

CHAPTER FIVE

Exchanges, Labels, and Put-Downs

My life has been full of incident: I have met well-known people, including Salvador Dali (mad, but shrewd) and Prince Charles (shorter than you would imagine), many exciting women (including an actress who almost received an Oscar), yet here in Hollybush [Michigan] my whole life is seen to be defined by the high school senior trip of 1966.

—Justin Cartwright, 1998

FROM THE LUNCHROOM: Melanie began telling stories about talent show auditions. Apparently, she is in charge . . . of choosing the acts. She made fun of an [Asian] Indian girl who did a dance, saying it didn't even look like an Indian tribal dance at all, and standing up and imitating her. She said the girl had bells on her skirt and an Indian costume where you couldn't see her face . . . She and two other girls "couldn't look at each other or else they would start cracking up." Melanie also talked about other acts . . . including a freshman named Patrick who apparently wears a skirt to school. She said he played a guitar and sang. Then she imitated how horrible he was. She talked about a girl [singer] . . . "She is the one who" and then made a gesture imitating big breasts. "They call her Foxy Brown." Boy #1 said, "No, they should call her Big and Brown." [The observer remarks]: ". . . they are probably one of the more popular junior groups . . . They talked about people behind their backs; ritually insulted, and imitated people during most of the lunch period."¹

The last two chapters have looked at the sources of status. Now we consider how status is different from other kinds of resources and how these distinctive characteristics shape peoples' behavior.

INALIENABILITY

If a robber says, “Your money or your life,” most people hand over their cash. But if a robber says, “Your status or your life,” people are likely to become very apprehensive—he must be insane. They could not give him their status if they wanted to. In this sense, status is inalienable. In high schools, the handsome football player or the beautiful cheerleader cannot give someone else their status—much less sell it to them. Stated in other terms, changing or exchanging status is difficult, and therefore converting other resources directly into status is problematic. One can, of course, gain or lose status by acquiring a status-relevant social position, but the status acquired is compromised if it is gained by illegitimate means. The nobleman who gains the crown by murdering the existing king and his heirs, the bourgeoisie who buys a title of nobility, or the candidate who wins by bribing election officials are looked upon with suspicion and disdain. Or conversely, the opposition leader or social critic who is imprisoned for obvious political reasons may officially be a criminal, but in the eyes of many becomes a hero. The point is not that economic and political resources are never used to manipulate status, but that the very nature of status makes this problematic.

This relative inalienability of status has several important implications for the nature of the social structure. First, it is the reason that social exchange in status systems is both limited and tends to be implicit or indirect. Second, it is one reason that status systems tend to be stable and have restricted mobility.

EXCHANGE, CONVERSION, AND MONEY

A note is required about the significance of exchange, conversion, and money. Clearly, having the resources to buy fashionable clothes, drive a cool car, and go to the “in” places is a big advantage. But it is important to see that economic resources are primarily a means and not the basis of status. The student who goes to school waving his bank statement around and bragging that he or his family has lots of money, only lowers his status. Wealth is an effective means to status only when converted into appropriate status symbols. Even then simply buying the right things is not enough. One must be able to develop the right personal style and the appropriate associations to be accepted. As one student noted, “Buying the right clothes did not automatically increase your status, but it served as one way to keep some people out. People who believed that they were cool simply because they wore expensive clothes were often the butt of many private jokes.”² Moreover, exchanges between individuals must be implicit. The boy who is too blatant about wooing girls with gifts and lavish entertainment becomes suspect—not to mention the girl who is too obviously influenced by such things or resorts to such tactics herself.

