grew four inches, gained self-confidence, felt the group hierarchy "evened out," and developed friendships in high school when he got involved with the yearbook staff. I frequently observed him and his friends striding surely down the school hallways. I also saw them browsing at a local record store that was frequented by members of other high school crowds. I ran into them at two heavy-metal rock concerts in a nearby city that I attended with some of the headbangers. Moreover, I was invited to "hang out" with them at several of their parties and found them to be interested in popular music and having fun, much like members of other crowds (e.g., the trendies and the headbangers). When I saw him, I was always struck by his beaming smile, glowing eyes, proud stance, and overall exuberant demeanor. The importance of becoming confident was expressed by another teenager, who stated: "You've gotta have confidence in what you're doin' and sayin' all the time—'cause if you don't have confidence in it, people are just goin' to go, "Huh, huh huh! [laugh at you]."

Along with becoming members of stable peer groups, some of these young men talked about losing weight and growing substantially taller, which enhanced their overall well-being.[11] Al-

though most of them and their friends also began dating girls toward the end of their sophomore year, one of them started dating at the end of middle school. He commented:

Example 11
When I think about middle school, I think that I was just a "dork"—that's all. Just last year [his freshmen year of high school], people started talking to me. . . . My first girlfriend, the very last week of eighth grade, there's something wrong with that 'cause everybody has been going with each other forever, but that is when I got my first girlfriend and I just wasted a lot of time. Now in high school I've got a girlfriend and I've got some friends.

His comment that "everybody has been going out with each other forever" refers to the trendies' earlier initiation into dating patterns that served as the ideal for many of the nerds. Now in high school, this former lonely dork has a steady girlfriend and many more friends than he had in middle school.[12] His statements about becoming more social are highly consistent with my observations of him in natural settings, where I frequently saw him happily talking and walking with different students in the school hallways. However, even though he exhibits relatively high levels of sociability and satisfaction, he still relies on the trendy crowd's norms to define such things as the importance of dating. In sum, involvement in a friendship group, school activity, beginning dating, and physically maturing combine to produce greater feelings of self-confidence among some adolescents.

Nerds Going Mainstream

Although this constellation of social, psychological, and physical changes that occur during the transition to and early years of high school provide a fertile

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[11] Although an examination of whether unpopular teenagers in middle school were "late" or "early-maturers" was beyond the scope of this study, the data suggest that at least some of the unpopular nerds were relatively late maturers, which is consistent with research that found that boys who mature early are more popular with their

peers than are those who mature later (Simmons and Blyth 1987).

[12] Overall, it appears that for this teenager and others I interviewed, finding friends and building self-confidence mutually reinforce one another and provide the social quota of friends and self-assurance that encourage them to date.

ground for progressive changes in social relations and feelings of self-efficacy, the data also indicate that teenagers experience significant shifts in their personal identity. These changes in self-attributions revolve around their assertion that they are becoming "normal" after a period of being frequently stigmatized as nerds. As one high school junior described himself:

Example 12
I like to think of myself as somewhat intelligent, but not necessarily the nerdy type. I like to think my personality strikes a balance between intelligence and being a normal human being. . . . I should sorta say I mainly am able to do that through my interest in sports. I suppose if I didn't have as strong an interest in sports as I did, I might seem much more of the nerdy type. I might strike someone that way. I hope I don't. I think that by being able to talk about things that regular people and people that I know talk about helps me fit in with the mainstream of high school . . . and not stand out . . . or even be outcast because of my intelligence, which really would be terrible.

