Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: Teenagers, Status, and Consumerism

By Murray Milner

Introductory remarks: Many explanations of the teenage behavior focus on their stage of biological and psychological development. Yet these are virtually the same for young people in all societies and historical periods. Their patterns of behavior, however, vary enormously across cultures. This reading offers a sociological understanding of contemporary American teenagers that focuses on the ways that adults have organized the formal structures of young people’s lives and in turn how they have responded to these structures by creating their own informal forms of social organization. The core of this informal organization is a peer status system that strongly shapes their behavior. Moreover, the analysis shows that rather than being exceptional or bizarre, teenage behaviors are very similar to those of people in other status systems. Teenage culture in the U.S. has, however, played a relatively unique and important role in encouraging consumerism in the broader society.

Status Systems
What Is Status?

Status is the accumulated approval and disapproval that people express toward a person, group, or object. As used here, it is more or less synonymous with notions of prestige and honor-dishonor. Status is the sum of the evaluations that are “located” in the minds of other people with whom a person interacts.
How Is Status Related to Power?

People can be influenced by three kinds of sanctions: (1) force, (2) goods and services, and (3) expressions of approval and disapproval. Each of these is the basic element of a type of power: political power, economic power, and status power. The president of the United States, the head of a large corporation, and the pope each specialize in a different kind of power. This is not to say that the pope has no wealth or that the president has no prestige. It is only to point out that the primary basis of their power is different. Similarly, institutions and societies differ in the relative importance of these three kinds of power. In the pre-1989 Soviet Union, political power was central. In most capitalist societies, economic power is central. In the traditional Indian caste system and American youth culture status is a central form of power.

Typically, individuals and groups attempt to influence and control their environment by the type of power that is most readily available to them. Those who are physically strong but short on money and respect—like dictators in poor countries and young males in poor urban neighborhoods—use force more often than others. The rich usually oppose restrictions on what can be bought and sold. The cultured or pious disdain mere money. In sum, status is more important in some contexts than in others, and it is especially important for American teenagers.

When Does Status Take on Increased Importance?

Where groups are excluded from economic and political power and given little respect, they may build a new identity rooted in a new status system. The black power movement and most forms of multiculturalism emerged from this condition. Those who are not respected embrace alternative norms: black becomes beautiful.

Adolescents in contemporary societies find themselves in a version of this situation. They have to be in school; they cannot hire or fire the teachers; they have little control over the curriculum. Moreover they are often criticized by their elders. The combination of powerlessness and adult disparagement motivates many adolescents to adopt an alternative status system with values and priorities different from adults. Status among peers is the kind of power that teenagers create themselves and over which adults have little control. Therefore it is extremely important to most teenagers. Hence, to understand their patterns of behavior we need to a theory that explains why people behave the way they do when status is very important to them.

A Theory of Status Relations

The theory of status relations can be stated in four points. First, one key source of status is conformity to the norms of the group. This is an obvious point, but its consequences are less obvious: those with higher status tend to elaborate and complicate the norms. Primarily, they do this to make it harder for outsiders to conform and
thereby become competitors. Therefore, where status is important, there are usually complex, subtle systems of norms and rituals. Often these are learned early in life—accent, demeanor, body language, and notions of taste and style—and are all very difficult for outsiders to copy. When they can be copied with relative ease, an alternative strategy is for high-status groups to change the norms frequently, so that outsiders are always a step behind. This is the reason that keeping up with fashions is often central to many status systems. We see this among an array of groups including aristocracies, upper-classes, teenagers, and increasingly among much of the U.S. population.

Second, the other key source of status is social associations: if you associate with those of higher status your status increases, and if you associate with those of lower status your status decreases. This is especially true for intimate, expressive relationships, such as close friendships. Key symbols of intimacy are who sleeps with whom and who eats with whom. Consequently, where status is important, romantic or sexual relationships, especially marriage, tend to be carefully regulated. The Indian caste system, in which people married only those in the same caste, is one historic example of the tendency to regulate romantic relationships, but so are country clubs, debutante balls and fraternity or sorority systems that encourage the children of the affluent to “run in the right circles.” Moreover, it is why teenagers tend to be so concerned about who is “going with” whom. Eating is also a near universal symbol of intimacy and a marker of status. Hence, there are eating clubs at Princeton, executive-only dining rooms, and “exclusive” dinner parties. It is why teenagers care so about who eats with whom in the lunch room.

