GRAVITATION
&
CLIQUES

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Why do cliques form? How is identity formed during adolescence?

This installation deals with stereotypes. I am exploring how stereotypes and cliques form in high-school. I researched how people socially gravitate towards one another in search of identity and belonging. In the process, I researched the psychology behind identity formation. Psychologist Erik Erikson explains how behaviors stem from the human instinct to form social groups to survive.

I used photography to explore this topic. I asked peers to dress up as stereotypes they would be identified with or ones commonly known in high-school. I sought to make my photographs look like bad high-school portraits to show an exaggerated reality of what stereotypes create. In order to harmonize all the photos together, I kept the lighting and editing consistent to concentrate more focus on the subjects and how they presented themselves.

I was in a clique in middle school and it influenced my identity today. It made me realize that I do not need to be a part of an exclusive group to feel secure with my identity and my social life. Now that I'm no longer in a clique, I find it interesting to observe how cliques form and behave.

I want the viewer to ponder why people gravitate to each other to create an identity.

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This paper addresses how teenagers gravitate to one another to create cliques. I will be exploring how and why humans instinctively group together. This paper will also explore how self-identity is formed through high school and how our environment and thinking shapes the people we are.

Middle school was a pivoting stage of my self-identity and changed the person I became in high school. I'm still changing in high school and I'm sure I won't be the same person that I am now, in my senior year. I joined a clique in middle school, and luckily managed to break away from it, and find personal growth that benefitted who I became.

I'm looking through embarrassing photos on Facebook late at night. The screen of the computer is the only source of light that illuminates my face. Feeling nostalgic, I open up folders I haven't opened since middle school. The neon colors and emoticons are almost blinding. A photo of my friends and I posing at the museum in our Abercrombie & Fitch sweaters over our lime green t-shirts take me back to 4th grade. I haven't been in a clique since I was in middle school. I remember noticing how all of my friends wore Ugg boots and *only* Hollister or Abercrombie. I felt like I needed to look like them in order to be closer and feel like I was a part of something special.

Walking into class on Monday morning, I was proudly sporting my new fit. My salmon Abercrombie sweater was halfway zipped so that the Abercrombie t-shirt could also be seen. My new Ugg boots were soft and warm and I made the extra effort that morning to avoid puddles so they wouldn't get ruined. At recess later that day, my friends complimented my outfit.

"Wow, your boots are sooo cute!! I love the chestnut color so much, my sister has the same pair!" I smiled as I quickly glanced at the surrounding boots around me, all the same style and in different colors. Everyone else at recess was wearing sneakers or different kinds of boots.

By the time middle school ended, my friends and I grew apart after we transferred to different schools. I went through phases with my style. I started watching fashion shows on the internet, following big accounts that posted outfit photos. The internet and high school had a huge influence on how I developed my own style. Freshman year I wanted people to like me in school, so I dressed like a 20-year-old fashion blogger from LA. I started not caring what other people thought about me, and I started experimenting with more colors and styles that I had never even considered.

Deep down, I think I wanted to protect myself with a hard shell. I still strive for that from time to time. It's a way to feel safe, secure, and in control of myself and my life. In middle school I wanted to surround myself with people that would offer me protection so that I would not be teased. I wanted to preserve the sensitive, easy to hurt part of myself. In order to protect that, I felt the need to form a shell that would protect me, and hiding within a group of people that accepted me became that shell.

The social basis for human behavior includes self-preservation. In order to survive, humans had to form social groups within their species. The individual and the group mutually support each other and help each other survive. We are programmed to communicate with each other and help each other out in times of need. This instinct can also be found in animals such as primates. Monkeys and apes work in ways that are similar to humans when it comes to forming groups to survive. They hunt together to get a share of food, have defense from predators, and more.

Freud, a neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis theorized that the mind is made up of a three-part structure that makes up human behavior. The id, ego, and superego are what we use in our decision making and processing.

Humans have sociologically adapted in ways that are evident today. "Stigmatization is the process by which a group excludes individuals from social interaction based on their desirability to the group. People are stigmatized for a variety of reasons, which vary wildly from group to group, but there seems to be an overall reasoning behind these exclusions. Any given

group has an ideal member, who has certain traits and displays certain behaviors. Those who do not poses these traits or show these behaviors are thus not desirable members of the group, and could potentially be harmful. As important as the need to belong is, belonging to the "wrong" group has benefits for neither the individual nor the group. While stigmatization can have a powerful effect on a person, as anyone who has lived with a teenager can likely attest, it remains an important process by which social groups maintain themselves" (Rochester Institute of Technology). This gives more insight as to why people act the way they do and why they change themselves in different environments.