This young man expressed clear concern that he may appear to be the "nerdy type" to his peers, and he used his interest in sports as an explicit connection to the "regular people" in the "mainstream of high school." It is important to note that his "interest in sports" refers to his fervent participation in a computer baseball league with three of his friends at school and some younger neighborhood boys. Even though he was not actively participating on a school athletic team, he thought that his knowledge of and passion for baseball connected him with the mainstream population of high school. Moreover, he usually wore an official major league baseball jacket, like many of his peers who were on school sports teams. Thus, at the same time that he is embracing a dominant activity of the trendies (athletics), he is distancing himself from the "deviant" identity of being solely an intellectual. In general, like the young man in Example 11, this teenager's self-definition of "normal" revealed that the trendies were still a primary reference group in that he constantly referred to how he was perceived by his peers and the importance of developing mainstream interests (e.g., athletics). Forming friendships and new interests helps one avoid standing out because of one's intelligence and reduces the possibility of being stigmatized as the nerdy type.

Similarly, another bright young man, a senior, who became involved in the student government and cross-country meets in high school and developed close friendships through these activities, noted that in middle school,

Example 13
I was just a fat, little, intelligent, trivia-mastering geek! Well, trivia has always been this great gift for me. I memorize stupid stuff and repeat it for umpteen years. I was always counted on for games like that. But now [in high school], it's like I've got a wider talent base or something. I appeal to more people or something. I mean that sounds totally ridiculous, but it's the way it kind of is.

This teenager, who was unpopular in middle school, was able to develop a "wider talent base" through activities and friendships in high school and became confident and connected to the mainstream of high school. Gaining "talent" means becoming involved in mainstream activities (e.g., student government, athletics) that are valued by the trendies.

Nerds Going Their Own Way

Other nerds followed a different path to becoming normal. Rather than adopt mainstream characteristics and behaviors, they essentially rejected the trendies' values to develop a more positive sense of self. As a young woman, who was a junior, explained:

I hadn't fit in in middle school and [was] sorta disgusted. In middle school I saw it as one big group of people that made fun of me all the time. . . . A girl who was incredibly mean to me in middle school . . . went out of her way to make my life miserable and . . . made fun of me constantly. And one time in gym [I was with] my one friend in middle school, Lisa, and Francey [the mean girl] was in our gym class, and one day she took us aside and tried to make us say "Shit"

'cause she thought it was really funny that we were such jerks and nerds that we didn't say "Shit." . . . We wouldn't do it, and ever after she would point us out in the hall to her friends and say "Look there's the girls that won't say 'Shit!'"

In ninth grade I met a girl named Ann who moved from Point City to Greentown, and we were really good friends for awhile and she was quite different from anybody else I knew here. She seemed a lot more grown-up, her father was a musician, and she sort of knew a lot more about the world than I did. She traveled a lot, and, in fact, for awhile we were accused of being lesbians 'cause we dressed funny and we were really close. I sort of idolized her, I mean, she sort of scared me because she seemed infinitely superior to me in every way. She's just really smart and really pretty. She's really independent, and I think that it was her independence that influenced me more than anything else and that I admired more than anything else, and that's when I stopped feeling like everybody was making fun of me all the time and that I had to have people around me all the time.

You know, friends around me all the time and Ann really helped me stop worrying so much about how people— what people thought about me, what they are saying about me. . . . It wasn't so much that I had this supportive relationship with her; it was more that I could be on my own the way she was on her own. I feel like I'm becoming very ordinary, but I also think that is because I am becoming more realistic about it—about who I am.

Her comments indicate that rather than adopt behaviors and styles typical of high-status groups, this young woman learned to be independent from her peers' expectations; emulating her best friend, she stopped "worrying so much about what other people thought about me, what they are saying about me." These comments were directed toward what popular people thought and said about her because several times during the interview she described a clear awareness of her high-status peers' attitudes toward her, since they "made fun of me all the time [and]—called me a brain" in middle school "because I was smart and funny looking." Thus, learning from her best friend that she "could be on [her] own" early in high school allowed this young woman significantly

to attenuate her sensitivity to the trendy group's norms and begin to see herself as "ordinary," rather than permit the popular groups' negative labels of her to dominate her self-perception. This process is also captured in the following comments by Susan, a young woman who was a high school junior:

Example 15
If you have confidence, you can overlook people who put you down 'cause there are always people who are going to put you down. And [when you have confidence], you don't have to worry about what I tend to think are the more trivial things in life like appearance or being trendy.

