

## Age Differences in Adolescents' Perceptions of Their Peer Groups

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This study employed social psychological theories of group formation to conceptualize and predict age differences in peer groups. Adolescents were administered questionnaires about the characteristics of their peer groups. Early and middle adolescents reported placing more value on being in a popular group and perceived more group conformity and leadership within their groups than pre- and late adolescents. Early and middle adolescents also reported more antagonist interactions and fewer positive interactions with group members and more antagonistic interactions with those not part of their peer groups. Girls reported having more positive group interactions, being more bothered by negative interactions, and having more permeable group boundaries. Boys reported more negative interactions with those outside their groups. Results are discussed in the context of adolescent development.

Adolescence is a period in which individuals are expanding their perspective beyond the family and learning how to negotiate relationships with others in the social system. Peers, particularly group members, become important social referents (Sherif & Sherif, 1964; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The peer group can also serve as a bridge from childhood parental dependencies to a sense of autonomy and connectedness with the greater social network (Blos, 1967; Erikson, 1968; Newman & Newman, 1976). Without being connected to the peer group, one may be left without an important source of support during a period of physical, emotional, and social upheaval (J. C. Coleman, 1980). This study examined developmental changes in perceptions of peer groups, integrating developmental research with the work of Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) and Festinger, Schacter, & Black (1950) on group process. This framework is offered as a fruitful way to organize our understanding of group functioning in adolescence.

Previous research has shown that stable same-sex peer groups begin to emerge in preadolescence (J. S. Coleman, 1961; Dunphy, 1963; Hallinan, 1980; Wilmott, 1966). The importance of being in a group increases during this time, tapering off during the late teen years (Brown, Eicher, & Petrie, 1986; J. C. Coleman, 1974; Dunphy, 1963).

Adolescent peer groups display several characteristic patterns of behavior. Sherif and Sherif (1964) reported that there were strict normative codes for group members' dress and behavior. Group identity was sharpened by these normative rules and by

intergroup conflict. Other work has shown that conformity tends to increase in early adolescence and to decline slowly later in adolescence, as peer group ties loosen (Berndt, 1979; Clasen & Brown, 1985; Costanzo & Shaw, 1966).

Case studies suggest that adolescent peer groups are also characterized by exclusivity, impermeability, and hostility toward nonmembers (Cusick, 1973). In general, these qualities appear to serve as mechanisms to differentiate between members and nonmembers and to create status differences. Status hierarchies can be observed both between and within groups. For example, J. S. Coleman (1961) described the "leading crowd" made up of popular students. Savin-Williams (1976, 1980a, 1980b) examined the development of status hierarchies within groups at a summer camp. After a period of vying for position, boys established stable dominance hierarchies, a development that reduced intragroup aggression. Status hierarchies were also apparent among the girls, although girls denied that some peers were more influential than others.

Little work has looked at differences in boys' and girls' peer groups, but sex differences in peer relations in general have been demonstrated. Girls report greater intimacy and emotional investment in their friendships than boys (Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Hallinan, 1980). In contrast, boys show more aggression in their relationships than girls (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1978). Boys also engage in more status and dominance struggles (Savin-Williams, 1976). Although some of these phenomena have not been investigated in the context of adolescent groups per se, these findings may have implications for group behavior.

As this brief review indicates, scattered work has been done on different aspects of adolescent group interaction, but much of it consists of case studies. Furthermore, no efforts have been made to integrate observations of adolescent group behavior with what is known about adult groups. Because many of the characteristics of adolescent groups appear to be similar to those discussed in the social psychological literature on adult groups, our understanding of peer groups may benefit by integrating work in this area with that of social psychologists such as Festinger et al. (1950) and Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c).

Festinger et al. (1950) proposed that social groups serve indi-

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viduals' needs for affiliation and social status. The cohesiveness of a group is determined by such factors as degree of communication among members and degree of consensus and conformity regarding attitudes and behavior. A normative code arises, becoming more rigid as the group members communicate and agree. Those who deviate from norms are rejected from the group. Those who value the group highly are less likely to deviate than those for whom group membership is not as important.

According to Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c), individuals create and identify with groups in order to define their social identities. This process results in the creation of ingroups. As ingroups develop, outgroups are defined. Group identification causes the activation of social comparison processes in which the ingroup is favored, the outgroup becomes negatively stereotyped, and intergroup aggression arises. Stereotyping and aggression toward the outgroup function to increase internal cohesiveness and a sense of superiority. When a status hierarchy is accomplished, aggression decreases.