Associations with objects are also important. If those with new wealth want respect, they buy art, antiques, and “historic” homes. Teenagers buy the “right” brands and hang out in the cool places. Disassociation is also important: the status conscious avoid low status people and objects. The tendency to associate with equals creates social boundaries. Rituals are often used to mark these boundaries.

Third, status is relatively inalienable. It is “located” primarily in other peoples’ minds. Conquerors, robbers, or parents may be able to take away your money, but to change your status they have to be able to alter the opinions of other people—often your peers. This makes status relatively secure and hence very desirable resource. It is why families with “old money” are often more respected than those with “new money.” The inalienability of status is also why teenagers have difficulty changing their status after the first or second year. Inalienability also affects the type of exchanges that occur. Most exchanges in status systems are implicit, rather than explicit. To send someone flowers or candy may improve your chances of them going out with you. Offering cash for a date is likely to have the opposite effect.

Fourth, status is relatively inexpansible. If a thousand Nobel prizes were awarded each year, the status value of these would be greatly diminished. There would be status inflation. This is common; as soon as most people have a high school diploma, a cell
phone, or whatever, these lose their value as a status symbol. 1 Because the amount of total status in a group cannot be expanded, when someone moves up someone else will have to move down. 2 Consequently, where status is important, mobility tends to be highly restricted, for example, in fraternities and sororities and high school cliques. Conversely, people often attempt to maintain or increase their status by putting down others. Racial or gender stereotyping is one example. Another is the tendency of the “popular crowd” to give others derogatory names or show other forms of disrespect toward those they consider to be their inferiors.

In sum, the theory explains some of the key patterns of behavior and social organization that are common in most status systems, including those that are typical of many American teenagers.

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. … There 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” gangsters). … Everyone 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”. …

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.

Many larger schools have status systems that are less hierarchical and more pluralistic; there are many different crowds and cliques, but little agreement about how they are ranked. While this is becoming more common, most high school peer status systems are relatively hierarchical.
Aspects of Conformity and Elaboration

Next we will examine some of the obvious norms of teenagers and how they are important in shaping the student status structures in schools. This includes norms about beauty, athletic ability, clothes and style, athletic uniforms and letter jackets, speech, body language, collective memories, humor, ritual, and space. 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.

Beauty and Athletic Ability

In many schools the most important factors influencing a teenager’s status are largely inherited: athletic ability for men and good looks for women. 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).” … 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.” 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 observer 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. …

Athletic ability is usually a highly respected quality for men. This is especially true in small towns, but is often also the case in urban and suburban schools. There is some evidence that being a good student has gained in importance. 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. 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 are less predictable. In some schools women athletes had considerable status, while in others they were referred to as “brutes.” An African-American female attending a predominantly white school says, “If a girl was too good at a particular sport she was often labeled butch or lesbian.”

**Clothes and Style**

Close behind these relatively inherited characteristics were clothes and sensitivity to style. A fieldworker notes that the girls at her table, “Commented 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.” As one student from Pennsylvania said, “The easiest way to identify different groups in high school was simply to look at them.” 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. … My 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.” 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.” 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.”

**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 an obvious 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 example 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.”
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, a student 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. Here clothes literally make the group.

**Speech and Language**

Non-material aspects of style were also important. Each clique tended to develop its own vocabulary. A Washington, D.C. 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.” A student from a small town in Appalachia recalls:

Students … 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.

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.” 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.”

