

CHAPTER THREE

Fitting In, Standing Out, and Keeping Up

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.

—Pierre Bourdieu, 1984

FROM THE LUNCHROOM: There were about ninety black kids hanging out and rapping freestyle. A few of the boys were making beats on the table so the others could rap . . . [T]he kids were having a great time. One at a time the kids would step up and show off their talent by rapping to the beat. There was one ringleader who kept calling out to the crowd to “do their thing.” A few of the kids were really good and a few others were really funny. One smaller kid was imitating the rapper Too Short and was making the crowd laugh. Another was “representing” the West Coast rap scene by “calling out” some Death Row. Death Row is a major rap label . . . A girl was imitating the rapper Foxy Brown. She was pretty good . . . and was using a lot of profanity . . . but that goes hand in hand with rap music. After the bell rang they dispersed.¹

The boys were either wearing Airwalk or Nike sneakers, baggy blue jeans, and several had on Tommy Hilfiger and Billabong tee-shirts and fleece pullovers . . .²

The next three chapters will look at processes that are common in most status systems, but are most easily identified in relatively hierarchical status systems. The material is organized around the key notions of the theory of status relations: conformity, association, inalienability, and inexpandibility. This chapter focuses on conformity. Those who wish to have high status not only attempt to conform, but they often try to control the content of the norms. They do this by elaborating and complicating the norms in ways that give them an advantage in the competition to conform. Paradoxically, high levels of conformity often require that students be very sensitive to changes in the norms. They

must “keep up” with their competition and changing fashions in the broader society. Often conformity to the norms of one group requires that you reject, or at least distance yourself from, the norms of other groups. Before I attempt to explain the patterns of behavior, I need to describe the crowds commonly found in high schools and their relationships to one another.

SOME CROWDS AND THEIR RANKINGS

In the majority of the schools analyzed, students were stratified by status, and most had variations on a common structure. A female student from the Tacoma, Washington, area provides a typical description:

The ideal of a social status was clear to all incoming sophomores . . . [T]here were six primary groups on campus which followed a specific hierarchy: the “Preps” (image-conscious types), the “Jocks” (highly athletic-oriented; usually involved in at least two sports), the “Rockers” (alternative grunge, skateboard types; Pacific Northwest version of the California “surfer” stereotype), the “Nerds” (academic-oriented; studious), the Punks/Weirdos (seen by the other groups as nonconformists; apathetic to [the school’s] social hierarchy), and the “G’s” (gangsters, “wannabe”³ gangsters) . . . [E]veryone agreed that two groups in particular distinguished themselves from the rest—the “Preps” and the “Jocks” . . . [Our] high school had a deeply-embedded tradition of school spirit and sports—especially football. The closer associated one was with this tradition, the more popular one became. Therefore, members of the sports teams, the cheerleading squad, and the dance team were considered the “royalty”. . .⁴

In other schools there were fewer distinctions—for example, everyone who was not a prep, a jock, or a nerd might be labeled “alternative.”

As the above quote indicates the “popular crowd”—those who were “cool”—were usually composed of a combination of male preps and athletes and the most attractive females in the school. Usually most of the female cheerleaders were core members of “the royalty.” One young man from a small Texas town provides a stereotypical description:

All cheerleaders have a nice golden, crispy tan and it is so obvious during the winter that they have unlimited tanning at the local tanning salon. If a guy got up the nerve to ask a cheerleader out then that was the talk of the week for their clique . . . The cheerleaders are very snobbish and feel too good to talk to anyone but themselves and people on a high economic level. Since the cheerleaders did a lot of jazz/dance, they listened to pretty much anything that had a fast beat so they could shake any body part they got a chance to.⁵

In some schools female members of the drill team were less exalted members of the popular crowd.⁶ Star athletes were well known not only in the school but were community celebrities.

The dominance of a popular crowd is not a West Coast or Southern or a small town phenomenon. A boy from a high status and very historic Boston suburb reports:

The social scene . . . was split broadly into two extreme groups commonly called the "jocks" and the "freaks" . . . The jocks were not necessarily all athletes . . . rather they were the "cooler" and more popular students . . . Although the different cliques . . . were not openly ranked, most people would agree that the jocks were the more prestigious, popular, and "cooler" students by the traditional high school standards . . . A "cooler" or more popular student rarely formed a friendship . . . with a less popular student . . . The strict barriers around different cliques made it very hard for students to get to know students well from other social groups.⁷

If there is a "top," there is also a "bottom." Toward the bottom were the "geeks" or "nerds." Sometimes a distinction was made between "nerds" who were openly preoccupied with academic success and an even lower strata referred to variously as "dorks," "trash," or "geeks." These students were considered hopelessly inept when it came to social events, dress and style. Often they also had low grades and were poor athletes. In academically oriented schools a distinction was made between "brains," who were moderately high in status, and "nerds," who were simply socially inept or too publicly studious.

In all but the smallest schools, there was usually an "alternative" group. The name or names used for this group included "freaks," "weirdos," "drug-gies," "hippies," "deadheads," "punks," "goths," and "the chain gang." (The last term refers to the practice of attaching their billfolds to their belts with a silver chain or wearing such chains in connection with items of clothing.) It should be noted that some of these terms are what groups call themselves; other labels are created by outsiders. In various ways these groups rejected many conventional middle-class values. They tended to be especially critical of what they saw as the hypocrisy of the preps, who were often sexually active and used alcohol and drugs, but were careful to keep this behavior hidden from adults. The more alienated of these alternative groups often flaunted their deviance.⁸ Contrary to popular stereotypes, such groups were not limited to California or the East Coast. A male from Alaska reports: "[The radical group] would wear black combat boots, bell bottomed pants, and ragged tee-shirts with sarcastic messages such as 'I love Cops.' These students were more likely to have pierced ears, eyebrows, noses, and belly buttons. One of the main ideals which the radical group wanted to be associated with was individuality."⁹ Even

elite Catholic girls' schools have such groups: "The 'freaky' girls danced to a beat different than the rest of the cliques at St. Mary's.¹⁰ They wore pale makeup with dark lipstick. They seemed to all have dyed hair colors and wore knee-high socks. Most of them wore Dr. Seuss or windsock hats to school. They were quiet and usually kept to themselves."¹¹