Identity is a complicated aspect that also comes with being human. After our instincts to survive, we have developed a sense of self and identity. There comes a lot of questioning with our identity when we grow up in the environments that shape how we turn out as adults. Erik Erikson studied how identity has formed through the developmental stages from birth to adulthood. The peak of identity formation is during adolescence, when one is faced with a multitude of changes and big problems that seem all too much to handle. Adolescents are faced with growth spurts, sexual maturation, future decisions, and more. As a coping mechanism, adolescents form relationships, find mentors, create cliques, etc. that help when every problem seems magnified and identity is in the unknown. "A variety of changes that affect one's work, status, or interpersonal relationships can bring on a crisis that forces one to redefine oneself in terms of values, priorities, and chosen activities or lifestyle." (Erik Erikson)

At the moment, it feels like I am at one of the many peaks of my life. I'm changing a lot as a person, and so are my teenage friends. It has been observed that "The frontal lobes are, in fact, on line and working hard from babyhood onwards, but they mediate numerous complex functions, and it is the more abstract and higher-level skills that take time to mature. Fifteen-year-olds have not yet fully developed the ability to understand the consequences of their actions and act accordingly. They have difficulty with planning and organization, and learning from their mistakes. They often act impulsively or inappropriately, they have roller-coaster emotions, and working towards distant goals rather than being unduly influenced by immediate rewards is a stretch for them" (Jenni Ogden). I find these kind of traits can start to define how adolescents usually act, and how they are labelled in high school. They can be seen as the awkward kids, the risk takers, the popular kids, etc.

Cliques in high school are most usually prevalent. There's always a group of people that seem to never be apart from one another, and only hang out with certain groups. The biological reason for why cliques become what they are is because of the "desire for familiarity and certainty, for control and dominance, and for security and support" (Stanford News Service). I want to be able to deconstruct how cliques form, and what makes them up. At first, it might seem an exclusive group of people is just a group of mean people. But there is something to understand about why these groups are close knit and together, and it stems from natural human instincts. It makes people feel powerful in numbers with others who are just like them. In a way, people are creating their own handpicked families. From experience, being in a clique for me had its pros and cons. I felt like I was part of a secret club that only special people could be in. I didn't feel powerless because I had people to sit with at lunch. Whenever we walked places together, I wanted people to see us and see how special we were. I was a pretty terrible and stuck up kid in middle school. I feel this way now about myself when I was younger because I wanted to feel better than others through the power of my clique. I don't hold those values anymore because I don't think feeling power over people is a healthy way to feel good about yourself. I know now I am no better or worse than others in my environment.

The cost of being in a clique was not opening my eyes up to other ideas that strayed from within the group. There wasn't much space for individuality and I had trapped myself in my own box. With my experience of being in a clique, I felt restricted to like what I truly liked and felt I couldn't completely express myself. I often discouraged people or forced myself to stop liking the things I really liked because it didn't fit in the mold. I remember being secretive about my music taste because I listened to Tchaikovsky and Bach and my friends listed to Miley Cyrus and Katy Perry. I slowly stopped listening to what I truly liked and forced myself to listen to more pop music. A positive part of being in a clique was when I felt united because we all liked and wore the same things. After we all transferred to different high schools, we grew apart and didn't stay friends. I was out in the wild, where everything and everyone was a foreign concept because I'd never paid attention to it in the bubble I put myself in. I gravitated to new people that I genuinely liked. I did notice similar cliques forming but I didn't feel like they were an essential part of my life anymore. Proving myself in high school wasn't a priority because I realized it simply didn't matter. People leave high school and forgot half the people and half the things that happened anyway and we would all just move on with our independent lives. I was able to explore more of my identity and pursue more of my creative hobbies. I started watching live streams of the Marc Jacobs show and spent hours on fashion blogs. I started taking pictures. I became more and more happy with myself amongst the few identity crises that I had. My happiness was being proud of sharing the music I liked and being confident in what I wore. I truly liked the person I became. My crises included cutting off more than a foot of my hair, oversharing online, and changing my entire wardrobe. I got a job at a paint studio and I made friends with people who loved the same thing I did. I became a lot happier with my life because I found one outside of school and I found what made me happy. If I hadn't been in a clique to realize all of this, I might have still been an awkward kid struggling to clearly see what I wanted. I was lucky to have my experience with cliques become a positive one, but that isn't the case for many. I notice people in my high school in the same friend groups that they've had since freshman year.

Cliques can be rewarding with social acceptance and feeling united, but they also keep people in boxes. There is so much more reward in finding yourself and people who you naturally work with. There is clearly a biological reason for why people seek out social groups, but there comes a time to understand that being in a group isn't an essential part of life. We are all on our own separate wavelengths. Learning to do your own thing is what is most important when it comes to your identity.

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