



## ***The “Out” Crowd: Resisting the Stereotypes of High School and Teen Culture***

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High school is a pivotal time in teens' lives, as it is the time they begin to form their identities outside of their families. They often look to images in the media in order to find out how teenagers in high school are supposed to act, and thus begin to engage in those activities. Alcohol, partying, gossip, and keeping up with the latest fashion trends become the pinnacle of high school life, because those are the issues the media chooses to depict as “normal” teenage concerns. High school, as an institution itself, perpetuates these images through the emphasis placed on the status of individuals and their group of friends.

I, however, had a very different experience of high school due to my group of friends and the activities that we participated in. My group rebelled against what we were being told was teen culture, and further, twisted some of those elements to retain a new meaning for our group. Also, we looked for ways to oppose the school as an institution by participating in activities that not only protected our group identity, but were also implicitly recognized as taboo according to teenage culture. Unlike many

other teens, we did not think that high school was a living hell, because we were always having fun and finding new ways to rebel both against the school, and against the stereotype of what high schoolers should be.

There are three theorists who have informed the way I frame my high school experience. Murray Milner Jr., James Scott, and Julie Bettie have all examined how institutional forces affect social interaction, with both Milner and Bettie focusing specifically on high school.<sup>1</sup>

Milner views high school as the ultimate institution of hegemony in which the ideological power of the school becomes so ingrained in the students that they accept this influence as both natural and universal.<sup>2</sup> For Milner, high school is a deferral mechanism that affords students no independence. Therefore, the social interactions among students are solely determined by the constraining structure of the high school itself. As a result of this rigid structure, student relations are based on consumerism and status differentiation. Further, students constantly engage in activities with one another in order to compete for the coveted positions at the top of the status hierarchy they develop within the school. Milner, however, ignores, or misses completely, the ability for teens to gain agency within the institution of high school.

Scott, on the other hand, examines the forms of everyday resistance in social interaction between dominant and subordinate groups.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Milner, however, Scott

1. I will focus specifically on these three texts throughout the paper: Murray Milner Jr.'s *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2004; James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990; and *Women Without Class*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003 by Julie Bettie.

2. Murray Milner Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2004.

3. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

awards agency to subordinate groups. Scott rejects the Gramscian view of hegemony, claiming instead that subordinate groups achieve symbolic aspects of resistance, even when they appear to conform to the dominant ideology. For example, Scott uses the term “hidden transcript” to refer to the discourse that occurs “offstage,” away from where power holders can observe the speeches, feelings, and actions that are expressed. Further, he claims that it is strategically beneficial for subordinate members to perform as if they adhere to the dominant ideology, whether or not that is actually the case. The hidden transcripts, coupled with performance, play important roles in maintaining this anti-Gramscian agency. For Scott, subordinate groups are less constrained ideologically because they can express themselves freely and safely within the hidden transcript, even though they may be more constrained in action due to their limited options and the repercussions for any actions as a result of their position in the power structure. By consciously manipulating pre-existing norms that outwardly appear to legitimize the dominant ideology, subordinate groups find agency to rebel in environments that seem to have no available agency, precisely because they appear to conform to the hegemonic notions of the institution.

Bettie analyzes high school from a theoretical framework that encompasses both Milner and Scott’s perspectives. Like Milner, Bettie views high school as an institutional force that shapes and determines the different types of interaction among high school students, particularly based on race and class. In her study of high school girls, group identities were established according to these two categories, and placed in a hierarchy with white, middle class girls at the top and Mexican working class girls at the bottom. Further, the school reproduced this hierarchy through its structural framework that emphasized academic achievement.<sup>1</sup> However, she also recognizes the opportu-

nity for the resistance and agency that Scott speaks of. For Bettie, students’ autonomy takes the form of the “badges of dignity” that they wear, each with their own meaning specific to each group. For example, the prep girls in Bettie’s study wore badges of academic excellence and high school conformity, whereas non prep girls wore badges of motherhood and female maturity.<sup>2</sup> For the non preps, their badges signified their resistance to the dominant ideology of the preps. The different groups of girls defined themselves in opposition to one another, with each group performing its own specific symbols of agency. Therefore, while Bettie does prescribe to the theory that high school as an institution establishes certain patterns of interaction, she also acknowledges that within this confined space, students find ways to create a space of their own in which to resist the hegemonic norms of the institution.