Often there were important internal distinctions within the alternative category. Skaters sometimes formed a distinct subgroup. This group in turn could be divided between those who specialized in "boards" (skateboards) and those who used "blades" (straight-bladed roller skates attached to boots). In many schools, skaters were associated with drug use. In at least one school, cigarette smokers were seen as a nonconforming semi-hippy group.¹² Hippies were often considered as quite distinct from groups that had more aggressive styles such as punks, goths, and metalheads.¹³ Often these subdivisions were based on a preferred style of music: hard rock, punk, ska, blues, etc. Alternative groups may or may not have actually used drugs, but they were characterized by what others considered bizarre dress, hairstyle, and body ornamentation such as nose rings. These symbolized their rejection of both adult authority and the cultural dominance and superior status of the popular crowd. The status of alternatives—or at least the less extreme versions of it—was frequently characterized as neutral—that is neither high nor low, but for the most part outside of the system. In some respects, they seem to be analogous to monks or ascetics in pre-modern societies. (In more hierarchical schools, these groups represent latent or embryonic pluralism.) In situations where such styles were associated with poor academic performance or openly defiant and aggressive behavior, these groups were seen as low-status "losers."¹⁴ One of the most cohesive of these alternative groups is the "straight-edgers." Their distinctive characteristic is that they eschew drugs, alcohol, or promiscuous sex. Many of them are vegetarian or even vegans, who also avoid the use of all animal products such as wool clothes or leather shoes.¹⁵

In many non-metropolitan schools there is a contingent identified as "country," "cowboys," "rednecks," or "kickers" (which is short for "shit kickers"). They are usually from families of working class or rural backgrounds. Country music and various forms of "Western" dress, such as cowboy boots, are preferred. Large pickup trucks are their key status symbol. Where these groups are present they tend to be looked down upon by others—though they do not necessarily accept their lower status. Many of these students are alienated from academic endeavors.

A number of schools identified groups known as "hoodlums,"¹⁶ "dirt-bags,"¹⁷ "hoods," "gangstas," "thugs," etc. They were identified with gangs who were willing to threaten and use force. In the schools for which we have data they have low status, though they may be feared.¹⁸ In many schools, especially those with significant numbers of racial or ethnic minorities, there were

often “pretend hoodlums.” These were students who might dress and walk like those associated with gangs, but who were in fact reasonably well-behaved students concerned about their academic performance.

Most students modeled themselves to a significant degree after the popular crowd, but were not members of the core clique or cliques; they were respectable members of the community who have not been banished to “nerd-dom,” but they were neither social stars nor members of the other groups mentioned. Frequently they were referred to as “normals,” “regulars,” or “average students.” Most schools also had “drifters” or “floaters.” These students manage to participate in more than one group. There is some evidence that as students mature more of them focus on particular friendships and liaisons rather than clique membership.¹⁹ Floaters are probably an example of this tendency. Usually floaters were not the highest-status individuals in a group, but they were accepted members. Ordinarily they had a primary group, but significant associations with other groups as well.²⁰ A suburban Dallas student remarks:

At my high school, people normally had to choose a group that would be the most important to them . . . Even if a person was a member of multiple groups, they almost always had one that they were the most loyal to. Race was often the most important [characteristic]. After all there was no way to get around what race you were but you could always drop out of other clubs and groups.²¹

Someone from a small Gulf coast city agrees, “any member of any group could be a member of a certain club, academic achievement group, or team, but they usually classified themselves as members of the group that contained most of their colleagues or friends.”²²

As is the case in most stratification systems, the top and the bottom groups are usually more clearly defined than those who rank in the middle.²³ Those at the top must avoid classmates of only modest status if they are to maintain their superiority; students of modest rank must shun those of even lower status to avoid becoming outcasts themselves. As we shall see, where there are significant numbers of African Americans or other distinctive ethnic groups, the structure becomes even more complicated. This will be discussed below. In sum, most high school students are organized into sets of crowds and cliques with distinguishable identities and most students are associated with one of these particular identities.²⁴ The details of these groups and their styles can vary from school to school and year to year, but the basic structure is common to most hierarchical high schools.

Of course, these identities and groups do not have the same relevance in every situation. Just as the occupation of an adult does not shape all interac-

tion with other people, neither does the participation of an adolescent in an identifiable crowd shape everything else teenagers do. Moreover, the boundaries of both occupation and crowd are often fuzzy. Some people have more than one occupation and some teenagers associate with more than one crowd. Nonetheless, occupation powerfully shapes the experience of most adults, and crowd membership is central to the experience of most teenagers. In the next chapter I will say more about when and why the boundaries of these crowds are more rigid and salient in some contexts than others.

ASPECTS OF CONFORMITY AND ELABORATION

First, we will examine some of the obvious norms of teenagers and how they are important in shaping the student status structures in schools. These include norms about beauty, athletic ability, clothes and style, athletic uniforms and letter jackets, speech, body language, collective memories, humor, ritual, popular music, dancing and singing, and space and territory. It is not news to point out that these concerns are often important to adolescents. The important thing to see is how they are all variations on the same themes: seeking status through conformity in order to fit in, that is, to gain a sense of acceptance and belonging. The paradox is that in order to be successful in the “conformity game” students must constantly change, elaborate, and complicate the norms in order to gain a competitive advantage. This is not the case for most traditional status systems and, as we will see, even a few aspects of high school life.