We believe that the work of Festinger et al. (1950) and Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) may offer a useful framework for describing developmental differences in adolescents' groups. Specifically, their theories may shed light on the different phenomena examined in the work on adolescent groups, including conformity, impermeability, differential status, and interactions with group members and nonmembers. In their own work, Festinger and colleagues and Tajfel were concerned with describing changes in adult groups that occurred as group membership became more important to the participants. The importance of group membership, however, may not only vary as a group develops, but also may be different during different developmental periods. The literature reviewed previously indicates that group membership is particularly important to early and middle adolescents as they seek to obtain some autonomy from their families (Blos, 1967; J. S. Coleman, 1961). Accordingly, using the Festinger and colleagues and Tajfel framework as a guideline, we expected that their experiences within the groups would be different from those of preadolescents and late adolescents.

In the present study, preadolescents and early, middle, and late adolescents completed questionnaires concerning their peer group experience. First, they were asked how much they valued being in a popular peer group. Then, they were asked to rate the degree to which individuals engaged in positive and negative behavior toward those within and outside their groups as well as the degree to which they were bothered by antagonistic behavior from others. Finally, they were asked to rate the following three structural elements of their groups: permeability, conformity, and the degree to which there were leaders in the group.

The following hypotheses were based on the Festinger et al. (1950) and Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) framework, coupled with the evidence that the importance of being within a popular group peaks during early and middle adolescence (J. C. Coleman, 1974). First, according to the Festinger et al. theory, cohesiveness, companionship, and intimacy should be greater when groups are more important; thus, we expected that positive behavior within the group would be higher in early and middle adolescence than in preadolescence and late adolescence. In addition, we predicted that early and middle adolescents would report greater pressure to conform. Within-group negative be-

havior was expected to reach its height as a means of controlling behavior during these periods.

Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) theorized that the differentiation between those within the group and those outside of the group is greater when the importance of group membership is more crucial. This differentiation is facilitated by displaying negative behavior toward those outside of the group. Thus, we predicted that levels of antagonism would be higher and levels of positive behavior toward outsiders would be lower during early and middle adolescence, when group membership is more important. Similarly, group permeability was expected to be low during this period. Those students who value membership in a popular group more than other students were expected to show the most antagonism.

Another purpose of this study was to examine the pattern of relations among the structural, interactional, and age variables. Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) and Festinger et al. (1950) would predict that changes in the interactional variables would lead to changes both in the importance of being in a popular group and in the structural variables and vice versa. One way to examine these ideas would be to determine whether age changes in the importance of being in a popular group and age changes in the structural variables could be accounted for by the interactional variables, and whether changes in the interactional variables could be accounted for by the importance of being in a popular group and by the structural variables.

Predictions about sex differences were also made. In light of evidence indicating girls' greater investment in social relationships, we expected females to place more value on group membership than males. Accordingly, we expected girls to be more conforming to peer group norms, to have more exclusive and impermeable groups, and to have more positive group interactions than boys. Boys were expected to display more antagonistic behavior than girls. In contrast, we hypothesized that girls would be more bothered by negative behavior from others, because they would be more invested in their groups. In fact, those of either sex who valued the group the most were expected to be most bothered by negative behavior. Finally, Savin-William's (1976, 1980a, 1980b) work suggested that boys would report having distinct leaders in their groups more frequently than would girls.

In this study, we decided to use self-report measures for several reasons. First, it would be difficult to incorporate all of the variables of interest into a single observational paradigm. Some of the behaviors of interest, such as antagonistic interactions, usually do not occur in public settings where they can be observed. Second, self-report measures provide us with the perspective of insiders who are sensitive to the private meanings of group behavior and who can tell us how behavior is perceived by those involved. Such perceptions may not be completely objective, but they influence individuals' behaviors and attitudes toward each other.

## Method

### *Subjects*

The sample included 312 students from the 5th through the 12th grades. The following pairs of consecutive grades were combined to rep-

resent different developmental stages: *preadolescence* (Grades 5 and 6,  $n = 85$ ), *early adolescence* (Grades 7 and 8,  $n = 107$ ), *middle adolescence* (Grades 9 and 10,  $n = 73$ ), and *late adolescence* (Grades 11 and 12,  $n = 47$ ).<sup>1</sup> Although it is recognized that the age of onset of adolescence varies widely, the terms referring to adolescent stages are used for heuristic purposes. The sample size was smaller in the upper grades because the study was conducted during study halls, which a minority of students did not have. School administrators indicated that the reasons for not having study halls were quite diverse and that the sample of students in study halls was representative of students in the school.