These three theorists have helped me frame my group’s experience of resistance against the institutions of both high school and teen culture. The rituals that we engaged in, such as gossip, put downs, and our exclusivity, were used to protect our group solidarity. This solidarity is what allowed us to engage in our activities of rebellion, such as having piggyback races or cartwheeling down the hall, dressing in costume, or pushing each other’s chairs into the middle of the classroom during lecture, in the first place. Milner’s analysis is not flexible enough to explain the way in which my group dealt with both the school and other groups of students. There were other mechanisms at work besides the structural aspects of high school that shaped and determined our social interactions. Bettie and Scott’s analyses are more applicable to my group’s high school experience. While our badges were not based on race and class like

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1. Julie Bettie, *Women Without Class*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

2. For more on badges of dignity consult Bettie, 2003, 4, 60-63, 71, 85-86.

those Bettie discusses, other signifiers, like our actions, were employed to represent our group identity, an identity that was defined in opposition to not only other groups of students but also the stereotype of how high schoolers should look and act. Similarly, our rebellious activities are demonstrative of Scott's framework of everyday resistance, as well as the creation of agency in a seemingly agency-free environment through our use of hidden transcripts. The use of these three theorists helps to shape the patterns and dynamics of my group of friends. It is important to note, however, that my group of friends did have constraints placed upon our autonomy. The larger institutional framework required that we not only attend school, but also that we follow the basic school rules. This is not to say that we could not express agency or resistance, but that we had to frame our resistance in safe ways. Therefore, our activities of rebellion were activities in which there were no stated rules prohibiting them, and thus there was room for manipulation.

I went to high school in a public school located in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, where there was little economic or racial diversity among the students. Perhaps for this reason, status symbols were essential in determining a group of friends' identity among other similar students. These status symbols became our version of Bettie's "badges of dignity." The parking lot was full of expensive cars that students owned themselves, while the halls were full of students sporting the latest trends from Abercrombie and Fitch, gossiping about who did what at the party over the weekend and who got caught by the police, passing around a homework assignment for their friends to use, or trying to decide where to go off campus for lunch. My group of friends, however, chose not to participate in any of the activities of these other students; in fact, we defined ourselves in opposition to most of them. We often viewed these other groups with contempt for the way that

they tried so hard to be "cool." My friends and I did not shop at Abercrombie and Fitch or have expensive cars, if we had them at all. We were not interested in the typical status signifiers that other students prided themselves in. Instead, we focused on the solidarity of our group, an identity that allowed us to practice the oppositional forms of resistance that we prided ourselves in.

### **PROTECTING THE SANCTITY OF THE GROUP**

My group of friends was, and still is, extremely close. Our group is mixed gender, and formed freshman year of high school when my next door neighbor and I merged our individual groups of friends together to form one big group. The two of us had gone to different elementary and middle schools, but having grown up together we were close, and thus each knew the other's friends. For this reason, everyone in the combined group was comfortable with one another right away, and we all grew close quickly. We knew that we could always count on each other, which created a safe space within the group that enabled us to truly be ourselves at all times. Establishing a safe space in high school is crucial, as it is a time when individuals are in a high stress environment in which they are constantly performing and being evaluated on their performance.<sup>1</sup> Further, as previously discussed, many students are undergoing the process of figuring out who they are in high school, and thus, a space in which they are truly free to express themselves is highly valued. For all these reasons, our safe space had to be protected, and many of our group

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1. Both Bettie and Milner discuss how performance plays a role in high school. Bettie found that high school girls perform the identity of a certain group in order to gain membership into that group. Milner uses performance as a means of establishing how individuals showcase their status through their clothes, speech patterns, and other forms of group membership, and also evaluate the status of others.

rituals were conducted with this goal in mind.

One of the characteristics of our group is that we were very selective about who was considered “in” the group. Recently I asked my friends how they thought people perceived us in high school. One of them commented that at a party he had recently attended a high school acquaintance told him we were “the most exclusive clique in school.” Another immediately said that he, too, had been told the same thing on numerous occasions. For the most part, it is true that we were not very receptive to new members, although there were exceptions.<sup>1</sup> We were so exclusive, in fact, that a few of the people in the group started to date, and their relationships lasted for the last two or three years of high school.<sup>2</sup> This exclusivity does not mean that we did not have friends outside of the group, but rather that we hung out with those friends on an individual basis. Because of the lack of mobility between groups in my school, membership in every group was restricted. For example, two people from two different groups could be friends inside school, during their classes, but they never hung out with each other’s groups and the two groups never hung out together. For example, I had friends

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1. Often, when a member of the group dated someone outside the group, the nonmember hung out with the group as well. Though we were all nice to this person and in most cases genuinely liked him or her, this outsider was still not “in” the group. We were still very protective about group boundaries because this person did not share the deep personal connections to the group that members had. Also, what we perceived as the temporary nature of this person kept him or her from permanently settling into the group.