BEAUTY AND ATHLETIC ABILITY

Let’s begin with the obvious. In many schools the most important factors influencing a teenager’s status are largely inherited: athletic ability for men and good looks for women.²⁵ A male from a suburb east of Oakland, California, says, “Social rank was determined largely by physical attractiveness, and to a lesser extent by cheerfulness, [and] a willingness to ‘party’ (with alcohol and marijuana) . . .”²⁶ A woman who attended a Catholic school said, “Females received high status if they were pretty. In fact, all the ‘cool’ girls had to be at least reasonably attractive.”²⁷ A young man from the Washington, DC, area observed, “The best looking girls were always invited [to parties] first.”²⁸ He elaborates: “For females, appearance was the single most important factor . . . Girls who were considered attractive dated the popular males and were invited to the cool parties, and therefore gained high status.”²⁹ Of course, beauty is not simply determined by biology. Norms concerning makeup, hairstyles, body weight, and clothes affect the definition of what is attractive. Often significant amounts of time are spent applying makeup and styling hair.

Men's status was also affected by their looks. The women we observed at our fieldwork site frequently discussed or pointed out which boys were "cute" and told various stories about them. A female field observer³⁰ who was sitting at lunch with a group of girls who were members of the orchestra reports the following:

The girls once again began gossiping about Morris, supposedly one of the cutest guys in the school. Laura had spotted him in the parking lot the afternoon before changing [his clothes] in his car. She had gotten a quick glimpse of his boxers and began to describe them to the whole group, "They were so cute with green and white stripes . . ." Then all of a sudden Morris walked by and the group got silent. After he was far out of sight, everyone breathed . . .³¹

Athletic ability is usually a highly respected quality for men.³² This is especially true of small towns, but is often also the case in urban and suburban schools. Teachers and administrators frequently accentuate the status of sports. A student from Fairfax County, Virginia, which contains a high percentage of professional families who work in the District of Columbia and is noted for its strong academic programs, reports that teachers and administrators heighten the status of those who participate in sports. This emphasis was related to the politics of the community:

Teachers also inflated the status of athletes by asking about particular plays from games over the weekend . . . [W]hen our football team made it to the quarterfinals of the state competition . . . the hype surrounding this success was nearly unbearable. For an entire week straight, on the morning announcements we had to listen to the [song] . . . "We Are the Champions"—and again in the afternoons. In the case of our men's basketball team we heard the same song twice a day everyday beginning with district play all the way through until we lost in the quarterfinals . . . This type of recognition . . . and encouragement was never given [to] our state champion forensic team nor [to] our nationally ranked [drill] team . . . I recall a student [who was] actively involved in these clubs pointing this issue out . . . [T]he principal of our school said that it was not intentional [and] that they did not have a theme song or battle cry for science oriented teams. But as [the principal] put it, "It goes much further than just the individual team. We have got to get the whole community excited about these next couple of games."³³

There is some evidence that being a good student has gained in importance, even though in many schools the importance of athletic accomplishment has not diminished much. The new ideal for men in some schools is to be both a strong student and an outstanding athlete. Obviously, not very many students

are actually excellent at both, though there is evidence that on average athletes make better grades than non-athletes.³⁴ This is, of course, another example of the elaboration of the norms that must be conformed to in order to achieve high status.

There is often less encouragement for women to become athletes and the consequences of doing so are less predictable. In some schools women athletes had considerable status, while in others they were referred to as “brutes.”³⁵ An African-American female attending a predominantly white school says, “[I]f a girl was too good at a particular sport she was often labeled butch or lesbian.”³⁶

CLOTHES AND STYLE

Close behind these relatively inherited characteristics were clothes and sensitivity to style. A fieldworker notes that the girls at her table, “[C]ommented on what everyone was wearing, especially the guys. ‘Can you believe he is wearing that awful shirt at school,’ as they pointed out a guy in a lime green shirt.”³⁷ As one student from Pennsylvania said, “The easiest way to identify different groups in high school was simply to look at them.”³⁸ A northern Virginia woman reported, “Without the cool clothing, a girl had no way of becoming popular, and her movement into the dating sphere would also be extremely limited . . . [M]y friends and I were always very conscious of where we were shopping, making sure that everything had its correct label with respect to what others were wearing.”³⁹ A female athlete who was a student in a Virginia high school commented, “If a kid doesn’t play a sport then the next thing that kids look at is their clothes. If they wear cool clothes then usually they’re all right.”⁴⁰

What it took to be fashionable was highly dynamic and competitive. A girl who went to a Catholic school in the Mid-Atlantic notes, “The problem with conformity in my high school was that the norms were always changing.”⁴¹ A California woman laments, “I remember going out countless times to a dance club thinking that I looked great in my new outfit . . . until I saw someone else that had on an even trendier outfit than I did [and] suddenly my status . . . seemed to fall . . .”⁴²

Once a person’s status was established, the norms about clothing (and most other things) became more flexible and relaxed. A student who attended a Catholic girls’ school in a large Texas city reports, “You had to look a certain way to become popular (nicely and neatly groomed and preppyish), but once you became popular, you could dress sloppy and no one cared.”⁴³ The effect of high status and self-confidence in relaxing the pressures to conform is not limited to differences between individuals. Class and ethnicity can also affect this. Groups who are most confident about their status can be more relaxed about conformity while those whose status is less secure are often preoccupied with fashions. Minority groups are frequently quite concerned with fashion. This is

reported for a variety of such groups. Well-to-do predominantly Jewish suburban communities in Philadelphia,⁴⁴ New Jersey,⁴⁵ and New York⁴⁶ often had groups of “JAPS” (Jewish American Princesses and Princes) who were very fashion-conscious.⁴⁷ Similarly, the Asian cliques in a Houston, Texas, school were careful to have designer labels.⁴⁸ Black students seem to be especially fashion conscious. In part, this has been a matter of establishing a special identity for themselves through the adoption of hip-hop clothes. But their concern seems to involve more than establishing a distinctive identity. A Hispanic male in a Philadelphia suburb—who hung out almost exclusively with African-American students—comments:

