Study examines high schoolers' accuracy in classification of their peers

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A study led by UIC's Rachel Gordon examines the accuracy of adolescent peer group classifications based on similar values, behaviors, and interests. Credit: John Schnobrich

Adolescents transitioning into high school encounter a large number of

unfamiliar peers, who they quickly label into groups by using an individual's appearance as their guide.

But how do visible queues of high school cliques correlate with what youth say about themselves?

Are adolescents that are stereotyped by peers as jocks actually more sports-oriented, populars more well-liked, and loners more lonely than the average high schooler?

A new study led by University of Illinois Chicago researcher Rachel Gordon, in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Texas at Austin, examines the accuracy of these peer group classifications based on similar values, behaviors, and interests.

The study, which is published in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, shows that peer crowd classification predicts aspects of unknown peers' mental health, academic achievement, extracurricular involvement, social status, and risk-taking behaviors.

"This study offers insights into the link between perceptions and reality and the social-psychological shortcuts that can, on the one hand, make youths' lives easier and, on the other hand, pigeonhole others into categories different from their true selves," said Gordon, professor of sociology and a fellow of the Institute for Health Research and Policy at UIC.

The researchers, who build on their earlier work on modern-day adolescent experiences, used video and survey data from a subgroup of U.S. youth who were born in 1991 and attended high school in the mid- to late- 2000s. These children were recruited at birth for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development.

To determine relevant peer crowds, the researchers assembled 10 focus groups totaling 61 approximate same-age peers as the youth in the previous study. Participants were asked to describe crowds they encountered in high school and their feedback led to the identification of nine peer crowds used in the study—"populars," "jocks," "smarts," "fine arts," druggies/stoners," "emo/goths," "anime/mangas," "troublemakers," and "loners."

Participants were also asked to view seven-second video clips of 15-year-olds and classify them into one of the groups. Ratings based on the short video clips were compared to what the depicted youth actually said about themselves.

For each outcome of the students' self-assessment, the researchers placed crowds into sets predicted by the focus group members to fall into low, middle, and high levels. The hypothesized low mental health group reported more depressive symptoms and loneliness than the middle group, as predicted. In terms of sports participation, the hypothesized high group was more involved in sports than both the middle and low groups. Lastly, the hypothesized high risk-taking group reported engaging in a higher average number of risks compared to the middle group.

"In many cases, these associations were consistent with expectations, based on what same-age focus groups predicted would be the hallmarks of various crowds," said Gordon, who chairs the Institute of Government and Public Affairs' working group on education and learning.

Other notable findings include:

- Focus groups did not consider "smarts" to be part of the low mental health group, despite "smarts" reporting greater loneliness than other crowds.

- Both the "fine arts and "anime/mangas" were assumed by focus groups as having middle levels of achievement. Members of the "fine arts" group had relatively high achievement in terms of their GPAs and advanced English enrollment. "Anime/mangas" had high GPAs but were among the crowds with the lowest enrollment in advanced English courses.
- "Smarts" had unexpectedly low sports participation compared to other crowds although focus group members viewed them as all-around engaged in extra-curricular activities.
- Despite being placed by focus groups in the middle, "jocks" had lower arts participation than almost all other crowds.
- "Smarts and "anime/mangas" engaged in less risk-taking than other crowd members, although focus groups expected them to fall in the middle.

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