All subjects attended a small, private, religious school system and were predominantly of White, middle-class background. This school system continued from kindergarten through high school, with the elementary school (kindergarten through 6th grade), the middle school (7th and 8th grades), and the high school (9th through 12th grades) on different campuses. The school system had a stable population. The curriculum and structure of the school day was believed to be typical of schools in the area except for the inclusion of a religion class. Issues concerning generalizability of results from this sample are discussed subsequently.

### Procedure and Measures

Trained assistants administered questionnaires to groups of students in the classroom. Administration took place in a 1-hour session and was part of a larger project on peer relations.

To ensure that all students used the term *peer group* similarly, it was defined as "a small number of same-sex friends, who spend time together, preferring to do things together rather than with other people." First, students were asked to rate the importance of being in a popular group. This 5-item scale was administered as part of a larger inventory of values scales, which included other domains such as family, best friendships, religion, having fun, school, and extracurricular activities. Because we were interested in the relative ranking of values, scores were ipsitized by deriving the mean of all the scales and then subtracting this mean from each scale score. Only the results of the relative importance of peer group are reported here. The internal consistency of this scale (as measured using Cronbach's alpha) was .92.

We assessed the following three aspects of teen's interpersonal within-group behavior: positive behavior, negative behavior, and the degree to which students were bothered by negative behavior from others. Each of the positive scales contained five items, whereas the negative scales contained six items (three overt and three covert). The ratings for each item were done on a standard 5-point Likert scale. The positive behavior scale sampled a number of different types of support. The items were adapted from Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) Network of Relationship Inventory. A sample item is "How much do you treat others in your group like they are admired and respected?". Previous research had found that the different types all loaded on a Support factor (Furman, 1989). Cronbach's alpha for the ingroup positive scale was .74.

The negative behavior scale measured the degree to which an individual engaged in antagonistic behaviors with those in the group. An attempt was made to sample items that represented both overt expressions of antagonism (e.g., "How much do you argue with the people in your group?") and more covert forms (e.g., "How much do you talk behind the back of people in your group?"). Cronbach's alpha for the ingroup negative scale was .86.

The bothered-by-negative-behavior scale assessed the degree to which individuals were bothered by negative behavior aimed at them by others in their groups (e.g., "How much does it bother you when friends from your group talk behind your back?"). The items paralleled the items on the negative behavior scale. Cronbach's alpha for the ingroup positive scale was .94.

To assess the relationships with those outside of the group, the stu-

dents were administered a corresponding set of three scales in which the questions asked about those outside of the group. Cronbach's alphas for the outgroup positive, outgroup negative, and bothered-by-outgroup-negativity scales were .79, .89, and .95, respectively.

We measured structural group properties using the following scales: group leadership or status hierarchy, group permeability, and group conformity. Students were asked to rate their agreement with particular statements using a standard 5-point Likert scale (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The leadership or status hierarchy scale assessed the degree to which group members were assigned hierarchical positions within the group (e.g., "It is obvious who the leaders are in my group"). This 5-item scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .79. The group permeability scale assessed the degree to which group membership was open to new people (e.g., "Anyone who wants to is welcome to join our group"). This 3-item scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .79. The group conformity scale assessed the degree to which the group members monitored one another's behavior and dress (e.g., "People in my group care a lot about how other group members act"). This 5-item scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .73.

## Results

### Developmental Trends and Sex Differences

Initially, we conducted multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAS) on groups of conceptually linked variables to reduce the probability of capitalization on chance. If the MANOVA was significant, we conducted analyses of variance (ANOVAS). Each of the univariate analyses was done with a single degree of freedom contrast analysis to test a specific hypothesis. For each variable, five contrasts were performed to detect (a) a linear trend, (b) a quadratic trend, (c) a linear Sex  $\times$  Age interaction, (d) a quadratic Sex  $\times$  Age interaction, and (e) a main effect for sex. For many of the variables, the data were expected to show a quadratic trend, with the preadolescent 5th and 6th graders reporting behavior similar to the late adolescent 11th and 12th graders, and the early and middle adolescent 7th through 10th graders reporting behavior that was similar to one another.