Dress was very important for the black crowd. We were almost always trying to stay on top of the latest hip-hop fashions. Baggy, somewhat flashy clothes were the norm . . . but the influence of the white students was clearly also present. We would wear “preppie” or nice, dressy clothes often, just as the white students, regardless of the group that they fell in. Shopping at the Gap, Structure, Eddie Bauer was practiced by almost everyone. I can say, however, that we dressed better than the popular, smart, or the two other groups. We would wear the dressy clothes, but always remain faithful to the hip-hop style, which back then was not as glamorous as it is today. None of the other groups would ever dare cross over to wear our clothing style. My friends and I always wondered about why we [sometimes] conformed to [the preppy] dress style, but it was never the other way around.⁴⁹

A black female who went to school in an upper-middle-class suburb of Washington, DC, with twenty-five percent minority students observes: “There did not appear to be a major emphasis on clothes in terms of brand names within the majority group of cool kids . . . [F]or African-American boys in particular things like Nike, Timberland, or Fila shoes were factors in social acceptance within the smaller peer group.”⁵⁰ In the pluralistic school where we carried out extensive observations, African-American students tended to be more concerned with dress. An African-American observer reports that the group of black women she observed didn’t wear brand names, but were well dressed. They said that if someone who was dressed “bumified”—like the hip-pies—tried to hang out with them, they wouldn’t talk to them.⁵¹

UNIFORMS, JACKETS, AND EMBLEMS

Armies have for centuries worn distinctive emblems or uniforms to identify friend and foe. The uniforms worn by sports teams are a similar example. But in addition to being worn during a game, uniforms and quasi-uniforms are also used to signify distinctive identities in other situations. A most obvious exam-

ple is the custom of sport teams wearing their game jersey to school the day of a game. The explicit intent is both to honor them by setting them apart and to create solidarity within the team. Some teams wear matching outfits during classes, especially women's teams or those who play less established sports.

After battles, armies give citations and decorations. This is true in high schools as well. The "letter jacket" is an especially significant status symbol. These jackets, emblazoned with the school's initials, indicate special accomplishments. As a woman from Corpus Christi, Texas, reports, "Most members of a school-related subgroup showed their status by wearing the school letterman jacket . . . The jacket was the symbol of a winner."⁵² A student from a rural area in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia reports: "A letterman's jacket . . . gave the individual a chance to show that they were an athlete anytime, not just on the day of the games, [and] also gave the wearer the prestige of being a veteran . . . There was even a school club for jacket wearers called the Monogram Club . . ."⁵³ This last sentence refers to an especially interesting phenomenon: The jacket club was not a preexisting group of outstanding students nor was the group based on a common activity. Rather the very basis and *raison d'être* of the group was a common status symbol.

Jackets are an especially useful form of status symbol because they are highly visible and supposedly have a practical purpose, which makes wearing them legitimate. In contrast, students who wore a medal to school all of the time would be considered pretentious. Jackets not only make their owners visible to others, but they make the wearers visible to one another, and hence contribute to elite solidarity. In this context jackets are a rudimentary form of "ethnicity"—a solidarity based on a visible status marker.⁵⁴ Here clothes literally make the group.

Historically, jackets were awarded at first only to accomplished athletes in high profile sports like football and basketball. Most schools now give these for accomplishments in a wide variety of activities, including band, choir, debate, student council, and academic performance. Students reported that, while it was acceptable for non-athletes to wear jackets, they were often teased if they wore championship patches. Only participation on important athletic teams warranted displaying patches. This indicates the strong tendency of high status groups to differentiate themselves from upstarts. In theoretical terms they are trying to prevent status inflation that would result in a decrease in their own status.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

Non-material aspects of style were also important. Each clique tended to develop its own vocabulary. A Washington, DC, suburbanite recounts, "I can remember when some of the popular males, including myself, decided to create a word with no meaning and start using it to see if people tried to copy us. Within a few weeks, we could hear people using this word, although they had

no idea of what it meant or what context to use it in.”⁵⁵ A student from a small town in Appalachia recalls:

[S]tudents . . . would come up with a saying or an original way for a word to be used. Only those in that particular crowd knew the meaning and the correct way to use a word or phrase. For example, to say “relish,” meant that something was really cool or awesome. Nonsense and made-up words were . . . important. Examples included “carbeeb” which translates to “that is stupid,” and “smedus beadus,” which refers to a nerd.⁵⁶

Note that “cool,” “awesome,” and “nerd”—originally innovative word usages—have become so conventional that they now require updated synonyms, even in small-town Appalachia.

As the theory would predict, higher status groups sometimes attempted to make copying more difficult: “When the preps talked they . . . used the highest vocabulary they knew, like ‘euphemism’ or ‘supercilious.’”⁵⁷ But slang and new words can be learned relatively easily so more subtle markers are introduced. A boy from the Dallas area reports, “Many of these slang words made it into everyone’s everyday language at my school. It was how the words were said that made the difference.”⁵⁸

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AND HUMOR

Groups often elaborate their cultural distinctiveness by referring to events and experiences that only members of the group have shared. These can be evoked by cryptic references, sometimes a single word. Typically, these events are humorous and are underlined by the ritual incantation, “It was *so* funny!” Another common marker of group distinctiveness is the inside joke. A young woman in a Catholic girls’ school reports, “[A]ll groups had inside jokes. These were jokes that only they understood and could use and see the humor . . . The thing about inside jokes is that they are not funny when you are on the outside and this excluding of others is exactly their point.”⁵⁹ As we shall see later, inside jokes seem to be especially characteristic of groups that others see as deviant or weird. Of course the memories and jokes are not norms, *per se*. Rather, the norm is that a full member of a group must be familiar with the group’s collective memories—whether or not they were actually present at the events. They must also “get it” when inside jokes are told.⁶⁰

RITUAL

Even more elemental than languages and inside knowledge are various forms of ritual. Animals often engage in elaborate forms of ritualized behavior

including mating displays, dominance-subservience signals, and grooming rituals of solidarity. These are easily observable when you walk your dog, your cat has kittens, or you observe behavior at your bird feeder. But unlike these examples, most human rituals are much less rooted in genetic programming and are primarily learned behavior. Nonetheless, many rituals are pre-linguistic forms of communication and are often extremely important mechanisms for expressing solidarity. Obvious examples are a smile or a handshake.