In the case of exchange and conversion, approvals or disapprovals that are bought or coerced are greatly devalued if not meaningless. Those who hire yes-men and flatterers are looked upon with derision, as are those who sell their services in this way. The same is true of prostitutes and their clients, and regimes that use torture to get confessions or pay for false testimony. The motives of the beautiful young woman who marries the rich old man are suspect, and there is “no fool like an old fool.” These various examples indicate that for status to be valuable, it must be rooted in relatively authentic expressions of approval and disapproval. Consequently, conversion of force or material resources into status is problematic. A well-known movie among teenagers is entitled *Can't Buy Me Love*.³ Made and set in the 1980s, it is the story of the stereotypical nerd who hires the beautiful popular girl to go out with him. His status skyrockets and he becomes one of the coolest guys in the school. They begin to fall in love—transforming their “arrangement” into an authentic relationship—only to be disgraced when their peers discover how the whole thing started. Of course, in good Hollywood fashion, they work through this trouble and supposedly live happily ever after. Even the Hollywood versions of adolescent culture recognize the limitations on exchange and conversion of other resources into status.

None of this is to argue that wealth is not important or that the class and status of a student's family are irrelevant. Rather, I am arguing that the effect of these background resources on a student's status *within a given school status structure* are mainly indirect and mediated through conformity to the student norms in a particular school. Obviously, family resources play a crucial role on where you live and which school you are likely to attend. They also affect a student's ability to engage in implicit exchange with other students; the low-income student cannot offer friends a ride in a new cool car. Nonetheless the link between family background characteristics and status among one's peers is not especially strong and is largely mediated through lifestyle norms.

STABILITY AND MOBILITY

Once status systems become well established, they are relatively stable. Adolescents repeatedly report the difficulty of changing their status once their peers have categorized them. There is general agreement that “a person's rank was mainly determined during their first year” [of high school].⁴ A girl from a District of Columbia suburb reports, “Social groups within the freshman classes started to be formed. These groups remained relatively stable throughout all four years . . .”⁵ Another student qualifies this slightly: “By sophomore year, the [high-status group] had basically determined who was going to be ‘cool’ for the next three years.”⁶ A sophomore in high school says: “I don't really think that there is a way to change your status because who you start to

hang out with when you begin high school is who you end up with at graduation . . . Once you are labeled by the students and the teachers as belonging to one group or another group, that status does not change throughout your high school experience.”⁷ A student from an all-girls Catholic high school reports, “At the beginning of the freshman year there were not too many bonds formed, so mobility and change was widely accessible. But as the years passed, accessibility became more difficult for those few that wanted to change groups.”⁸ A student who attended an all-male Catholic school reports the same: “It is hard to think of how hard it was to move from one group to another.”⁹ Like in the caste system, and apparently most institutionalized status systems, mobility is highly restricted. Frequently, however, the stability and the absence of mobility are exaggerated. There were cases of women who “bloomed” or men who became star athletes rather late, and consequently experienced considerable upward mobility. Occasionally, popular students disgraced themselves. Most of the mobility that does occur involves movement from middle status categories to categories just above or below. As we shall see later, boundaries weaken as students move into higher grades and are less salient in certain more pluralistic schools. For the most part, however, after the first year or so, status is relatively fixed for most people in most schools.¹⁰ What is even clearer is that many students perceive that changing identities and crossing boundaries is difficult.

There is an individual and psychological aspect of this tendency toward stability. The initial rejections that many adolescents experience in middle school and the early years of high school shape how these students see themselves. If someone is a late bloomer and not particularly attractive their freshman year, this objective reality limits their opportunity to conform to the norms of their peers. Typically they are excluded from the highest status, most popular groups. This initial objective experience then shapes their subjective sense of themselves, which may in later years limit them as much or more than their own looks or the actions of others. In sociological jargon, the initial limits of the objective opportunity structure that shaped their earlier social identity become subjectively internalized and form part of their personal identity. One student describes how early social definitions become personal identities.

Early definitions of the groups were hard to overcome. I know that by my senior year, I would have interacted well with the popular group, and I also know that they would have been fairly accepting. Despite these two facts, I never made much of an effort to break into that social crowd because I still felt a distinctive separation from it . . . In my mind the popular group was inherently exclusive and I therefore did not have a chance of successfully interacting within it. Because I had this prejudice, I did not even try to break into the group. I ended up excluding myself.¹¹

This is the report of a white middle-class student from Alaska. It seems likely that these effects are even stronger for those from lower-class or minority backgrounds, who have often experienced a long history of being rejected by those of higher status.¹²

This stability, however, involves more than limited mobility for individuals. Rarely are there dramatic changes in the relative status of different categories. In no school that we know about are cheerleaders and athletes the “in crowd” one year, only to be replaced by computer geeks and drama students the next year. The categories and the relationship between categories are relatively stable over time. None of this means that there is no mobility or that the rankings of social categories are natural or immutable. Nor am I suggesting that an individual’s status cannot change quickly, for example, by being disgraced or winning a famous prize. In most situations, however, the inalienability of status makes status systems *relatively* stable.