To begin, as predicted, analysis of the importance of being in a popular peer group revealed a quadratic effect, with early and middle adolescents rating membership as more important than pre- or late adolescents rated it,  $F(1, 328) = 9.36, p < .01$ . Contrary to predictions, boys reported placing a higher value on membership than girls ( $M_s = .02$  and  $-.29$ , respectively),  $F(1, 328) = 10.83, p < .01$ .

A multivariate contrast analysis of the three variables assessing within-group behavior yielded a significant quadratic effect,  $F(2, 265) = 13.83, p < .01$ , as well as a significant sex difference,  $F(3, 265) = 23.57, p < .01$ . Results at the univariate level are displayed in Table 1. A significant quadratic effect was found for within-group positive behavior,  $F(1, 269) = 10.28, p < .01$ , with scores decreasing in early adolescence and increasing again in late adolescence. Analyses also indicated a significant quadratic effect for within-group negative behavior,  $F(1, 269) =$

<sup>1</sup> To ensure that the grouping of consecutive grades was appropriate,  $t$  tests were conducted comparing scores of the combined grades. Significant differences were found in only 5 of the 40 cases. Additionally, a trend analysis was conducted on the ungrouped data. All the linear and quadratic effects reported in the primary analyses in the text were found in these analyses.

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations of Group  
Variables by Grade Level

Variable	Grades			
	5 and 6	7 and 8	9 and 10	11 and 12
Value of popularity				
<i>M</i>	-.89	-.53	-.65	-.85
<i>SD</i>	.77	.76	.69	.85
Within positive				
<i>M</i>	3.85	3.61	3.61	3.82
<i>SD</i>	.56	.66	.59	.43
Within negative				
<i>M</i>	1.75	2.19	2.11	1.75
<i>SD</i>	.74	.64	.57	.54
Bothered by within negative				
<i>M</i>	2.85	3.24	3.17	2.58
<i>SD</i>	1.16	.93	.96	1.13
Out group positive				
<i>M</i>	2.73	2.61	2.92	3.03
<i>SD</i>	.68	.62	.68	.62
Out group negative				
<i>M</i>	2.11	2.39	2.26	2.15
<i>SD</i>	.86	.74	.77	.73
Bothered by out negative				
<i>M</i>	2.36	2.70	2.63	2.34
<i>SD</i>	1.15	1.01	.94	.95
Status hierarchy/ leadership				
<i>M</i>	3.02	3.32	3.20	2.86
<i>SD</i>	.82	.67	.69	.76
Permeability				
<i>M</i>	3.03	3.07	3.21	3.29
<i>SD</i>	.86	.76	.80	.84
Group conformity				
<i>M</i>	3.16	3.10	3.10	2.70
<i>SD</i>	.77	.57	.58	.71

Note. Scales scores can range from 1 to 5 on all scales except value of popularity, where a score of 0 indicates that the rating is the same as the mean of the other value ratings.

24.83,  $p < .01$ , increasing in early adolescence and decreasing by late adolescence. Thus, negative and positive behavior showed inverse patterns. As hypothesized, girls reported displaying more positive within-group behavior than boys ( $M_s = 3.47$  and  $3.97$ , respectively),  $F(1, 269) = 46.32$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was no sex difference in negative within-group behavior ( $M_s = 2.03$  and  $1.93$ , for girls and boys, respectively).

Next, we carried out analyses to look at the nature of the interactions with those outside of the groups. Here a multivariate contrast analysis indicated the presence of both a significant linear trend,  $F(3, 298) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .01$ , and a significant quadratic trend,  $F(3, 298) = 4.69$ ,  $p < .01$ . Significant sex effects were also found,  $F(3, 298) = 9.30$ ,  $p < .01$ . As Table 1 indicates, univariate analyses revealed that out-of-group positive behavior displayed a significant linear effect, increasing from preadolescence through late adolescence,  $F(1, 302) = 11.22$ ,  $p < .01$ . It is

interesting that this pattern is different from that of the within-group positive behavior, where there was a quadratic effect.