Some of the most obvious rituals associated with high school life are the routines led by cheerleaders and drill teams. This usually involved a mixture of verbal phrases and routinized physical movement. As Emile Durkheim pointed out early in the twentieth century, participating in common rituals is a primary means for creating social solidarity.⁶¹ High school cheers, which engage large crowds in simultaneously producing the same movements and sounds, are an obvious example. Rituals were, according to Durkheim, likely to be especially effective when they were oriented toward some transcendent being or object. The differences between members of the community seemed inconsequential compared to the “otherness” of the god or totem. Durkheim focused on the otherness of the sacred and the solidarity and effervescent spirit that emerged from its ritualized worship.

Such solidarity and spirit can, however, also be produced by the otherness of a common enemy. This is, of course, precisely what military parades and high school cheers at sports events are intended to produce: solidarity in the face of a common enemy. The enemy is in some respects the analog of the devil or even more accurately foreign gods. But the solidarity produced at the high school ball game is not solely rooted in antipathy directed toward a common enemy. A positive dimension is also present: the honor and prestige of the school community. This is a form of sacredness and, sociologically speaking, an analog of the “true god.” Just as in many societies, these sacred notions are given a more concrete form by adopting a totem. Typically these totems are powerful animals that it is wise to treat with respect and even fear: lions, tigers, bears, wolves, cougars, eagles, etc. (Schools rarely adopt totems that are associated with weakness, dirtiness, or other low-status attributes, for example, flies, buzzards, rats, pigs, or lambs.) The solidarity and spirit needed to gain victory is created by ritualized behavior directed toward honoring the local gods and rejecting the foreign gods. Just as churches honor gods by singing hymns of praise, schools have songs and anthems. Taking part in such rituals usually has an impact on the way participants feel, resulting in a heightened state of emotion. Durkheim referred to this as effervescence. “School spirit” is, of course, a particular example of such ritually-induced effervescence.

Ritual leaders of the community, whether they are priests or cheerleaders, usually have relatively high status. In part this is because of their close association with what is especially sacred for a particular community. In the case of

high schools this is honorable combat with enemies, hopefully victory over them, and the honor this victory brings to the whole school. Cheerleaders have no direct role in the games played, but they are the key people who organize “moral” support for the teams. This moral support is expressed through public rituals. In addition to their close association with what is sacred, cheerleaders are ritual specialists who have mastered the ceremonial techniques of the community and can lead others in carrying these out.

Ritual is not only important in producing school-wide solidarity, but also in creating the solidarity, and hence the boundaries, of the various crowds and cliques that make up the student body. Special handshakes or greetings such as a “high five” or “low five” are common. Hugs are frequently exchanged by girls and occasionally by boys to express friendship or solidarity. This rarely occurs between members of different groups, unless they have been close friends in the past. Explicit in most of these interpersonal rituals is the positive affirmation of a common social identity, and the implicit distancing—at least for the moment—from other identities. When football players greet one another by keeping their elbows bent and gripping one another’s hand and then each making a fist—instead of shaking hands in a more conventional manner—they set themselves apart from other students and affirm their identities as members of a team. When these same individuals apply for summer jobs, however, they usually shake hands with the interviewer in the more conventional manner. They want to affirm their identity as responsible young adults who are capable of assuming a different identity than the one they adopt on the football field. The particular ritualized greeting selected depends on whether they are greeting close friends, casual acquaintances, parents, or the school principal. In each case, rituals are used to affirm particular identities and, implicitly, to downplay alternative identities.

BODY LANGUAGE AND DEMEANOR

Closely related to ritual is body language: the way people communicate by the way they carry and use their bodies. This is an even more implicit form of symbolization and communication. The marionette motions of the military drill team communicate obedience, preparation, and skill. The formal dress and demeanor in the corporate office communicates a tend-to-business seriousness that is inappropriate in the family room or neighborhood bar.

On average, American teenagers use a less formal demeanor than adults. Frequently they are “laid back,” “cool,” or “chilled out.” Demeanor is also used to communicate status and mark different subgroups. Students’ off-handed comments make this clear: “Preps walk with pride . . .”⁶² “When these [popular] people walked, they had a certain air about them.”⁶³ “The guys all walked really stiff (trying to look as muscular as possible), flexing almost as

they walked, taking up a lot of space, and showing little emotion.”⁶⁴ “The jocks were very noticeable . . . They would walk around with erect posture and their chest pointed toward heaven.”⁶⁵ “Many of the [“kickers,” i.e., “cowboys” or “rednecks”] walked bow-legged . . .”⁶⁶ “Some black students walked . . . as if they had an ankle injury and limped on every other step.”⁶⁷ Each of these remarks may have been derogatory in intent, but they report widely-observed patterns of behavior. These patterns are not primarily unconscious habits. Rather they are rooted in social norms about how the members of a certain crowd are supposed to portray themselves in public.

POPULAR MUSIC

In addition to language, ritual, and demeanor, music is often a central medium of expression and communication and this is especially the case for teenage Americans. Music communicates primarily by sound rather than bodily motions. It is often used to create social solidarity, for example, religious hymns, national anthems, and labor union songs. Predictably, teenagers want their own music. Each generation or cohort seems to embrace new forms of music as a way of distinguishing its identity from older generations. The emergence of rock ’n roll at the end of the 1950s is the most dramatic example, but, both before and after this, each generation has been associated with a relatively distinctive genre or set of genres.⁶⁸ Music sets off teenagers from adults, but also distinguishes various adolescent subcultures. Country and western, ska, west coast rap, east coast rap, classic rock, acid rock, hard rock, and techno rock, not to mention older forms like jazz, rhythm and blues, and swing, are only a few of the distinctions that were significant in the last decades of the twentieth century. Most large high schools have some devotees to each of these genres and often this shared appreciation will serve as the basis for friendships and cliques.⁶⁹

DANCING AND SINGING

Dancing and singing use multiple media. Dancing involves music and ritual movements. Singing involves music and language—usually in the form of rhyming poetry. Dancing is frequently used to suggest sexuality—a special preoccupation of adolescents. Predictably, each generation and subculture of teenagers adopts at least some relatively distinctive dances. Frequently, older generations find these crude or overly suggestive. Each generation also seems to adopt particular songs.