INEXPANSIBILITY

In chapter two I noted that the total amount of status available to a group was largely inexpandible, in contrast to goods and services or force. Status is primarily a relative ranking. If everyone received A’s or had Mercedes these would not have much status value.

MORE ON MOBILITY

The concept of inexpandibility of status further enriches our understanding of several of the key characteristics of high school status systems. First, in conjunction with the notion of inalienability, it helps us comprehend why mobility is so difficult in high school status systems. Because status is relatively inexpandible, those who initially gain high status are very reluctant to improve the status of inferiors by associating with them. Intuitively they know that allowing others to move up threatens their own position. So, the concepts of inexpandibility and inalienability help us to see why, in most high schools, very few people are able to change their status or their group ties after the first or second year.

This is not to say that people do not try to change their status. A few succeed as the following account indicates:

My friend had been a member of the Brain groups since elementary school, but beginning in the eighth grade and continuing through high school, he persistently pursued acceptance by the Preps. His family background and dress were quite similar to theirs, yet they were reluctant to accept him. He was fairly good friends with a couple of Prep girls, but still not a group member. In an effort to prove to them he could be like them, he changed

his appearance slightly by wearing nicer shirts, such as polos and oxfords . . . He gradually distanced himself from his old friends and continually “kissed-up” to the Preps . . . He spent two and a half years striving to become one of the Preps. Surprisingly enough, he was successful and became one of them by the time we reached the end of junior year. His success became evident when he won a spot on the student council and was the student announcer for the morning announcements our senior year.¹³

Clearly one of the prerequisites of this success was a willingness to distance himself from old friends.

Another girl, in a quite different school, reports on a similar attempt that was less successful:

As we got older, about the end of the tenth grade, a group of girls began to move ourselves away from our normal crowd . . . My two best friends, Sarah and Mary, and I were getting bored with hanging out at the mall and going to the movies every weekend. The three of us and a few other girls felt the draw of the popular crowd. We were ready to drink and socialize with the popular girls and date the more attractive guys. Unfortunately, it was not easy to break into the popular crowd. We attended a couple of the popular crowd’s parties because we would tag along with Mary’s popular older brother John when he went out. But we never reached the stage where we felt that we could just show up at parties and be accepted as regular members.¹⁴

She goes on to recount how this attempt at upward mobility involved not only withdrawing from old relationships, but also denigrating former friends and contributing to their downward mobility.

For us to move up, we felt that we had to distance ourselves from our former friends and push them down. My friends and I would not defend our old friends when the popular kids called them dorks merely because they did not drink or because they attended the Governor’s magnet school . . . for science. We just laughed . . . and agreed with their insults. We wanted to distance ourselves from our old friends so that the popular kids would see that we were nothing like them. In the end, I think my friends and I that broke away merely reestablished ourselves as the normal group and . . . downgraded our friends to the smart nerd category.¹⁵

This story of the betrayal of old friends is an example of a more general phenomenon and leads to our next question: Why are teenagers so frequently mean-spirited and even cruel to one another?

PUT-DOWNS AND "SMALL CRUELITIES"

The fact that status is inexpandable has an additional implication. If lowers moving up threaten those above, the inverse is true; you can move up by putting others down. This is one reason putdowns are such a common phenomenon among adolescents. In his book *Cool*, Marcel Danesi notes the prevalence of "small cruelties." He focuses on those that involve the criticism of someone's body, for example, "Hey, fatso."¹⁶ While these "small cruelties" often refer to characteristics of the body, the phenomenon is much more general and fundamental. Terms like "put down," "make fun of," "trash," and "dump on" (a euphemism for "shit on") occur with considerable regularity in school settings. More accurately, most local adolescent cultures have more "up-to-date" synonyms for these concepts.