The significant quadratic effect revealed in the MANOVAS reflected the increase of negative behavior outside the group in early adolescence and its decrease in late adolescence,  $F(1, 302) = 4.41$ ,  $p < .05$ . As expected, there were also significant sex differences for both out-of-group positive and negative behavior. Girls reported more out-of-group positive interactions than boys ( $M_s = 2.39$  and  $2.09$ , respectively), and boys reported more out-of-group negative interactions than girls ( $M_s = 2.39$  and  $2.09$ , respectively),  $F_s(1, 302) = 6.94$  and  $8.41$ ,  $p_s < .01$ , respectively.

Developmental changes were also evident in how bothered students were about negative behavior directed at them from within and from outside of their groups. Both of these variables showed a significant quadratic effect, increasing in early adolescence and decreasing in late adolescence,  $F_s(1, 301) = 15.58$  and  $7.52$ ,  $p_s < .01$ , respectively. As hypothesized, girls were more bothered than boys by negative behavior, both within the group ( $M_s = 2.74$  and  $3.38$ , respectively) and toward outsiders ( $M_s = 2.30$  and  $2.80$ ),  $F_s(1, 269) = 15.82$  and  $26.04$ ,  $p_s < .01$ .

### Group Structure

Developmental and sex differences were also apparent in the structural properties of groups (see Table 1). Multivariate contrast analyses revealed the presence of a significant linear effect,  $F(3, 265) = 8.48$ ,  $p < .01$ , a significant quadratic effect,  $F(3, 265) = 7.02$ ,  $p < .01$ , and a significant sex effect,  $F(3, 265) = 10.04$ ,  $p < .01$ . At the univariate level, the leadership variable displayed a significant quadratic effect, increasing in early adolescence and decreasing in late adolescence,  $F(1, 270) = 11.58$ ,  $p < .01$ . As hypothesized, boys displayed a greater tendency to have leaders in their groups than girls ( $M_s = 3.24$  and  $3.02$ , respectively),  $F(1, 270) = 5.83$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Contrary to predictions, boys reported their groups to be less permeable than girls reported theirs to be ( $M_s = 2.97$  and  $3.31$ , respectively),  $F(1, 269) = 11.26$ ,  $p < .01$ . Regarding age differences, permeability showed a trend toward a linear effect, although the effect did not reach significance,  $F(1, 269) = 3.38$ ,  $p < .10$ . Group conformity displayed a significant linear effect, decreasing from preadolescence through late adolescence,  $F(1, 269) = 12.07$ ,  $p < .01$ .

### Relations Among Group Behavior, Structure, and Value of Being in a Popular Group

We carried out correlational analyses to detect patterns of relations among group behavior, group structure, and the value placed on being in a popular group (see Table 2). Initially, we performed separate analyses for boys and girls and for each of the four age groups. Because these analyses indicated few sex or age group differences, we pooled the data across both sex and age group. Because of the large sample size, only those that reached a .01 level of significance will be discussed.

Value placed on being in a popular group was found to be related to perceptions of group behavior. As hypothesized, those who placed a high value on the peer group showed more within- and out-of-group negative behavior. Students who valued group

Table 2  
*Correlations Among Properties of Groups*

Variable	Value on popularity	Leadership	Permeability	Conformity
Value of popularity	—	.25**	-.22**	.18**
Within positive	-.11*	-.10	.28**	.07
Within negative	.31**	.37**	-.18**	.22**
Out group positive	-.18**	-.13**	.29**	-.11*
Out group negative	.26**	.10	-.30**	.16**
Bothered by within negative	-.01	.16**	.09	.20**
Bothered by out group negative	.00	.05	.21**	.13*

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

membership highly also reported less permeable group boundaries as well as more leadership and more conformity within their group.

Regarding the relation of group structural variables to other variables, results indicated that leadership was positively related to the amount of within-group negative behavior and to the degree to which students were bothered by within-group negative behavior. Permeability was positively related to both within-group and out-of-group positive behavior. In contrast, it was negatively related to both within- and out-of-group negative behavior. Generally then, positive behavior was associated with permeability, whereas negative behavior was associated with impermeability.

We had hypothesized that groups that were more conforming would have a higher amount of negative interactions. As expected, those that reported more conformity also reported more negative behavior both in and out of the group. Those who reported more conformity within their group also reported being more bothered by negative behavior from within the group.