Dancing seems to be especially important in creating solidarity across relatively large groups. Many can participate simultaneously in the presence of others. This is, of course, also true of hymns or anthems sung in unison, such

as the school song. For teenagers, however, songs seem to be especially important in creating links between small groups of friends and romantically involved couples. Friends often have a favorite song. Many couples have “our song.” In addition to being a means of creating internal solidarity, dances and songs are another way of elaborating and complicating the norms in order to create boundaries between insiders and outsiders.⁷⁰

PHONES, BACKPACKS, AND CARS

While clothes are an important status symbol, so are other physical objects. One male from a small West Virginia city noted, “Now maybe 50 percent of the higher status crowd have pagers.”⁷¹ In many schools, pagers were associated with gangs and drug dealers. By the end of the 1990s, mobile phones had become an important status symbol. In some schools in upscale neighborhoods they were so common that they lost their value as a positive status symbol, but not having one could cause you to be looked down upon. Backpacks could be important, but it was not just a matter of having the right kind, but how you wore it: “When the popular kids started to wear their backpacks with both straps as opposed to wearing their backpacks with one strap, [other students] eventually followed by wearing their backpacks with both straps even though wearing your backpacks with both straps had traditionally conveyed strong images of the ‘nerd.’”⁷² In yet another school, how men wore their hair was an important marker. “Most preps had neatly trimmed hair; most redneck males made a half-hearted attempt to grow facial hair.”⁷³ Some of the most potent status symbols are associated with cars. The first crucial distinction is whether a student has a driver’s license. The second is whether they have a car they can regularly drive to school. The third is whether it is a cool car. In the 1990s, the highest status cars were new four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicles commonly referred to as SUVs. Among “rednecks” and “cowboys,” large pickup trucks were cool. Most of these vehicles cost in the range of \$20,000 to \$40,000. Forty thousand dollars is 115 percent of the total annual median household income for this period.⁷⁴

SPACE AND TERRITORY

Because students tend to associate with members of their own group, space tends to become segregated. This is obvious in the halls, before and after school, and even between classes. A girl from a prestigious high school in suburban Boston reports, “The major way that virtually everyone—students, teachers and administrators—identified cliques . . . was tied to where people gathered on the school’s main hallway in their free time . . . Each locker area was associated with a particular social group, each with its own identity.”⁷⁵ This

is especially the case at lunch. A female who attended a large private school reports: "At lunch, 'cool' kids sat at the front of the cafeteria. This allowed for . . . all the 'cool' people to sit in one place. Not to mention, it gave [them] . . . a chance to be seen." Space was also segregated at out-of-school hangouts; unwanted students were often teased and even harassed if they showed up at the wrong place. Even small spaces become important symbols, for example, seating in classrooms, cafeterias, and school buses. Who was seen with whom in cars was a crucial status symbol. In one community, not having someone to drive you home was humiliating: "The bus was the ultimate ride of shame . . ." ⁷⁶ In other communities, however, most people rode the bus, but seating quickly became stratified. High-status students sat at the back because it was harder for the driver and others to see them, and because they paraded by everyone else as they made their entries and exits. But even where it was not possible to actually segregate space, who one was seen with in certain public places was important. A male student remarks, "Who a person came with to the mall was very important." ⁷⁷ This was even more the case for school events like football games or concerts. Some privileges in the use of space are officially sanctioned. Seniors usually have the most desirable lockers and often have their own lounge.

For some groups, "their space" seems almost crucial to their identity. One group of freshmen ⁷⁸ we observed at WWHS hung out in the courtyard even in the coldest weather. Often they complained about the cold, but they rarely moved into the cafeteria only a few feet away. A field observer records the following incident. "It was quite cold outside today, and since he [James] is only wearing a short-sleeved shirt, he is especially freezing. He yells out loud, 'I can't take it anymore. It's just too cold.' Wilson answers back in jest, 'Oh shut up, you baby.' They remained in the courtyard." ⁷⁹ Later in the lunch period:

[Bill's girl] friend pretends to cry and whimpers aloud to him, "It's so cold. I don't want to stay out here anymore." Everyone stands up and moves closer together because Wilson said, "Let's move together for body warmth." Soon, Wilson says, "It's too cold out here. I think we should all go inside until the bell rings." No one has any objections to this idea since the wind is making everybody especially cold. Each of the students picks up their backpacks and begin to head inside . . . I went in with the group but as soon as we got inside the cafeteria, everyone went their separate ways. ⁸⁰

It is noteworthy that when they leave "their space," they disperse—almost like a congregation leaving church.

Just as individuals and groups have a status, spaces are assigned different identities and different statuses. One's status and group membership is signified not only by a particular style of dress, but by the physical spaces one uses.

Failure to conform to these practices violates norms that can result in sanctions from one's own group and from other groups as well.

This is not unique to teenagers. Physical distance is frequently used as a metaphor for social distance. The rich tend to live on top of the hill or in penthouses; the offices of top executives are never in the basement; the powerful have larger offices, desks, and cars. Similarly, social boundaries are represented by physical boundaries. The "well to do" live in "exclusive" neighborhoods and in "gated communities"; the lowly live in "the ghetto" or on "the wrong side of the tracks." Some of these patterns have practical roots: The view is better from the penthouse than the basement; gated communities probably are safer. But these patterns are also a way to symbolize status differences. Predictably, high school students also relate physical space to status. Later we will take up subtler and less-well-known examples of how space is related to social structure.

THE FLEXIBILITY OF NORMS AND STATUS SYMBOLS

Obviously, conforming to some norms is easier than conforming to others. Wearing a fashionable tee-shirt is not hard; making an A in calculus is more difficult. The ease of conformity affects whether a cultural item will be used to symbolize differentiation or solidarity. Language and popular music illustrate this.

LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

Though language and music can be used to create social boundaries, they can also be used to create links across these boundaries. Interestingly, for adolescents this seems to be truer for language and music than it is for clothes or other physical objects. As noted above, a student from the Philadelphia area reports that in his school, whites would never dare copy black hip-hop dress, though blacks would on occasion dress preppy. But he goes on to say:

Music was a little more flexible because there was acceptance on both sides for different types of music listened to by the white and black crowds. White students listened to some rap and hip-hop, and black students (which included myself) listened to some of the top 40 and alternative music the white students listened to. The status walls were nonexistent when it came to music and language. We all listened to pretty much the same music, and talked the same.⁸¹

The tendency of music to be shared across groups was not restricted to this eastern urban setting. A boy from a small Texas town reports, "Music was a universal characteristic that was not a major difference in any certain group,

other than the ‘cowboys.’”⁸² A girl from the same school says, “Ironically, [music] was a common bond . . . Music that transcended the social boundaries included alternative rock, rock ’n roll old school style, and rap music . . .”⁸³

These differences are special instances of variations in the inalienability of status markers, and how this affects their use in creating social differences and social solidarities. If you come to school wearing preppy clothes, it is not practical to slip into other clothes when you encounter acquaintances dressed in hip-hop or punk fashion. But with a little effort, you may be able to express solidarity by speaking their lingo. Similarly, you can go to a party and, without too much difficulty, feign appreciation for the kind of music that is being played—even if it is not your favorite. This is in contrast to objects such as clothes, cars, and where you live. These may create divides that are much more difficult to bridge because these goods are simply not available to some.

This is not to say that symbolic, in contrast to material, markers are always more alienable and hence more flexible. Picking up a few words and phrases of an argot is one thing; speaking a second language like a native is quite another. The latter is nearly impossible after early adolescence. Consequently, where status groups are especially determined to maintain their boundaries these more complex symbolic systems often serve as barriers that are the last line of defense. In Britain, an Oxbridge accent is still a distinctive class marker. In numerous historical contexts, groups that speak essentially the same language go to considerable lengths to maintain differences in vocabulary, accent, and even the alphabet they use. The relevant point for understanding contemporary high schools is that where people seek to develop links across social boundaries—as different groups of adolescents frequently do—language and music may be a more available medium than consumer goods.

ATHLETIC SHOES AND LETTER JACKETS

When status symbols are used primarily to differentiate individuals and groups the ease with which they can be acquired or copied is an important consideration. For most consumer commodities the only limitation on acquiring them is having the money to pay for them. This is, of course, one reason that the status values of these commodities change relatively rapidly. At the end of the twentieth century athletic shoes were a good example. The major manufacturers brought out new models of shoes about every six months. Since there were several major manufacturers, what was considered cool among young urban males changed even more often. In order to gain status by this, it meant you had to regularly discard one style and acquire another. These concerns have also spread to both male and female suburban students.

Letter jackets, which are a prized status symbol among many of the very same adolescents, illustrate the opposite tendency. Letter jackets are not sub-

ject to rapid changes in fashion—and the theory of status relations explains why this is so. The distribution of these status symbols is controlled and allocated by an authority structure. An attempt to buy look-alike jackets by someone who had not earned a letter would be derided and looked down upon. Conversely, those who have earned a letter jacket would be considered crass or even despicable if they agreed to sell their jackets to the highest bidder. Hence, the pressure to stay ahead by having the most up-to-date version is largely removed. Rather, there is even some value in keeping them largely the same since this places people in an honored tradition. Of course, styles eventually change overtime, but like the military services—where drastic changes in uniforms are nearly always controversial—uniforms and letter jackets change relatively slowly.

Since some status symbols are commodities that can be purchased, a brief note is needed to clarify the link between money and status symbols—and some of the consequences of this link.

MONEY AND STATUS SYMBOLS

To acquire significant status usually requires more than money; you must acquire the appropriate status symbols. Athletic uniforms of officially sponsored school teams cannot simply be purchased and worn at will, and hence money is not directly relevant to acquiring this kind of status. This is obviously not the case with many kinds of status symbols, including most kinds of clothing. Consequently, the preoccupation with fashionable clothes and other status symbols creates an acute need for money. This sometimes creates conflicts with parents. On the other hand, some parents take pride in their children's ability to be popular and willingly provide them significant amounts of money. Students who do not receive much money from their families often hold part-time jobs so they can buy the status symbols they feel they must have to be accepted or popular. A female from a very well-to-do community in New Jersey observes, "A number of the 'popular students' who were not all that rich and could not afford the name brand clothes, somehow managed to work many hours while going to school to obtain nice clothes."⁸⁴

Some research suggests that the pressure to have fashionable things is also one of the factors that have contributed to the high rate of shoplifting among teenagers. Teenagers, however, deny that their friends in any direct way pressured them to engage in such activity. Rather, it was more a matter of keeping up with one's peers both in terms of exciting behavior and the acquisition of status symbols.⁸⁵ Such social and economic pressures may also increase the probability that students will sell drugs.⁸⁶

Being a cool teenager and more generally the acquisition of status is fre-

quently associated with conspicuous consumption. Ironically, coolness can also be a form of asceticism.