Both the observations at WWHS and the descriptions from other high schools provide many examples of this phenomenon. On the mild side was the treatment of low-status peers who showed up in public places frequented by the elite: "Those who were not 'cool', that showed up at the park, were not included, ostracized, and even teased."¹⁷ The treatment of others is frequently much harsher. One girl from an East Coast metropolitan area reports, "The struggle for popularity was a harsh one, with back-stabbing by supposed 'friends' . . . and the banishment of one person by another based on the need to find one's own level of popularity."¹⁸

Most common is the tendency of friends and clique members to say snide things about those who are not members of their group. Even if the outsiders are not present, such put-downs lower their status and discourage those who are present from associating with them, or even treating them with routine respect. One of our field observers¹⁹ recorded the following incidents:

Kate and Ellen were joking with Robert about having found him a date for the dance. I did not catch the name of the girl they were making fun of, but they told him that he could go with "that big, fat, blonde girl." This inspired Robert to start making jokes about the trouble he would have wrapping his arms around the girl and to laugh about how she would roll over him.

This was a put-down of both the "fat blonde girl," but also a subtle dig at Robert. He ignores the innuendo by playing along with the "joke." While Kate may have been particularly inclined to put others down, it was by no means restricted to her. Our field observer continues, "There was an overweight girl whom I have never seen before who was sitting at the table for the first few minutes of the period. After she left, everyone expressed their gratitude that 'the bitch was gone . . .'" These incidents are reported from a school that, relatively speaking, is low on hierarchy and status differentiation.

Such behavior is not restricted to the inner-city or public schools. A student who attended a relatively small and well-to-do Christian academy in a major Southern capital reports:

Ritual insulting was common. The most popular boys were capable of cleverly using language to formulate the perfect insult. They devised nicknames for everyone they did not like. These nicknames brought individuals into the spotlight and heavily influenced their status. "Betty Spaghetti" went on to a successful social career. "Yoshi" and "Salmon Boy" became isolates . . . Low-status boys . . . participated in ritual insulting in a more vicious and indiscriminate way . . .²⁰

Nor was viciousness in this school restricted to the boys. The popular girls "practiced ritual insulting, mocking each other and those less popular, attractive, or fashionable." The former student of this Christian academy was struck by what she called "the brutality of their commentary."²¹ Physical aggression was also used to keep people in their place. High-status boys would gang-tackle and rough-up others "in an isolated hallway out of the view of the administration . . ." "New football players were cruelly hazed and freshman boys tried to avoid locker rooms where they could be cornered and dunked in a toilet."²²

Predictably the tendency is for those of higher status to insult those of lower status and this motivated the latter to minimize interaction. A young woman from a small coastal town in the East says, "If a higher status person talked to a lower status person then they were usually out to embarrass them. A lower status person usually avoided high status people for this reason."²³

HARASSING THE WEAK

Preps often make fun of nerds. A northern Virginia female says, "The 'cool kids' had many ways of making themselves distinctive; the first and most obvious was labeling everyone else . . . with names like *prude*, *dork*, *geek*, *dweeb*, *bamma* . . . which instantly made you a social outcast."²⁴ More generally those who are most vulnerable usually receive the most verbal and physical harassment. In some situations, students officially designated as academically weak were stigmatized. A student from a small rural community says that the "slow" students

. . . were made to attend classes separate from the rest of the students and were given various labels that coincided with each new trend developed by educators to make them feel less inferior . . . [T]hese labels were used by other students to demean the "slow" students and differentiate them from "normal" students. It is no surprise that many of these students eventually dropped out.²⁵

One of the most troubling things is the aggressive harassment of the physically or mentally handicapped. A student from Texas reports:

The retarded students socialized only with each other, and were pretty much made fun of by all the normal students. For example, during class changes, all of the retarded students stood outside their classroom and watched everyone walk by. The sad part is that they were oblivious to the fact that almost everyone passing by made fun of them in some sort of way. They tried to participate in extracurricular activities, such as going to the Homecoming Dance and football games, but yet again just hung around each other. Most students felt they had special needs and should not be in public schools as they were.²⁶