2. This is not to say that people did not date outside the group, as discussed in the previous footnote, but demonstrates how close of a group we were. Members were able to carry their friendships one step further into relationships that lasted throughout most of high school. For these individuals, group identity was strengthened even further because they had both their best friends and their significant other in the same group.

from my soccer team, but I either hung out with my soccer girls or my group, never both together.

While I cannot speak for the rest of the school’s cliques, I believe that my group of friends was exclusive in order to protect the boundaries of the group. The group provided a safe space in which members could be themselves and act in certain ways without fear of rejection and abandonment.<sup>3</sup> For it to serve this purpose, the integrity of the group had to be maintained, which limited members to only those that had the same agenda — rebelling against the institutions of high school and teen culture. Therefore, the exclusivity was a means of keeping those who represented all we were against from tainting our safe space, and consequently, can be read as a form of rebellion in and of itself; it provided us with the power and autonomy to not only determine who was in the group, but also afforded us independence, as we did not need others to define us.

The safe space created within the group was integral for most, if not all, of the group rituals. Our safe space can be linked to Scott’s notion of hidden transcripts, which take place outside of the realm of the public sphere. These exchanges occur under two conditions: first that the interaction takes place “in a sequestered social site where the control, surveillance, and repression of the dominant are least able to reach, and second when this sequestered social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences of domination.”<sup>4</sup> Hidden transcripts allow individuals to express feelings that they may not have been able to express otherwise due to their necessary performances in the face of domination and oppression.<sup>5</sup> They also serve as a bonding mechanism among those expressing the hidden transcript. The hidden transcripts that occurred among my group of friends

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3. I will discuss this point in greater detail below.

4. Scott, 1990, 120.

contained these facets that Scott describes. The safe space created by the group facilitated the hidden transcripts that allowed members to express themselves fully without the fear of being judged or ostracized. More importantly, many of the group rituals, such as gossip and making fun of each other, occurred only in the hidden transcript, away from the mainstream culture and only with group members. These rituals will now be examined in closer detail.

The daily rituals that might have appeared mundane to an outsider were, in actuality, significant sources of bonding for members in the group. Milner describes activities such as put-downs and gossip as forms of power and manipulation that are executed with malicious intent. In his opinion, these actions serve as a means for prohibiting others from moving up the hierarchy in the high school status system because they denigrate the status of the victim while simultaneously elevate the status of the instigator. While I am certainly not denying that Milner's theory can be the motive behind this kind of behavior, there are other functions of these actions. In my group of friends, the reverse of Milner's analysis was true, and these activities served as a way to bring us all closer together.

Put downs and poking fun at one another were a major component of the dynamics within my group of friends. In fact, we were constantly mocking each other. We would find out about something a member did, and then think of a witty way to tease him or her. The jokes continued throughout the entire day, usually during the times when we were all together, like during lunch or in between classes. For example, one member spent fifteen minutes describing the contents of his desk to another mem-

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5. Scott uses the example of slaves that were forced to maintain deference to their masters during the day, but at night would gather together in their quarters to express their grievances and state what they wanted to say to their masters.

ber on the phone one night, and when the rest of the group found out about this event, there was a multitude of jokes. After every remark or story he told for the next couple of days, members would make comments such as, "hey, can you tell me everything that is in your desk again?" or "so, what kind of wood is your desk made of?" When we made fun of each other with jokes such as these, it was never done with a malicious intent, although at times it felt as though the jokes would never end. For us, these insults were a way to bring us all closer together, and confirm members' insider status within the group. While some people received more bashing than others, everyone certainly had their turn. Further, it was not only one person dishing out the insults, but the entire group. Unlike in Milner's study, our put-downs were not about power or picking on weaker members of the group.<sup>1</sup> My next door neighbor frequently bore the brunt of the jokes, mostly because he had the biggest mouth, but he was a core member of the group whom everyone loved. Since we made fun of each other when we were all together, the put downs and insults were not necessarily about power relations among members of the group, but rather about the group as a whole. It was a way to express solidarity. We would feed off of one another and keep the joke going for as long as possible, sometimes bringing up a punch line long after the incident had been forgotten. In fact, members still make jokes about the desk incident. Though in a sense members were performing their wit for the rest of the group, it was not about power within the group because the joke or insult was not as good if everyone was not there to hear it and expand on it.