An unpopular middle school student, Susan became independent from the trendies' evaluations as she went her own way by working on the high school newspaper and developing strong ties with several other student journalists who are interested in current social issues and reading the classics. She viewed confidence as the key to not worrying about the trendies' evaluations. Specifically, her statement that "you don't have to worry about . . . the more trivial things in life like appearance or being trendy" suggests that she is shifting the identities in her salience hierarchy around to align them with her social relationships. In other words, the collective sociability and supportiveness of friendship groups that are not centered on mainstream interests provides these teenagers with the strength to shuffle their identity-salience hierarchies to bring them in line with their new commitments (see Serpe and Stryker 1987). In short, during middle school, they wanted to be popular, but in high school they devalue the trendies' attitudes and activities and go their own way.

Overall, the recurrent patterns in the data indicate two distinct processes that facilitate a change in these adolescents' identity from nerds to normals. One path centers on embracing behaviors and appearances that are respected by high-status peers, while the other path hinges on one's emancipation from popular peers' expectations and invidious comparisons. The young men were more

likely to choose the first path and to use school activities as an arena in which they could adopt mainstream interests and develop rewarding relationships with peers to feel good about themselves. Similarly, the young women developed supportive friendships through participation in school activities, but they were more likely than were the young men to follow the second path by enhancing their self-perceptions through close relationships that neither centered on school-sponsored activities nor connected them to the mainstream of the school. Youniss and Smollar (1985) also found that shared activities were the primary basis for young men's friendships, while young women were more likely to engage in intimate friendships.

DISCUSSION

The intensive interviews and observations used in this study provided information that can increase our understanding of the mostly cross-sectional survey research on teenagers' self-esteem. Surveys of large samples of adolescents that have focused on populations of junior high school or senior high school students have indicated that although self-esteem is generally low during junior high (or middle) school (cf. Simmons and Blyth 1987; Simmons, Blyth, et al. 1987; Simmons, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg 1973) more teenagers express positive self-evaluations in high school (see Harter 1983; O'Malley and Bachman 1983; Rosenberg 1979).[13] The findings reported here are consistent with these cross-sectional studies of adolescents' self-evaluations in junior- and senior high school. However, my study went beyond earlier cross-sectional and survey research by providing information

regarding the social structural and interpersonal *processes* whereby teenagers who expressed negative self-evaluations in middle school were able to fit into a specialized school activity or close friendship network in high school and gradually began to feel better about themselves through positive peer relationships and recognized success in the activities.

Specifically, the interview and observational data delineate processes of historical and structural change that earlier studies were not able to consider systematically. Historically all the teenagers who complained about their middle school experiences kept going back to the same theme: the existence of one powerful and exclusive trendy group.[14] Normals and members of the other high school crowds who were unpopular in middle school repeatedly returned to this theme, which connotes a certain structure in terms of the dominance of one group. This rigid stratification system was socially constructed and maintained through daily interpersonal interactions that were characterized by the trendies' ridicule and avoidance of the nerds.[15]

During this time, the trendies' negative evaluations of the nerds were highly salient, since many nerds wanted to be members of the popular trendy group. This desire to be popular, coupled with the experience (or the expectation) of being ostracized by the trendies for acting "out of the ordinary," appears to have combined to accentuate and sustain the nerds' shyness (e.g., having "trouble interacting with other people," being "self-conscious"). The nerds' predicament was worsened by having few,

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[13] Studies that report relatively high levels of self-esteem in high school are also consistent with several other investigations that indicated that some teenagers who are not in the traditional "leading crowd" of athletes and cheerleaders manage to develop positive self-perceptions (e.g., Brown and Lohr 1987; Coleman 1961). Also, Youniss and Smollar (1985) found that older teenagers devalued popularity in favor of close friendships.