In the relatively egalitarian school in which we conducted extensive fieldwork, an observer reports: "Then a mentally disabled boy walked by who Angela called 'Funky Butt' because of the way he walked. She then started to make up songs about him."²⁷

A female with a physical handicap from a well-to-do community in New Jersey reports, "Those students with physical disabilities tend to be mocked . . . The learning disabled are not popular and are seen as stupid dorks who wear ugly clothes. Special education students have classes in a separate part of the school, and teachers assume they are troublemakers."²⁸

On theoretical grounds, I would predict that harassment of the weak is more common from those just above them or those who are wannabes rather than from the highest status students. The top elites of a social system rarely carry out the persecution of the lowly—even though they may instigate it. One of the points of being elite is to have stooges do the dirty work for you. We did, however, observe cases where relatively high status students engage in this behavior. Overall our data is ambiguous on this point and further research is needed to clarify the matter.

In short, "small cruelties" and "meanness" are extremely common.²⁹ Why are teenagers so mean? This is due to the centrality of peer status in school settings and the competition that results for a largely inexpandable resource.³⁰ In the competition for status, people (especially leaders), often vacillate between being nice and being mean, depending on whether they see the other person as a supporter or as a threat. Conversely, followers are usually nice to those above them in the hope of being accepted as an intimate, and hence raising their status. At the same time, they often resent the deference they have to show. Frequently, those with high status are talked about and envied, but disliked.³¹ From the leader's point of view, followers of high status are essential, but they pose a threat and from time to time must be "put in their place." This, of course, may turn them into enemies rather than supporters. To further com-

plicate things, if those of high status hold others at too much of a distance, they run the risk of being labeled snobs. In sum, high status requires the careful management of social distance and intimacy. These contradictions and dilemmas often lead to treating others positively in one context and negatively in another. Often this involves two-facedness and backbiting. My key point, of course, is that such behavior is not primarily rooted in a particular stage of biological and psychological development, but is largely the result of the social context.³²

But if teenagers are mean to those who are roughly equals because they are competitors for an inexhaustible resource, why are they mean to those who offer no threat at all? Some of the most demeaning behavior is directed toward those who are the weakest and most vulnerable. Why does cruelty to the handicapped raise someone else's status? Beating a much weaker team does not raise the status of the victor much. I suspect that the primary motivation for picking on the weak is not because it directly raises the aggressor's status. One psychological and two social processes probably contribute to the victimization of the weak. First, in an atmosphere where put-downs and verbal aggression are common, there is probably a definite tendency to displace hostility by scapegoating the vulnerable.³³ This mechanism has been widely alluded to as a reason for the persecution of minority groups.³⁴ Second, in a context where verbal aggression is common and even admired, the vulnerable offer an opportunity to hone and display one's skills without risking significant retaliation. Third, in a system where the content of many of the norms is obviously highly arbitrary—as is the case with fashion and style—an even higher value is placed on conformity. Deviance must be persecuted lest it call into question the basic assumptions of the normative structure. Many handicapped students do deviate considerably from the norms of other students. Apparently, this is seen as highly threatening and is punished. These ideas are offered as tentative hypotheses to explain what seem like “senseless” cruelties. The broader theoretical point is that the inextinguishability of status has a number of direct and indirect consequences on behavioral patterns. None of this means that such cruelties are unavoidable or inevitable, but it does suggest that they are likely, given how we currently organize our schools.³⁵

EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION OF THE WEAK

There is also a tendency for the weakest members of the group to be the most isolated. This is not limited to the handicapped. In August B. Hollingshead's classic study *Elmtown's Youth*, which was initiated in the 1940s, he reports:

[P]ersons in each class try to develop relations with persons a class higher in the status structure than themselves. Conversely, the higher-class person,

on average, tries to limit his contact with persons of lower status than himself in order to not be criticized for "lowering himself." This process operates in all classes, but it is especially noticeable in contacts with class V. This class is so repugnant socially that adolescents in higher classes avoid clique and dating ties with its members.³⁶

The treatment of Untouchables in the Indian caste system is an even more extreme version of this. In the past they were forced to live outside the village, excluded from temples, forbidden to use the village wells, and forced to carry out the most menial tasks, such as removing dead animals and cleaning out latrines. In general, they were shunned by everyone else.