**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 are humorous events and these 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, “All 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.” 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.6

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 common 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 Durkheim7 pointed out early in the twentieth century, participating in common rituals is a primary means for creating social solidarity. High school cheers, which engage large crowds in simultaneously producing the same movements and sounds, are an 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 what “patriotism” and “school spirit are about; 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 of the corporation
The 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. …” “The jocks were very noticeable. … They would walk around with erect posture and their chest pointed toward heaven.” “Many of the [“kickers,” i.e. “cowboys” or “rednecks’] walked bow-legged. …” “Some black students walked … as if they had an ankle injury and limped on every other step.” 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 conformity to social norms: how the members of a certain crowd are supposed to portray themselves in public.

**Space and Territory**

Because students tended 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.” 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. …” 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.

For some groups, “their space” seems almost crucial to their identity. One group of freshmen we observed 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.” 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.

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. 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.” Predictably, high school students also relate physical space to status.

Teen Status Systems and Consumerism

Here the level of analysis shifts. We have been focusing on why teenagers behave the way that they do. Now we will focus on the link between teenage status systems and the broader society—and more specifically consumer capitalism.

Scope of the Teenage Market

Children and especially teenagers are important consumers not only because they are potential customers in the present but also for two other reasons. According to Professor James U. McNeal in *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*, there are three markets: children as a primary market spending their own money; as a significant influence on their parents’ spending; and as a future market when they become adults. All of these become more important as children develop into adolescents.

Teenagers are a lucrative current market. While estimates of adolescent spending power vary from source to source, all agree that the level of spending by 12 to 17 year olds is unprecedented. Peter Zollo heads one of the marketing research firms that focus on teenagers. He reports that America’s 12–19 year-olds spent roughly $94 billion of their own money in 1998, up from $63 billion four years earlier. Other estimates are as much as thirty-five percent higher than this. To put these figures in perspective they are roughly comparable to the estimated initial cost of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.
Teenagers also influence adult spending. Advertisers have begun courting young consumers even for big-ticket items such as cars, airline tickets, expensive family vacations, computers, and entertainment centers. Ford has ads in Teen Magazine, and BMW markets to adolescents as well. Hyatt Hotels and Resorts assembled a group of 12–17 year olds to advise them about desired services at Hyatt hotels as well as assist in decision-making for their new youth-oriented Camp Hyatt program. Minivan and Sport Utility Vehicle producers advertised extensively in the children’s magazine Crayola Kids—though obviously children do not directly purchase these products. Delta Airlines started a youth-oriented program including a magazine and birthday greetings, as well as discounts for parents. While car, hotel, and airline companies do not see young people as the primary customer, they recognize that children have a major influence on which products their parents choose.

Perhaps most important, teenagers are seen as a crucial future market. As noted in chapter one, adolescence is the stage of life when people develop the sense of the identity they will draw on as adults. This includes tastes and preferences likely to last a lifetime. Music is an obvious example. Typically adults show nostalgia and loyalty about the music of their adolescence—even if they learn to appreciate a greater variety of musical styles. Marketers are aware of the long-term impact of habits and taste developed in adolescence and they are concerned to shape taste and brand loyalty during this seminal period. A variety of firms including airlines, banks, investment companies, and, of course, retailers invest in marketing to customers of the future.

Taking Aim at Teenagers

Because of the three markets outlined above, teenagers have become the target of massive marketing and advertising campaigns. These campaigns shape their selection and use of a broad range of commodities. Advertising is also a core feature of the symbolic milieu within which young people grow up—and hence their very being and sense of the world are shaped by such ads. By the time American children graduate from high school they will have spent 18,000–22,000 hours in front of the television compared to only 13,000 hours in the classroom. Children and adolescents spend more time watching TV and videos than any other activity besides sleeping.