[14] As was noted earlier, this theme, vividly expressed by high school students, is highly consistent with the patterns found by Eder (1985), Eder and Kinney (1988), and Parker (1991) using both questionnaire and observational methods at the middle school these high school students attended.

[15] It is important to note that many trendies who were interviewed in high school noted with regret that they had not "made the effort" or did not "have the time" to get to know people in different groups earlier in their middle school or high school careers.

if any, friends and consequently not being members of supportive peer groups in middle school in which they could develop interpersonal competence. In addition, the middle school was characterized by fewer specialized school activities that would facilitate meeting peers with similar interests. Overall, unpopular nerds' vivid emotional recollections of their middle school experiences indicate that the negative social identities that the trendies imputed to them at that time had a significant and distressing impact on their personal identities.

The transition to high school was characterized by an increasing number of students and groups who formed more diverse peer cultures that were organized into a less hierarchical social structure. The normals' emergence as a visible group of confident happy individuals provided a new model for the development of a positive identity within the changing social system. These teenagers made sense of things by saying: "I'm not a nerd anymore! Now I'm *normal!*" So historically these adolescents were developing more positive self-perceptions as the immediate social structure of the peer groups changed. It is a reciprocal process and illustrates a central tenet of structural symbolic interactionist theory:

> If the social person is shaped by interaction, it is social structure that shapes the possibilities for interaction and so, ultimately, the person. Conversely, if the social person creatively alters patterns of interaction, those altered patterns can ultimately change social structure. (Stryker 1980, p. 66)

Increasing peer acceptance and social confidence characterizes normals' patterns of interpersonal interactions that dovetail with the more diverse and less hierarchical social structure of the high school. The social side of high school allows these teenagers, most of whom are competent students, a chance to become competent social actors as they learn how to manage their impressions and overcome stigma (Goffman 1959, 1963) within the friendly confines of their peer group (Fine 1981). Overall, whether *going mainstream* or *going their*

own way, within the social reality they constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1967), the normals took over the position formerly attributed to the trendies.

A key interpersonal process that provides the foundation for the normals' new definitions of social and psychological reality is their frequent talk with friends. What continually struck me while listening to these teenagers talk with friends in natural settings and group interviews was the high level of intimacy and intensity with which they expressed themselves. Their conversations clicked along at a rapid pace as they openly shared stories and feelings about their past and ongoing experiences. They exuded emotion and reassured another through their verbal and nonverbal expressions. They finished each others' sentences, which appeared as if they are reading each others' minds (see Examples 2, 8, and 9). It seems that at least part of the excitement and pleasure these teenagers exhibited stemmed from the fact that finding friends and frequently talking are relatively new experiences for them.

Overall, these teenagers' supportive talk and deep understanding of one another may be due, at least in part, to their common experiences with rejection and ridicule in middle school. In these terms, their shared adversity provides them with a particularly well-grounded "reciprocity of perspectives" —a basic "interpretive procedure" of everyday life that helps them make sense and meaning of their lives (cf. Cicourel 1974). Collectively accomplishing social interaction through their talk and shared activities, they continually assign positive meaning to themselves.

The normals' vivid and emotional descriptions of their social experiences in school in their everyday conversations and small-group interviews revealed that they brought about the more positive and orderly nature of their high school world (Zimmerman and Wieder 1970) through the accounting practices (e.g., developing conversational skills with allies) that they lacked in middle school. In middle school the future normals were situationally and developmentally constrained because they lacked

close friends and self-confidence in contrast to the social and vocal trendies. They did not become competent performers of accounting practices until they had trusted and sympathetic friends in high school. In addition to the significance of their "accounting" conversations, my observations of them in natural settings indicated that just being in each other's physical presence was an important interpersonal process of identity formation. Their occasional glances and winks of the eye while walking closely together emboldened and reminded them that they were "somebodies." In sum, the shifting nature of interpersonal interactions and the concomitant changes in their immediate social structure and peer culture facilitated and reflected the nerds' recovery from their earlier distressing social experiences and attendant low self-evaluations.[16]