The isolation of the people at the bottom is largely a function of social location. If everybody "reaches up" and you are on the bottom, there is no one below attempting to establish relationships with you. But there seems to be an additional psychological or cognitive mechanism operating. Those at the bottom seem to be reprehensible to an extent that is disproportionate to their structural location. This seems to parallel the disproportionate rewards of those at the top. For example, sports stars, who usually out-perform their competitors by only marginal degrees, receive a highly disproportionate amount of praise and other rewards. Apparently, those at the bottom are seen as not only lowly, but degraded. Accordingly, they are avoided and often harassed and victimized. Whatever the sources and mechanisms of rejection and isolation of the lowest strata, the result in high schools is a social world in which the lowest status students are deprived of many of the things available to other students.³⁷

On the other hand, rarely is the isolation of the lowly solely a matter of persecution; they often do deviate in ways that are at best insensitive to others. This is not infrequently true of handicapped students. A fieldworker reports on an incident involving a special education student who had some kind of mental handicap:

One specific incident that occurred toward the end of the period while the girls were around was the ridicule of Louis. Louis was distinct in the group because he was the only black person and overweight. When I asked a girl who he was she said, "He is Louis. No one really likes him, but he always hangs around during lunch. He is foul." Louis had been the center of ridicule throughout lunch but he seemed to bring it on to himself. At one point, Louis pulled out a condom. He started to swing it around and got the girls worked up and the boys laughing. He then put his mouth to it and blew it up like a balloon. All of the girls shrieked and the boys thought that that was so funny. Word got around to the whole group, even those who were not watching the incident. Laura stood up and told a friend who was approaching the group to let her know what Louis had done. Louis then

dropped the condom and walked away. An adult walked up to the area and Louis nonchalantly picked up the condom and threw it away in the trash-can. The adult remained standing in the area for most of the remaining lunch period.³⁸

Hence, reducing the exclusion and isolation of the lowest strata—even handicapped students in schools—is rarely simply a matter of reducing inequality and changing the prejudices of higher status strata. This is, however, a crucial prerequisite to greater inclusion and solidarity.³⁹

GOSSIP

Gossip is a particularly common and powerful means to inflict small cruelties. It is, of course, closely tied to secrecy and rumor, which were discussed earlier. Others have studied the content and structure of gossip in some detail.⁴⁰ Gossip is evaluative talk about a person who is not present. The findings indicate that the vast majority of incidents of gossip involve negative comments about someone not present. Unless a high status member of the group immediately contradicts a negative remark, it tends to be seconded and elaborated by other members of a group, both those of high status and those of low status. An obvious question is why gossip tends to be so negative and often malicious—even when it is about close intimates. Why do people rarely gossip about how well someone else did on a quiz or how pleasant he or she is? First, if one is inclined to praise someone, it can be done in public—even with the person present; it does not require their absence, as is the case with gossip. Second, because of the inexpandability of status, praise of others tends to lower one's own status. Conversely, putting them down tends to accomplish the opposite—especially if others join in.

If the point is to raise one's own status, put-downs are most useful if they lower the status of those who are status equals or superiors. But publicly criticizing such people can be dangerous; it motivates them to retaliate. Precisely because they have equal or superior status their put-downs are as likely to be just as successful as the instigator's. Hence, secrecy is needed. This encourages people to be two-faced and go behind others' backs. If others really respect someone, criticizing them can be a risky act of deviance. Hence, the company of those who are likely to agree is needed. Consequently, most gossip occurs between those who are relatively intimate and considered trustworthy.