“Advertisers pay a premium to reach young viewers,” according to The Washington Post. The article continues, “For example, although [the youth-oriented Dawson’s Creek] ranked only 76th among all viewers in the Nielsen survey, the WB has charged advertisers about $250,000 for a 30-second commercial during the show. That’s about what CBS charges for time on ‘60 Minutes,’ which draws twice the number of viewers as ‘Dawson’.” Teenagers are willing to experiment with new products and so companies see them as customers whose loyalty is up for grabs. As an article
in the traditionally conservative *Economist* reported, the strategy is “Hook them on a brand today, and with any luck they will still be using it in the next century.” These companies not only advertise the nature of their products, but also attempt to associate their products with cultural images that appeal to children, including the Flintstones, Batman, and a whole array of Disney characters and various “superheroes.” Most sport shoe and apparel companies have one or more celebrity athletes in their ads, which are aimed at teenagers. The Nike advertising campaign featuring Michael Jordan and his special line of athletic shoes is a classic example. Rock and rap music stars are also featured in ads aimed specifically at teenagers. Very few ad-free zones exist for adolescents, as marketing permeates TV, the Internet, magazines, and even public schools.

To the degree that adults are concerned about the consumerism of teenagers, they usually blame the “usual suspects”: the businesses that make products aimed at teenagers and the marketers and advertisers that attempt to persuade adolescents to buy these. But to understand both the reasons for teenage consumerism, and more generally the patterns of behavior characteristic of teenagers, we need to look beyond the “usual suspects” and consider the role of some “un-indicted co-conspirators”: teachers, public officials and parents.

### Ways of Profiting: Businesses, Teachers, Officials, and Parents

Obviously, corporations spend billions of dollars attempting to both draw on and stimulate teenagers’ status concerns in order to sell them products. What is less obvious is how other adults benefit from the way that teenage life is organized.

### Constant Complaints and Lame Laments

The very notions of “adolescence” and “teenagers” imply that this is “a difficult age”—full of dangers and temptations for young people, and annoyance and frustration for adults. In most societies adults bemoan younger peoples’ lack of respect for tradition and their impropriety. Yet, despite a half a century of adult complaints, and sometimes outrage, few changes have occurred in the way adults organize the lives of adolescents: they are sent off to schools for five days a week, sorted by age, and supervised by a few teachers. As school attendance and years of schooling increased, more and more young people have been kept in a state of postponed maturity for longer and longer. Clearly, this is likely to increase the importance of peers and decrease the significance of adults—resulting in behaviors that adults have long grumbled about. When those with real power complain loud and long about the behavior of subordinates—without really doing anything—we need to ask why. Often those in authority are wed to patterns of social organization that make the teenage behavior they lament likely if not inevitable.
Cui Bono and Co-dependence

The Latin phrase *cui bono* asks the question, “Who benefits?” Having already pointed to the obvious—that businesses benefit from teenagers—I will focus on three other groups that benefit from the existing patterns.

*Students* seldom want fundamental changes. While many high school students are troubled and alienated, they are the minority. Most students report that they are reasonably content. They respect and appreciate their parents. The majority of adolescents have a considerable amount of leisure time to spend with their friends. High school students may complain about the boredom of school and the constraints placed on them by adults, but for the most part they realize they have a pretty good life. Relatively few young people are pleading to be allowed to earn their own living or to take on the level of responsibilities that people their age faced in earlier historical periods.

*Teachers, school administrators, and public officials* are rarely in favor of shrinking or even radically changing the education system. Politicians find supporting education attractive because it is much easier to promise a better future than to actually improve the present. Nearly everyone wants schools to be more effective, and most teachers work hard to accomplish this. Better teaching, revised curricula, and improved facilities may help. Such measures do not, however, address the issue of informal youth cultures. In short, while our present schools often frustrate politicians, educational officials, and teachers, they are seldom in favor of a fundamental reorganization of education. Instead politicians, officials, educators and citizens engage in their favorite activity: revising the curriculum. Commonly such reforms are taken in stride or ignored as young people go about the more important business of spending time with their friends.