What is most demonstrative of this group membership mentality is that this type of joking around and insulting only occurred among members of the group. Not one of my friends would ever carry on the

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1. I will discuss power relations within the group later in the paper.

way that we did when we were all together with someone who was not “part of the group,” both because none of us would ever take the chance that someone would misinterpret the joke as mean spirited and because it was something that we did within the protected confines of the group. This aspect of the ritual is important because it exemplifies the hidden transcript nature of these interactions. Though it may not have seemed like it at the time, making fun of each other was a way of showing how comfortable we were and the affection we had for one another.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, gossip was used as a way to vent and bond with other members of the group. As in Scott’s hidden transcripts, this type of action could only occur out of the public arena among trusted individuals who were undergoing the same experiences. When gossip did occur among my friends, it always took place among the safety of our group members, out of earshot of other people. Like the put downs, gossip was not conducted with malicious intent, but rather to express the grievances the gossipers felt in a particular situation. For the most part, my group did not participate in the malevolent gossip that Milner describes.<sup>2</sup> Rather, we used gossip as a form of resistance against the stereotype of how high schoolers typically use it: gossip functioned in a way that strengthened our group identity as opposed to dissolving it. The members of the group bonded and further confirmed their membership in the group because only those who were members were privy to the gossip.<sup>3</sup> This point is important because gossip was a way to safely express what individuals could not or would not say in the public encounter that

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1. That is not to say that we did not or could not show other forms of affection for each other, but these actions reinforced those feelings.

2. “Having gossip or a juicy story to tell is also a way of gaining the group’s attention and making one’s self the center of the group’s activities, as well as lowering someone else’s status.” Milner, 2004, 93.

was the source of the gossip. Being able to express those feelings among trusted friends allowed for members to say whatever they were feeling without worrying about whether it was going to be interpreted the wrong way. For example, when one of the members started to date a girl from a different school, the group tried to welcome her and make her feel comfortable. Numerous members, however, had several encounters with her in which she came across as fake, and she was blatantly rude to many members. As a result of her actions, members began to gossip about her, in which they shared and compared their individual experiences. Because this girl was threatening the uniformity of the group, members felt that they needed to protect the group, and gossiping both acknowledged the others’ anxieties and felt proactive. Because group members were so close and knew one another inside and out, members never had to worry about acting a certain way or what the group would think, which reinforced and strengthened the bonds between each of the group members.

Gossip was usually about people outside of the group who had some form of interaction with various members of the group. However, there were instances in which we gossiped about each other. Like all other gossip, this latter kind was conducted in response to something that a member did that upset us. For example, there were times in which members removed themselves from the group for a great deal of time in order to hang out with their non-group significant other. This withdrawal upset members, which resulted in gossip about the withdrawn person. This gossip, however, was more about protecting the group and feeling as though we were losing a friend than it was about wanting to

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3. This exclusive knowledge correlates with Milner’s discussion of sharing secrets as a form of intimacy and trust. For more information on secrets and how they turn into rumors see Milner, 2004, 70-71.

hurt that person. Gossip was a means of solidifying the group in an environment in which so many people were trying to break others down. By using it to protect the group and thus flipping the potential for how gossip was used, members were not only able to express their grievances in a safe space, but also rebel against the dominant notion of gossip as something that teenagers engage in to widen the gap of power within the status system.

Although there were no power hierarchies within my group of friends, there were members that took on a more active role in the group. Even though the group was close and everyone genuinely cared for one another, leaders naturally emerged. However, unlike Scott's distinction of power relationships between and among groups in which subordinate individuals provide deference to dominant individuals,<sup>1</sup> there was no real sense of power within my group of friends. As mentioned previously, the group dynamics were never about having power over anyone else, or denigrating a member's status within the group. Rather, the more active members of the group used their leadership abilities to form a more cohesive group identity. They helped to establish the identity of resistance within the group by setting the standard for what the group stood for. These members were the first to begin the acts of resistance—such as cartwheels or the piggyback races down the halls—that the rest of the members used as models to follow. Though there were a few somewhat more active members in the group in terms of executing activities of rebellion, they did not have any power over any other member. In fact, that kind of hier-

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1. In terms of the public interaction, individuals played the subordinate role in the face of power, saving their true emotions for the hidden transcript. The way in which individuals interacted with others was based on the power relationships between those individuals, whether it was an interaction between a dominant and subordinate member, or they were both members of the dominant or subordinate group. Scott, 1990.

archy was an aspect that existed in other groups of students, one of the things that my group was rebelling against. It was everyone in the group and how we interacted together that made our group strong, not individual members. The active players made group members feel comfortable expressing their resistance, thereby forging a unified group identity that was strong enough to defy the stereotypical high school experience.

## HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS SHACKLES

High school is an institution erected upon rigid rules and regulations. Students are more or less forced to attend classes for eight hours a day, with a multitude of people all competing for status. Milner describes high school as an institution that eliminates independence, as students have no control over what they learn. The power they do have, however, lies in the status system they construct to evaluate one another.<sup>2</sup> Both individuals and groups are defined on a hierarchical scale based on certain criteria such as cars, clothes, parties, and intelligence. According to Milner, this status system delineates the patterns of interaction between groups of students, as individuals are constantly trying to either raise their status or prohibit the movement of lower status individuals into their high status bracket.<sup>3</sup>

Students' need to differentiate themselves was especially visible in my high school, where status symbols were the main way for students to distinguish themselves. While most groups of students used their

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2. Milner, 2004, 4.

3. Milner argues that individuals are constantly being judged according to how much status they have. Thus, everyday interactions between individuals, such as gossip or put downs, become driven by practices that will elevate your own status and decrease someone else's status. As previously discussed, however, in my group, these rituals did not serve this purpose.

clothes as status in order to express autonomy, my group of friends participated in odd behavior as a way to gain agency within the institution. Instead of being concerned with who was wearing what, we focused more on how to resist the norms of both the school and the other students. Our main concern was to have as much fun as we possibly could. We would do cartwheels down the hallway, have piggyback races, and frequently dress in costume for school dances. One dance had a western theme and instead of dressing provocatively in cowboy gear like most of the other students did, one of the boys in the group and I went together as a cactus and tumbleweed.<sup>1</sup> At another dance, the same boy and I bent gender norms—I wore a suit and he wore a dress complete with heels, makeup, and jewelry. These examples reveal some of the ways in which we rebelled against not only the school, but teenage culture as well. The cross dressing instance took place at the Turnabout dance, a dance in which the girls have the opportunity to ask the boys to accompany them. We decided to take this idea one step further, though, to demonstrate how the dominant culture permeates teenage thinking. Even at Turnabout, heteronormative ideas on sexuality prevail, as the girls abandon their dominant role in the proceedings after they have asked their date, relinquishing all power again to the boys. They expect the boys to pay for dinner, open doors, and more or less act as though it was the boy that invited them to the dance in the first place. Additionally, Turnabout implies that girls are not supposed to ask boys to the other dances, but instead wait for the boys to take the initiative. The cross dressing was a comment on the image of teen culture that is dominated by the idea of dances such as prom as the

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1. Students were shocked at our costume and could not believe that we were dressed so differently from everyone else. Their disbelief at our nonconformist apparel is further demonstrated by a friend telling me that his younger sister and her friends still talk about the outfits.

defining moment of high school life, accompanied by acts of chivalry and expectations that everything will be perfect. Not only was this act resistant to teenhood, but also to the rigid standards of the school, as both the faculty and the students were shocked by our appearance. Through actions such as these, my group of friends rebelled against these institutions as we sought new ways to have fun precisely because both the school and teen culture told us we were not supposed to be having fun in high school. Unlike the many students that characterize high school as hell, we liked high school because it afforded us the opportunity to act in counter hegemonic ways.<sup>2</sup> We were constantly socializing and scheming how to amuse ourselves, and did not care what other people thought about us. We enjoyed school because it was another opportunity for us to have fun and spend more time together.

Rebellious activities like those described above can be seen as performances that my group engaged in. Erving Goffman argues that there is a performative element in human nature. All actions and interactions can be viewed in a dramaturgical sense, and each actor learns how to play the part.<sup>3</sup> Goffman, however, does not examine how power, class, race, or gender influence the daily performances of individuals. Both Scott and Bettie, however, not only expand on Goffman's theory of performance, but also examine the role of these other elements in their own works. As previously discussed, Bettie examines how high school girls utilize their performances in order to gain validity in certain status groups, while Scott focuses on the power relations between dominant and subordinate individu-

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2. While we certainly had complaints about school like everyone else, overall high school was a positive experience because we were always having fun together.

3. For more information on Goffman's theories consult Randall Collins and Michael Makoowsky's *The Discovery of Society*, 6th Ed. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1998.

als that force them into a constant state of performance, both for one another and for other members in their respective groups.