Next, we conducted analyses to determine whether age changes in the importance of being in a popular group and age changes in the three structural variables (leadership, permeability, and conformity) could be accounted for by the interactional variables. We conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses in which the importance of being in a popular group and the interactional variables were predicted, first, by the set of interactional variables and, then, by the addition of the linear and quadratic effects of grade (see Table 3). In all cases, the multiple correlation ( $R$ ) was significant after the interactional variables had been entered, and the subsequent entry of the grade variables did not provide a significant increment in prediction in any case. When the order of entry was reversed, the interactional variables consistently provided significant increments in predictions above the level obtained from the grade variables.

We conducted a complementary set of analyses to determine

Table 3  
*Prediction of Structural Variables: Multiple Correlations*

Structural variable	Order			
	Interaction then Grade		Grade then Interaction	
Importance of popular group	.34**	.35	.14	.35**
Leadership	.35**	.36	.17*	.36**
Permeability	.51**	.51	.07	.51**
Conformity	.31**	.34	.17*	.34**

Note. The two numerical columns on the left present the multiple correlations when the interactional variables (within positive, within negative, bothered by within negative, out group positive, out group negative, and bothered by out group negatives) were entered first and when the linear and quadratic effects of grade were entered second. The two columns on the right present the multiple correlations when the order was reversed. The significance levels refer to the significance of the increment in predictions at each step.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

whether age changes in the interactional variables could be accounted for by the importance of being in a popular group and by the structural variables (see Table 4). As can be seen in Table 4, the multiple correlation was significant after the first step in the equation in all cases except for the prediction of bothered-by-within-group negative behavior. The addition of the grade variables was not significant for the three outgroup variables. In the case of positive and negative behavior within the group, the increment was significant, but over 75% of the explained variance was accounted for by the structural variables and by the importance of being in a popular group. For the prediction of within-group negative behavior, the grade effects predicted half of the explained variance, but neither set of variables accounted for a large amount of variance (3%). When the order of entry was reversed, the importance of being in a popular group and the structural variables consistently provided significant increments in prediction above the level obtained from the grade variables.

Table 4  
*Prediction of Interactional Variables: Multiple Correlations\**

Interactional variable	Order			
	Structure then Grade		Grade then Structure	
Within positive	.37**	.41*	.19*	.41**
Within negative	.44**	.50**	.30**	.50**
Bothered by within negative	.18	.25**	.18**	.25
Out group positive	.28**	.30	.13	.30**
Out group negative	.35**	.42	.15	.42**
Bothered by out group negative	.27**	.30	.14	.30**

Note. The two numerical columns on the left present the multiple correlations when the structural variables (leadership, permeability, and conformity) and importance of being in a popular group were entered first and when the linear and quadratic effects of grade were entered second. The two columns on the right present the multiple correlations when the order is reversed. The significance levels refer to the significance of the increment in predictions at each step.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

As expected, the beginning of adolescence was characterized by major changes in the perceptions of peer groups in this sample of White, middle-class students in a small school. Critical to our conceptualization and consistent with previous work (Brown et al., 1986; Veroff & Veroff, 1980), the importance of being in a popular clique increased in early adolescence. The sense of belonging gained by membership in a popular group may allow teens to feel secure in the social arena, bolstering their sense of identity as they seek to separate from the family unit.

As others have found (Berndt, 1979; Brown et al., 1986; Costanzo & Shaw, 1966), conformity was higher during early and middle adolescence than in late adolescence. In addition, these students reported less group permeability than late adolescent students reported, and their groups were perceived as having a clearer hierarchical structure. Taken together, these changes resemble the Festinger et al. (1950) and Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) descriptions of cohesive social units, with concrete boundaries, a stable identity, and clear standards for membership. The presence of a leader in a group offers other group members someone with whom to identify and to model oneself after. Finally, the relatively high degree of impermeability indicates that others are kept out, thereby providing the group members exclusive status. The high level of conformity reported suggests that there are rigid norms: Teens conform lest they be criticized for "sticking out" or being different.

We had also expected conformity to be higher in early and middle adolescence than in preadolescence, but group conformity actually displayed a decreasing linear trend. Even though the importance of peer groups has not yet peaked in the fifth and sixth grades, it seems that there may be alternative pressures to conform that are already salient at this time. For example, preadolescents may feel that they should conform to the behavior of the general peer group (as opposed to the norms applied by members of a specific clique). Moreover, as they become adolescents, they may feel a need to assert their independence and their own identity, or at least to perceive that they are independent. It is also possible that within this setting, where students know each other well over a long period, that conformity pressure starts at an earlier age than one might expect in a public school with less stability.