A very important kind of respect and status comes from one's close peers, and the rivalry can be intense. Sibling rivalry is the most obvious case, but gossip about close friends is another. The result is that gossip is often about another intimate who is not present, and is frequently associated with backstabbing and backbiting. A fieldworker reports:

This group almost always had gossip, often about their own members who weren't there at the time. This was not done only playfully, but often was somewhat malicious. For instance, when it was discovered that Karen had egged Kate's car, everyone turned against [Kate] and insulted her seeming inability to stand up for herself. Yet, the next week, Susan was talking about [Kate] as if they were great friends again. I found it sort of odd that so much backbiting went on within this seemingly close-knit group.⁴¹

Not all gossip is about close friends. Frequently, gossip is a form of forced intimacy, that is, people being intimate when it is not wanted. Gossip does not involve forced physical intimacy, as in the case of throwing food, but rather forced cognitive and emotional intimacy. But what is the motivation for such behavior? Why would people want to be intimate with someone who rejects them? There seem to be two key motivations. One is to reduce the status of someone by making public his or her deviant behavior. This is usually directed toward rivals or high status individuals who are viewed as snobbish and as needing to be "brought down a notch or two." An alternative motivation is to raise one's own status by publicly displaying one's intimacy with someone of higher status. Even if the person who spreads the gossip does not have direct contact with the high status person, it shows that they have their "sources"—that is, they are tied into the network of higher status people.

Web-based bulletin boards are becoming a new means of public ridicule popular among teenagers. This is, of course, a great magnification of gossip written on the walls of toilet stalls. These means of gossip do not require that it be restricted to trusted intimates because retaliation is unlikely since the perpetrator is anonymous. Such Websites often amount to near-permanent public slander, which is potentially available to large audiences. It is becoming an increasing matter of concern to students, teachers, and parents.⁴²

Gossip and storytelling are closely related. Having gossip or a juicy story to tell is also a way of gaining the group's attention and making one's self the center of the group's activities, as well as lowering someone else's status. I recorded the following in my field notes:

About this time John asked Linda whether she likes Luke. She said, "Well, not really. He treats me nice but we're not really friends." John then said, "Well, you'll like to hear this because he's really 'going down.'" He repeated the theme of "going down" several times laughing about it. When they asked why, he said that Luke's girlfriend was going to beat him up. Apparently on a band [bus] trip . . . someone suggested . . . that they share their most secret fantasies [by writing them down] . . . Luke wrote down, "Every night I dream of fucking Sally [someone other than his girlfriend]." Predictably—and maybe this was part of a plot all along—the paper was

grabbed and passed around the bus. John took great relish in recounting these various events of the bus trip. Jane expressed the general opinion of the group that anyone who would write down such fantasies was stupid and deserved to be embarrassed.

This incident illustrates in a slightly different way the significance of gossip and storytelling and how one blends into the other. Telling a good story is, in part, a source of status for the storyteller, but it is also usually a way to lower the status of someone else.

In sum, like earlier work, we found that gossip was common and usually negative. This is rooted in the struggle for status and respect—even among intimates—that is accentuated because of the relative inexpandability of status.

GROUP MOBILITY: THE EFFECT OF AGE AND GRADE

Earlier I discussed the difficulty most individuals face in changing their initial status or crowd—due to the inalienability and inexpandability of status. On the other hand, the distribution of status across grades, and the fact that most students will change grades each year, means that there are certain forms of built-in mobility.

David Kinney's study of "Nerds to Normals" looked at students' transition from middle school to high school.⁴³ In middle school, students were either members of the popular crowd or they were shunned and excluded and given a negative label such as nerds or geeks. But when these same students made the move to high school many of the former nerds were able to make the transition to normals. Because of the greater number and variety of both students and extracurricular activities there was a larger array of peer groups, while those who had been nerds could find friends that would treat them as normal. Moreover, high school students were generally less judgmental of their peers than middle school students. This same decline in the intensity of status differences seems to continue as students move through high school.