Most *parents* love their children, want the best for them, and often make significant sacrifices on their behalf. But this does not mean that parents do not indirectly benefit from the social arrangements that cause the kind of adolescent behavior they criticize. One aspect of this might be called “leaving children.” Raising children is very hard work and most parents—good, loving parents—are more than happy to see them go off to school for the better part of the day. “Quality time” may create good emotional ties between parents and children, but this is not a substitute for a network of adults who know what their children and the neighbors’ children are doing in the afternoon and evening. Many children and adolescents—good kids who love their parents—will still engage in risky behaviors if they can do so undetected. I am not suggesting that parents should stay home, but only that not doing so has significant consequences, not simply at the level of individual children and families, but at the level of the neighborhood, the community, and the society.

A second form of adult behavior might be called “indulging children.” Parents’ absence from their children’s lives may be a source of guilt for a parent. One way to appease this guilt is by spending money on them. Joan Chiaramonte, vice president...
of a market research firm, states that because parents have such a limited amount of
time with their children, they do not “want to spend it arguing over whether to go to
McDonald’s or Burger King,” and so give in quickly to their children’s demands.16

“Using children” to display the family’s status is another way parents reinforce teenage
behavior. Some parents attempt to demonstrate their wealth and status via their children.
Until the middle of the twentieth century, men earned most of the income for the fam-
ily, while women, as “traditional housewives,” were responsible for providing services to
family members and converting money into status.17 In general, today’s adults are too
busy earning income to attend to many of the subtle fine points of showing it off within
local neighborhoods and communities. Increasingly children are their status symbols. For
some parents who have less time and opportunity to display their wealth in their local
community, teenagers eagerly step in to take on this “responsibility.” In this respect they
are often the contemporary “housewives” of the professional and managerial classes.

Some parents contribute to the behavior they object to in adolescents by “copying
teenagers.” In many societies the most prestigious social role was that of elder. With
his usual biting hyperbole, the novelist Tom Wolfe claims this has all changed: “In the
late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, old people in America prayed, ‘Please,
God, don’t let me look poor.’ In the year 2000, they prayed, ‘Please, God, don’t let me
look old.’ Sexiness was equated with youth, and youth ruled. The most widespread
age-related disease was not senility but juvenility. The social ideal was to look twenty-
three and dress thirteen.”18 This is a caricature of adult life, but the reality to which it
alludes is all too familiar. If, however, parents gain status by being more like teenagers,
it is difficult for them to exercise authority to change or shape the behaviors of those
teenagers. Most parents try to responsibly cope with the dilemma they face: main-
taining their own status through displays of youthfulness and sexuality, and limiting
and guiding the sexuality of their immature adolescents. This is, however, a fine and
difficult line to walk.

My intention is not to scold students, school officials and parents, or to call into
question their good intentions, sincerity, and hard work. Rather it is to suggest that
understanding adolescents requires paying serious attention to the things adults do to
create and sustain the teenage behaviors they lament.

Causation and Conspiracy

Good arguments are not improved by overstatement. Therefore I want to specify the
nature of the causal relationships I am suggesting. My argument is that the structure
of American secondary education—keeping teenagers in their own isolated world with
little economic and political power or few non-school responsibilities—results in many
teenagers being preoccupied with their status among their peers. These status concerns,
in turn, play a significant contributing role in the development and maintenance of
consumer capitalism.
One of the reasons that high school status systems are so important to this process is that they are virtually a universal experience for American youth. Of course, students vary in the way and the degree to which they participate in peer status systems. Virtually no American teenager, however, is oblivious to this aspect of his or her social environment. Moreover, this occurs at a key point in identity formation and for most people is one of their most memorable experiences. In Broke Heart Blues, Joyce Carol Oates poignant novel about high school life and its after effects, one of the characters says, “High school life is our metaphor for life that devours what remains of the remainder of life.” This does not mean that high school life automatically transforms all Americans into mindless consumers. It does mean, however, that a strong desire to have the latest commodities and fashions is likely to be seen as “normal” rather than exceptional or objectionable. The pervasiveness of the pursuit of status and its link to consumer commodities become taken-for-granted.