Early and middle adolescents reported having more antagonistic interactions with one another than the older and younger groups. This finding is consistent with both the adolescent literature indicating an increase in negative themes about groups during this period (J. C. Coleman, 1974) and the literature on adult groups indicating greater rejection of the deviant within highly cohesive groups (Schacter, 1951).

Negative interactions within the group may serve several purposes. First, adolescents may be disparaging of others in order to bolster their own sense of self-worth (Sullivan, 1953). This social comparison process may also underlie antagonistic behavior toward those outside the group. Second, negativity may create within-group dominance hierarchies that ultimately lead to a reduction in aggression (Savin-Williams, 1976). Third, aggression may enforce group similarity by serving as punishment when peers do not conform (Festinger et al., 1950). The

correlation between conformity and placing value on being in a popular group is consistent with the idea that, as group membership increases in value, it becomes more important to conform in order to avoid censure from others.

Our hypothesis that early adolescents become increasingly sensitive to negative evaluations from others was supported by the increase in "botheredness" that was reported in early and middle adolescence. Negative evaluations may embody a threat to these teens' group membership. Given the perceived rise in impermeability and negative behavior within groups, it may be adaptive to be sensitive to others' judgments if teens are interested in maintaining their group status.

As predicted, early adolescent students reported more negative and less positive behavior toward the outgroup. This pattern of behavior helps to fortify clear group boundaries and to create a sense of unity and superiority within the group. This process of scapegoating has been demonstrated in research on adult groups (Freedman & Doobs, 1968) but is not typically discussed in relation to adolescent group behavior.

We hypothesized that there would be more positive behavior in groups in early and middle adolescence when the groups are very cohesive, but students actually reported a decrease in positive behavior during this period. One explanation may be that positive behavior does in fact increase, but that students are less aware of it because of the simultaneous increase in conflict. Alternatively, there may actually be a decrease. If this is true, it seems inconsistent with findings that indicate that adolescents seek out many of their social provisions from their peers (Berndt, 1982). Perhaps, however, many of these provisions are met in relationships with best friends rather than in group interactions. In fact, we have used similar questions to assess supportive behavior in friendships and found increases between preadolescence and early adolescence (Furman & Buhrmester, 1988). Future investigators may want to examine the different functions served by friendships and peer group relationships (Furman & Robbins, 1985).

### *Late Adolescence*

As hypothesized, many behaviors returned to preadolescent levels by late adolescence. Group membership per se became less crucial to the adolescents, the permeability of group boundaries increased, and conformity to group norms decreased. Coupled with other research indicating that adolescents become more autonomous and self-reliant as they get older (J. C. Coleman, 1974; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986), these findings suggest that it becomes less important for adolescents to take advantage of the status and provision of "belongingness" that a group provides. Instead, they may look more toward individual relationships (same or opposite sex) to fulfill their needs.

Reports of within-group and out-of-group negative behaviors decreased, perhaps because late adolescents have less need to control the behavior of others. Whereas negative behavior decreased, positive behavior within and outside of the group increased. Perhaps it was too risky to display intimacy and interpersonal vulnerability in the group setting earlier in adolescence, particularly given the increased negativity that characterized that period. As groups become more positive and less negative, they may have felt a greater sense of comfort.

There were also individual differences in the perception of groups. Students who reported placing a high value on being in a popular group also reported that their groups were characterized by a high degree of negative behavior and little positive behavior toward outsiders. Within their groups, they reported less permeable boundaries, with a higher degree of leadership and conformity. Additionally, students who placed value on being in a popular group reported displaying more negative behavior outside of their groups and less positive behavior to outsiders. These differences may reflect either variations in the different groups or individual differences in the students' characteristics. In either case, the pattern of relations resembles the cluster of behaviors that characterize the peak period in the development of cliques. The advantages of competing for popularity appear to be very important for these students. In turn, they are willing to experience the stress that competition may entail, including giving and receiving a good deal of antagonism.

### *Sex Differences in Peer Group Interaction*

Taken together, the results appear to replicate the common pattern that girls are more relationship-oriented than boys. Girls reported having more positive interactions both in and out of the group and fewer negative interactions with those outside the group. Consistent with J. C. Coleman's (1974) findings and our own hypotheses, girls also reported being more bothered by negative behavior. In contrast, boys reported more negative behavior toward those outside the group and less permeable boundaries. The fact that there was no sex difference in the amount of negative behavior displayed within the group may mean that boys only feel the need to be antagonistic to those outside their circle of friends, perhaps to fortify group boundaries.