These social changes and individual developments can be interpreted in terms of an emerging body of research on childhood and adolescent socialization that has identified youths' attempts to gain control over their lives as a major aspect of peer culture (cf. Corsaro 1985; Corsaro and Eder 1990; Corsaro and Rizzo 1988). Nerds become normals as they receive and take advantage of opportunities through school activities and favorable peer relations to redefine their social and psychological realities. Their active construction and maintenance of themselves and groups can be viewed as setting the stage for their adult lives. Along these lines Corsaro and Rizzo (1988 p. 890) found that "the children's recognition and their attempts to adapt peer culture to societal demands can be seen as the creative appropriation of certain elements of the adult society." Through their everyday experiences, the nerds gradually realize (with the help of the trendies' expectations and evalua-

tions) that the adult world demands social skills, close friends, and self-confidence. This realization and their appropriation of key features of the adult world (e.g., self-presentation techniques) allow them to gain more control over others' evaluations of them and delimit which others matter to them and thus helps them adapt to their immediate social world.

This self-enhancement process is integrally related to participation in groups, since it was through their collective (school and friendship) activities that the nerds engineered their recovery of identity toward becoming normals. This interpretation can be summarized in terms of Cottrell's (1969, p. 550) discussion of the interpersonal character of the development of self in which he stressed that "much of our activity and striving, perhaps most of it, is directed toward establishing and maintaining social contexts supportive of desired identities or toward changing contexts that impose unwanted identities."[17]

More research is needed to follow high school students into their adult lives to delineate the impact that adolescent social experiences and identity formation have on human development over the life course (Elder 1974; Elder, Caspi, and Downey 1986). Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) in-depth study of a Black high school showed that high academic achievers use strategies (e.g., "clowning," becoming involved in athletics, helping "hoodlums" with their schoolwork in return for protection) to avoid appearing too concerned with upward mobility ("acting White"). According to Fordham and Ogbu (p. 202), "high-achieving students . . . would do much

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[16] Other unpopular teenagers from middle school who were primarily from working-class homes formed a crowd called the headbangers, in which they received recognition on the basis of their distinctive dress and rebellious behavior that focused on a lifestyle associated with heavy-metal music.

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[17] Developmental psychologists have argued that adolescents' growing cognitive capacities allow them to become aware of and control their increasingly abstract and differentiated thoughts and feelings about themselves (see the review by Harter 1990). The data presented here suggest that interpersonal processes occurring on the social side of secondary schools provide a sociological foundation for changes in identity that are typically assigned to developmental stages of adolescence.

better if they did not have to divert time and effort into strategies designed to camouflage their academic pursuit." Although the study reported here was not designed to examine such a process among White students, it should be noted that the vast majority of the normals at this school were high academic achievers and thus that their social efforts did not seem to affect their academic pursuits negatively.[18] Future research should follow cohorts of African American and White students through secondary schools with different racial compositions to compare systematically high achievers who use strategies to downplay their academic excellence with those who do not to further our understanding of the interplay between the social and academic sides of schooling.

In summary, this study illustrates the significance of examining the social experiences and school activities that shape and are shaped by the content of adolescents' self-perceptions over time. Eder and Parker's (1987, p. 210) study of a middle-school peer culture showed that it was through male athletic and female cheerleading "activities and not through academic coursework, that schools currently have the most impact on adolescents' values and behavior." The findings reported here also indicate that extracurricular activities and peer culture in high school strongly shape adolescents' values and behavior. Some nerds became normals when they learned to value themselves and behave confidently through meaningful and rewarding peer relationships that occurred on the social side of schooling.

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[18] An ongoing follow-up study of these teenagers indicates that they all are now attending universities. Perhaps experience with the "burden of 'acting White,'" identified by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), has a greater impact on African American teenagers' academic achievement than does the general anti-intellectualism in contemporary society that both African Americans and Whites experience.

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