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**The Formation of Status Groups among Adolescents and Teenagers in American  
Schooling: An Examination of Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids from the Film *Mean Girls***

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Why are many teenagers so obsessed with the clothes they wear? How does American schooling segregate themselves by class, race, and gender? Why are adolescents so obsessed with who they sit with at lunch? In the film, *Mean Girls*, director Mark Water portrays how are teenagers constantly obsessed with who they hang out with because the ones they associate themselves has a huge effect on their social or political status in American schooling. Generally, the formation of status group hierarchy among teenagers is often their starting point for learning “political” skills and building social networks in American high school (Milner, 2004, 21). Typically, American teenagers who hold high status on-campus would often discuss with students their romantic relationship more frequently than other life issues such as family, money, or academic stress (Milner, 2004, 22). Milner (2004) defines status as “the accumulated approval and disapproval that people express toward an actor or an object” (p. 29). In other words, groups that are regarded as high or low status are more likely to develop and create strong boundaries and distinctive subcultures in the classroom (Milner, 2004, 80). As a result, changing group status once their peers have categorized them is extremely difficult (Milner, 2004, 83). Hence, the formation of status groups among adolescents is quite important because many often have limited economic or political power in society; they are constantly evaluated or judged by their immediate surroundings; and they often have strong influence from their peers and social groups.

To enumerate, during the film, popular girls such as Regina, Cady, and Karen were often pressured to fit in, stand out, and keep up with their status group identities as a way to gain a sense of appreciation or acceptance from their immediate social surroundings. Nowadays, the relationship between appearance and status begins in childhood (Milner, 2004, 249). A child’s freedom and ability to consume in a capitalistic society often have a strong influence with their status group hierarchy. Usually, members of clique or crowds are forced to behave in a certain

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way because most American teenagers are strongly influenced by peers and peer culture (Milner, 2004, 245). For example, Regina, Gretchen, and Karen would invite Cady to join their peer group system in order to establish solidarity and perhaps create conflict among those who are not members of their immediate status group (Milner, 2004, 60). Milner (2004) defines conflict as a “strain toward the articulation of assumptions which mark that group along in order to reinforce solidarity among its members” (p. 99). As such, teenagers are often forced to develop friendships that would not only give them social support but would also provide them emotional gratification during their years in schooling (Milner, 2004, 10).

Nonetheless, a key source of status is conformity to the norms of the status group. Usually, student norms can be identified as beauty, athletic ability, clothes, uniforms, letter jackets, speech, body language, humor, music, dancing, singing, and even space or territory (Milner, 2004, 44). Max Weber once coined the term status groups as “social formations that were based on differences in status and lifestyle” (Milner, 2004, 22). In other words, status groups are viewed as those who share common lifestyle, similar patterns of consumption, and similar symbols and rituals. They are seen as a social formation based on status and lifestyle.

Historically, the notion of status is seen as inexpandable because if someone moves up in the status structure, someone else will have to move down (Milner, 2004, 96). For instance, Regina, Gretchen, or Karen were obsessed with music, clothing, and fashion because they wanted to gain high status in their social group (Milner, 2004, 5). Typically, the idea of consumerism can be identified as expensive clothing, limousines to go to prom, or even renting out a hotel suite for an all-night party. Adolescent who do consume, particularly those from wealthy parents like Regina and Cady, often are viewed to be a part of an ‘elite status group’. Weber (1946) notes that elite status groups are collectively bound together by personal ties and

shared convictions that generate their own distinctive cultural traits, tastes, and styles. The shared status culture helps group monopolize scarce, social, and cultural resources by providing coherence to existing social networks and facilitating the development of co-membership (Youn, 2013). As a result, cultural resources such as purchasing expensive clothing or obtaining luxurious cars can often lead to strength of social ties and networks. These social resources, in turn, become critical factors in gaining access to powerful individuals and dominant institutions as portrayed in the film *Mean Girls*. Nevertheless, the formation of status groups between dominant and subordinate groups play an integral role for Regina, Cady, and Karen because American schooling generates status cultures, status groups, as well as class position. Because teenagers and adolescents have the power to create an informal social world in which they can evaluate one another (Milner, 2004, 4), the peer status system is often conceptualized as an important component of consumer capitalism to which American schooling teaches us today.

Aside from consumerism, the film also portrayed many types of associations or relationships that have led to the creation of many status groups hierarchy in high school. One common theme shown in the film was dating someone popular in order to build status profile. For instance, during the movie, Cady would date Regina's ex-boyfriend Aaron because she believes that their relationship would increase their profile in her status group. Despite the fact that Regina would eventually help Cady date Aaron, she would go on to recognize that Cady's desire to date Aaron would increase their overall popularity in high school (Milner, 2004, 65). In addition to dating, another common theme that occurred was being invited to the right parties as a mark of high status (Milner, 2004, 72). For example, in the end of the film, Cady would host a party and not invite Janis or Damian because she wanted to date Aaron without the possibility of losing her best friends. In other words, one can consider partying as an essence of being part of

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the “popular crowd” or “being cool” (Milner, 2004, 72). Some parties emphasize solidarity and togetherness while others are set up to break friendships or relationships (Milner, 2004, 73).

Consequently, the role of cultural capital in a capitalistic society can enable students to access hierarchical positions in the social structure. As meritocracy intensifies, one’s awareness of one’s place in larger society becomes increasingly important (Youn, 2013).

In essence, status groups in American schooling have distinctive social properties that has made adolescents different from the economically-based formations we call “classes” (Milner, 2004, 182). Though maintaining high levels of consumption is critical to the economic prosperity of advanced capitalist societies, the rapid changes in fashion will continue to serve as a central component of maintaining high levels of consumption and economic demand for American schooling (Milner, 2004, 180). Laurence Steinberg once argued in *Beyond the Classroom* that the primary concern with schools is the result of who students are and what they do outside of their formal educational processes (Milner, 2004, 19). As a result, the formation of status groups among American teenagers provides them a unique opportunity to understand their interrelationships with their peers. Today, much of American students are growing up within a broad, highly stratified social system (Lareau, 2003, 15). If we want to understand the problems of teenagers in schooling, we need to understand how most adults behave in the context of our economic institutions (Milner, 2004, 169). By doing so, parents and teachers can better prepare adolescents to fully integrate themselves for the global competitive knowledge-based society. As Milner (2004) concludes in *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*: “The crucial prerequisite to changing the lives of our children is for the adults who care about them to change their own lives” (p. 202).

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