COOLNESS AND BOREDOM

For a number of years the word “cool” has been used to describe characteristics that were envied or at least admired. Like most widely-used terms it has relatively specific roots but over time has taken on a number of more general and figurative meanings. According to Marcel Danesi in his book, *Cool: The Signs and Meaning of Adolescence*, the notion emerged from the early jazz movement. The initial participants were mainly black men who were subject to all sorts of discrimination and oppression. It is not accidental that the notion and term emerged among an oppressed group. Open resistance to white authority could bring severe penalties, including death by lynching. In such a context, self-respect is found and a modicum of power gained, not by being aggressive, but by taking on an air of seeming indifference. The oppressiveness of the broader social context is mitigated by creating a separate world that does not openly threaten the-powers-that-be, but resists them in subtle ways. Especially important is the creation of new cultural forms. These forms usually express indifference and thinly disguised disrespect of established conventions and authority structures. Jazz was initially such a cultural development. This resistance is communicated not primarily by explicit content, but implicitly by style. According to Danesi:

First and foremost, coolness implies a deliberately slow and lackadaisical form of bodily locomotion; accompanied by a nonchalant and unflappable countenance . . . Being cool involves a control over emotionally induced body states. Losing one's cool, as the expression goes, is to be avoided at all costs . . . [T]he sum and substance of coolness is a self-conscious aplomb in overall behavior.⁸⁷

Unsurprisingly, adolescents, who are subject both to the authority of parents and school officials, adopt this style as a means of expressing resistance to adult authority. Obviously, a typical teenager's social location is significantly different from that of early jazz musicians. For most teenagers, their relationship and attitude toward those in authority is ambivalent. Most adolescents love their parents and respect most of their teachers. Nonetheless they are seeking greater autonomy and often disagree with authority figures about the norms that are appropriate for their situation.

A male from suburban Burlington, Vermont, says, “A sense of self-confidence, [a] lack of respect for authority, and occasional recklessness were all crucial in becoming part of the cool group of people . . . For females, coolness

came from attitude and dress . . . If a girl acted self-confident, reckless, and also dressed somewhat provocatively, she would immediately become popular with the boys . . .”⁸⁸ Similar criteria are mentioned in Virginia: “An air of invincibility seemed to surround the popular guys. They drove fast, often under the influence of alcohol . . .”⁸⁹ A female from a small town says, “The cool kids were effortless and that was their number one resource. They didn’t seem to try.”⁹⁰ A crucial aspect of conformity to peer norms is to feign rebellion or at least non-conformity to the norms of adults in general and school officials in particular. Numerous students testified to these aspects of coolness.⁹¹

The precise stylistic content of the conformity varies from time to time and from subgroup to subgroup.⁹² The commonality, however, is resistance to some set of norms that are seen as imposed—usually by parents and schools. Ironically, some students use the term to describe resistance, not to adult authority, but to peer pressure—especially those that produce failure in school. In some schools, it is cool to be smart, as long as one shows resistance to adults in other ways. For some, ambivalence toward authority is transformed into alienation and open hostility. These are the wild teenagers who are described in many movies and books.⁹³ While some may still aspire to conventional notions of success, the patterns of behavior they engage in are almost certain to produce a different outcome. Many are openly cynical about conventional norms and have few hopes for the future. These levels of alienation are not restricted to minority students in urban ghettos, but involve substantial numbers of white teenagers in suburban areas.

The key theoretical point is that “coolness” expresses resistance to established authorities or conventional customs and involves the creation of a set of alternative or counter norms. Not surprisingly, in resistant subcultures—whether they are teenage cliques, Communist Party cells, or persecuted religious sects—high levels of conformity are demanded to the norms of the deviant group.

For students who still are committed to conventional notions of success—a college education, a good job, etc.—behavior that would get one thrown out of school or barred from further education is not a viable option. If one cannot be cool by being daringly deviant, the next best thing is to be blatantly bored. Adolescents characteristically complain about how boring their school or hometown setting is. “Nothing ever happens.” A fieldworker reports, “One boy came up to me and said, ‘Lunch is so boring for us; I can’t imagine how boring it is for you.’”⁹⁴ A second observer reports: “Today, I spent more time observing my group . . . I watched them and they sat there absolutely bored. They sat there for a while like that and then finally Scott came out and admitted that their lunch was totally boring . . . They sat there for the rest of lunch doing nothing.”⁹⁵ Such complaints may have substantial validity, but in addition, it is a way to distance one’s self from the authorized patterns of behavior

without having to engage in serious forms of deviance, which might result in serious sanctions. These expressions of boredom are frequently associated with behaviors annoying to authorities—throwing food, jokes in class, a surly manner—but are not serious enough to bring significant retribution.

Finally, coolness needs to be put in a broader historical and comparative perspective. Coolness is a variant of asceticism. Asceticism is a means of seeking power by being indifferent to the usual worldly sanctions. Typically this involves a form of “other worldliness.” Usually it is associated with those who are highly religious and seek to express their religious commitment by eschewing worldly forms of power and privilege. The power of the saint or holy man is not of this world, but of a different realm. Certainly, the otherworldliness of American teenagers is not that of the religious monk or the self-denying sect. Nor is it the asceticism of early capitalism described by Max Weber, which praised disciplined hard work and rejected the lavish forms of consumption and status pretensions of the feudal nobility.⁹⁶ What teenage coolness and these other forms of asceticism have in common, however, is resistance through the cultivation of an alternative lifestyle that advocates indifference to what is valued in the existing dominant culture. They do not usually attack existing authority, but subvert it by inverting its values and symbols. Blessed are the meek and the poor. Cool are the nonchalant and the bored.

Let me summarize the argument. A key source of status is conformity to the norms of the group. This creates a tendency for those who want to protect their status or identity to elaborate and complicate the norms in order to make it hard for outsiders to copy. In situations where members of a group cannot prevent others from copying them, they change the norms frequently and emphasize keeping up with the fashions they set. A result is that peer norms are created, elaborated, and regularly changed in a wide variety of areas.

While teenagers often want to set themselves off from others, at other times and in other contexts they want to create connections and establish solidarity with those who are not members of their immediate status group. This is often done by affirming norms and symbols that other groups share such as certain forms of popular music or shared slang or argot. Because symbols vary in the ease and flexibility with which they can be adopted, some symbols are more likely to be used to create cross-group solidarities and others to symbolize differences.

Though modern status processes are closely tied to high levels of consumption, the essence of coolness is a form of asceticism, that is, the resistance to adult norms and authority through the adoption of an alternative lifestyle. These tendencies are not due primarily to the biological and developmental peculiarities of a particular age group. Their obsession with status and status symbols and their conformity to peer norms are a perfectly reasonable response to the social setting in which they live—a situation that has been created largely by adults.