Not surprisingly, students are especially preoccupied with their status during the early years of high school. A girl from suburban Boston says:

During the first two or three years of high school students, were very conscious of the status of the particular group to which they belonged, and various groups did very little intermingling. For instance, a "cooler" or more popular student rarely formed a friendship or even acknowledged a friendship with a less popular student . . . The strict barriers around different cliques made it very hard for students to get to know students [from other social groups] well.⁴⁴

Even some freshmen are aware of this pattern:

Susan began to explain to me how the freshmen class was very clique-oriented and that although the different groups sometimes associated with one another, there was often tension between them. She seemed very mature and said that, "By the time the students reached their senior year, the cliques became less apparent and the class interacted more as a whole." She said that she was friends with many upperclassmen, and that "on the whole, they were much more accepting of each other." She explained, "You don't have to look or act a certain way to be someone's friend by the time you enter twelfth grade."⁴⁵

Part of this anticipated change will result from physical and psychological maturation.⁴⁶ In addition to physical and psychological considerations, the social status of freshmen is relatively fluid. Students see both great opportunity and danger, and hence are more concerned about their status. But these well-known factors are exacerbated by a structural consideration that is often overlooked: First- and second-year students as a group have low status relative to other students and so collectively these lower grades have less status to go around. This makes the competition for that status especially intense. As time goes on their status becomes crystallized and they become resigned, if not reconciled, to their social position. But in addition, the competition and emphasis on differentiation lessens as the status of the class as a whole gradually increases. A student from Pennsylvania makes the following observations about her senior year: "The senior class as a whole became such a high status group that even [vocational/technical students] and nerds were reassimilated back into the general fold of simply 'a senior' . . . [T]here was just less drive to increase individual status as the class as a whole was so high . . ."⁴⁷ This student attended a medium-sized, rural high school. The shift toward class solidarity may have been more extensive than in other settings, but students in most schools report these same tendencies.⁴⁸ In short, because status is relatively inexpandable, and because its distribution is skewed in favor of the upper grades, competition and preoccupation are especially acute in the early years of high school and less so in later years. Data dealing with a different aspect of school life supports this interpretation. Anthropologist Frances Schwartz found that students in high ability classes were much more cooperative and less hostile toward one another than students in low ability classes.⁴⁹ Obviously various things could contribute to this. Nevertheless, the relative inexpandability of status and scarcity of respect for students in lower-status classes almost certainly adds to their competitiveness and aggressiveness.

The higher status of older students is probably the most important social factor affecting the declining significance of status. A second social factor is the

extensive common activities and rituals of solidarity during the senior year: senior trips, senior-class gifts to the school, senior picnics, the senior prom, and usually a whole array of graduation-related events. A girl from an urban Catholic school in Texas recalls, "As senior year rolled around the groups became more welcoming and open because of the bonding events that the school sponsored, such as retreats, community days, and intramurals [i.e., competitions between the senior and junior classes]." ⁵⁰

A third important consideration is a shift in the types and arenas of power that are relevant. Most seniors have more money to spend than in previous years, in part because many have part-time jobs. Many become eligible to vote. Some are courted by colleges and offered scholarships. That is, status in their peer group is no longer the only kind of power that is available. A key assumption of the theory is that the patterns associated with status groups and caste will be especially strong where status is insulated from other forms of power. As this condition begins to break down, the power of these patterns declines accordingly. Stated in slightly different terms, seniors begin to both acquire and anticipate other forms of power, and hence the relevance of the high school status system declines.

To summarize, the behaviors characteristic of status systems in general and teenagers in particular occur because of the nature of status as a resource. Status is relatively inalienable. It cannot be easily appropriated or simply transferred from one person to another. Because status is relatively inalienable, status identities and status systems tend to be relatively stable once they have become well established. Therefore changing status or status groups after the first or second year in a school is difficult.

Status is also relatively inexpandable. If someone moves up in the status structure, someone else will have to move down. Similarly if a social category gains higher status, another category will lose status. Conversely, one way to move up is to put others down. These characteristics of status help explain a number of behaviors typical of status systems in general and teenagers in particular, including: extreme concern to maintain boundaries and limit mobility; the "small cruelties" toward those who are vulnerable, including the handicapped; the frequent use of negative and even malicious gossip—even about close intimates; and the greater concern with status and cliques. The theory of status relations, and more specifically the concepts of the inalienability and inexpandability of status, offers systematic explanations for all of these phenomena in the sense that they can be seen as parts of a broader pattern rooted in the nature of status and status groups.