Of course, girls display negative behavior as well. In fact, the differences in perceptions may not be based on objective differences. Specifically, it may be that admitting to the presence of negative interaction places stress on girls, because it conflicts with an identity that is built on fostering warm relationships. This explanation may also account for the unexpected finding that girls reported their groups to be more permeable than boys, and that being in a popular group is less important than it is to boys. Alternatively, girls may be accurately reporting that they display less aggression. The fact that girls complain frequently about negative interactions may be because they are more easily hurt by antagonism.

Finally, boys more readily reported that leaders existed within their groups. This is consistent with work showing that boys engage in more dominance struggles (Savin-Williams, 1976, 1980a). Boys may be accustomed to dominance and competition in a way that girls are not.

### *Future Directions*

This research could be extended in several directions. For example, we relied exclusively on self-reports; thus, we have information about the students' perceptions, but not necessarily about their behavior. It would be valuable to complement these measures with observations of group interactions.

In addition, the present sample represents a primarily White, middle-class portion of the population. In the past, much of the work on adolescent groups has studied working-class, male groups or gangs (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). Gangs may have different norms for behavior and, perhaps, different group dynamics. Although one can only speculate, it is possible that in some settings being part of a gang may be even more important than being part of a clique, and the developmental differences observed here may be heightened in that context. It would be interesting to compare and contrast characteristics of groups of different socioeconomic classes.

Furthermore, like many schools, the one in this study was relatively small and stable. As a result, students may have less choice of peer groups than they would in a larger school. It is unclear, however, exactly how this would effect interpersonal behavior patterns. The fact that there may be fewer available groups in a small school could accentuate the importance of being part of a particular group. However, the reverse may be true if many peers are vying for membership in the popular groups of a large school.

An important task for future research is to identify the factors responsible for age differences in peer group interactions. The regression analyses shed some light on the mechanisms that are potentially responsible for the observed age effects. In particular, it appears that the age effects in the importance of being in a popular group and in the structural variables could be accounted for by the interactional variables. The linear and quadratic effects of grade did not provide a significant increment in prediction above the level obtained from the interactional variables, whereas the interactional variables were still related to the importance of being in a popular group and to the structural variables after accounting for the influence of grade. Similarly, the importance of being in a popular group and of the structural variables could account for the out-of-group interactional variables. These variables were also related to two of the three within-group interactional variables, but some age effects remained. Thus, some other mechanism, as well as these variables, may be responsible for these effects. For example, the development of more intimate dyadic relationships with friends within one's group (Berndt, 1982) may be a factor that contributes to the observed age effects. In general, however, these results are consistent with the arguments of Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) and Festinger et al. (1950) that the interactional and structural variables may affect each other, although firm causal inferences cannot be drawn from this form of data.

Another important question that is not addressed fully in this study is the exact nature of the original basis for changes in the importance of being in a popular group. Perhaps the changes reflect the adolescent's separation from the family unit. Environmental factors may also contribute to these age differences (Higgins & Parsons, 1983). For example, the curriculum and structure of the school day changes when children enter junior high or middle schools. When they do not have a consistent classroom of peers with whom to identify, they may feel a greater need to be part of a particular group or clique. Group membership may also be in greater flux during the first year in a new school (the 7th and 9th grades in this study), and, consequently, being part of a group may be more valued. In our supplementary analyses (see Footnote 1), we found few differences

between the perceptions of 7th and 8th graders or between those of 9th and 10th graders, but the effects of school transitions warrant further consideration.

In summary, the results of this study suggest that the framework for group processes drawn from the work of Festinger et al. (1950) and Tajfel (1978a, 1978b, 1978c) is helpful in understanding adolescent group processes. Although adolescent researchers have not typically drawn on the social psychological literature, it appears that teen groups function in much the same way as other groups. Conformity, exclusivity, positive interactions, and scapegoating processes all appear to be salient mechanisms of group operation. Conversely, the present study also provides an important extension of Festinger and Tajfel's work by showing that changes in group interactions are associated with changes in the importance of group membership that occur with an individual's development. We believe that further efforts to integrate the research on adolescent and adult group functioning may prove to be fruitful.

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