Attempting to assign responsibility—and hence praise and blame—for the emergence of the present system is probably futile. This is less the case, I believe, when it comes to who is responsible for the continuation of the existing system. Currently, several stock villains are criticized. First, and foremost we blame young people themselves. Another villain in the standard plot are the school officials and teachers who shape the content of students’ day-to-day lives—including the politicians who lay down policies and provide the funding for public schooling. Finally, “the media,” and to a lesser degree the businesses and corporations, which market to teenagers, are seen as corrupting influences. Certainly, young people, schools, the government, the media and corporations can be legitimately criticized for many things.

Nonetheless if we want to understand the problems of teenagers and schools, we need to focus on how most adults behave in the context of our economic institutions. More specifically we must examine the relative importance and status attributed to different social roles. In advanced capitalist societies two roles are paramount: producer and consumer. The first is reflected in a person’s occupational prestige and the second in the lifestyles they live. Roles such as spouse, parent, community volunteer, citizen, or friend may be ritualistically extolled, but they are of secondary significance. One simple indicator of this system of values is that many high status individuals—professionals and executives—would find being fired more embarrassing than being divorced or arrested for a minor offense such as driving while intoxicated. This is not because people think money is everything—usually they do not. Individuals may be conscientious spouses, parents, and citizens. They may try hard to teach their children the “right things.” But no matter what they say to their children, the very organization of their lives communicates the fundamental importance of their roles as producers and consumers—and the secondary value of most other roles. The same can be said for the organizations that shape our work-a-day world: businesses in general and corporations in particular. There are corporations who try to treat their employees well. Many make contributions to the arts, the sciences and community.
institutions. Most local businesspeople and corporation executives genuinely care about these matters. But the fundamental concern of corporations is to make a profit and this requires that they encourage employees to be good producers and the public to be eager consumers. Everything else is secondary. Their employees know this and those who wish to prosper organize their lives accordingly. And their children get the message.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. Why are psychological and biological factors not very useful in explaining the broad social patterns of teenage behavior?
2. Why is status especially important to American teenagers—even though this has not been the case for those of the same age in other societies?
3. What are the four elements of the theory of status relations?
4. Name some of the ways that teenage status systems are similar to other status systems. How does the theory of status relations help to understand these similarities?
5. Why does the very structure of schools tend to make students preoccupied with their status?
6. Why are teenage status systems an important contributor to consumerism in the U.S.?
7. Imagine that we were exposed to the same amount of advertising as we are today, but that most was produced by political parties aimed at persuading us to support their policies, or by religious groups trying to persuade us to believe what they believe? Would we take this for granted as “normal” in the same way that we do the current commercial advertising that encourages us to buy products?

NOTES
2. Such moves may be only relative. Hence, if those at the bottom gain additional respect, it does not mean that anyone at the top will have to move to the bottom, but only that the distance between the top and the bottom will have been reduced.
3. “Wannabe” is a slang contraction of “want to be,” meaning trying to be a member of a group to which you do not belong. There are various spellings: wanabie, wanna-be, etc.
4. This is not to say that the importance of these factors is the same in all social settings, age groups, or periods. Tedesco and Gaier (1988), found that in choosing friends the importance of physical characteristics and achievement declined relative to interpersonal qualities as the students matured. Suitor and Reavis
(1995), comparing college students who had graduated between 1979 and 1982 with those who had graduated in 1988–89 found that their had been very little change in the significance of these factors in determining peer status. They did, however, find that the respect women received for athletic achievement had increased.

5. Eder and Kinney (1995), using both qualitative and quantitative data, found that this was the case for younger students in the 6th through 8th grades in middle schools.

6. See Sanford and Eder (1984), for a study of humor in a middle school. They identify four types of humor: memorized jokes, funny stories, practical jokes, and humorous behavior. While we did not systematically record or code behavior by these categories, our data seem to indicate that funny stories are a more common form of humor among older adolescents.


8. McNeal (1992) and (1998),


17. See Collins (1992). My discussion of women’s roles focuses on modern societies, and especially the middle classes. Obviously, in many historical situations women have played a major role in the process of productions as well as consumption.


REFERENCES