My group used performance as a way to stand out and express agency in an environment comprised of two thousand other students who appeared more or less indistinguishable to an outside observer. Our acts of defiance were not performances for the other students, however. We were performing only for ourselves. This performance for the group was a way to not only amuse ourselves and have fun in an anti-hegemonic way, but it also brought members of the group closer together and affirmed the group identity. Much like Bettie found in her study of high school girls, and Scott found among members of the dominant class performing for each other, our performances reinforced our group identity and set us apart from the other groups of students. The reason that these performances were acceptable is because they were done within the safe space of the group, among those who were trusted. The ability to perform in these ways demonstrates our lack of insecurity within our group.

High school, as an institution, creates and perpetuates insecurity among the students. Teens are made to feel as though they are “uncool” or “losers” if they do not wear the right clothes, have the right car, or get invited to the right parties. This insecurity is what drives the status system in high schools, which is reinforced by the media portrayal of what high school teens are supposed to be like. For example, if the media depicts high schoolers as detached partiers obsessed with consumption, then teens embody that representation, and anyone that does not fit the characterization is cast off as abnormal, desperately attempting to change his or her fate. Because the majority of high school students are so insecure, they are critical of one another, using each other as markers for designating status.

Conversely, the safe space that was created within the confines of my group facili-

tated our ability to resist the insecurity that many other students felt. Because we did not conform to the stereotype of teen culture, we were not concerned with the status system signifiers. We were secure because we had our group identity. Due to the intense bonds we shared with one another, we knew that we were strong enough to face others and rebel against both the school and teen culture, which none of us would have been able to do solely on our own. Thus, we were able to be the antithesis of the high school stereotype and engage in our rebellious activities because we were secure and did not care what other people thought about us. Members knew that they could always count on the group to back them up in whatever endeavor they undertook. For this reason, members did not have to worry that they would be alienated for engaging in a particular activity or for not being fashionable, which allowed members to truly be themselves at all times and under all circumstances. In fact, our group dynamics were reminiscent of a sibling relationship.<sup>1</sup> Like siblings, we would make fun of each other, wrestle, and sometimes even fight, but we knew that our bonds were strong, and that we would always be there for each other. Further, we knew that we would always be friends, no matter how we each changed and grew. For this reason, we were able to be secure in our group identity, unlike many other groups of friends in high school that are driven by fear of losing their status and thus, their friends. Not only were we able to become secure with ourselves and one another because of the safe space that we constructed within the group, but we were also able to maintain this security through the exclusion of others. Our exclusivity was a way to keep insecure students from infiltrating our secure space and bring-

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1. My relationships with my siblings can be applied to the dynamics of my group of friends. With my siblings, one minute we are fighting and insulting one another, and in the next, we are laughing and getting along as if nothing had ever happened.

ing unwanted drama. Further, our security was a resistance to the notion of high school teens as insecure, a resistance that was achieved solely because we created a safe space within the group that we actively protected.

## “JUST SAY NO” TO TEEN CULTURE

Teen culture perpetuates a stereotype of high school that influences how teens shape their lives. Teens believe that they must live out the life they see depicted in the media in order to be “normal.” Just as in advertising campaigns,<sup>1</sup> a feedback loop exists in teen culture in which teens see the way that they are supposed to act in the media, act that way, and then feed that image back to the media to be re-appropriated and used in the media once again. Teens are fed the idea that normal high schoolers should not be smart or else they will be nerds, opting instead to be detached, bored, deviant, and not care about school. In fact, teens should hate high school altogether, experiencing it more as a living hell than an educational institution. Milner found that this attitude is what determined whether or not an individual was “cool.”<sup>2</sup> Further, teens are told that they should be obsessed with consumerism and status differentiation reflected through material objects, gossip, and backstabbing to enhance their position in the status hierarchy. Finally, perhaps the most defining char-

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1. *The Merchants of Cool* shows this feedback mechanism in which members of advertising companies, called “cool hunters,” search for new and upcoming styles, identities, and personas among teens, and then package those styles as the latest trend to sell back to those teens. Further, these teens take these trends and then feed them back to the companies to be used again in another form. To see this process in its full glory watch the video *The Merchants of Cool*, Barak Goodman and Rachel Dretzin, Dir. PBS Frontline, 2000.

2. According to Milner, “coolness” was determined by either deviance or blatant boredom in high school, each expressing the indifference felt for the educational process. For more on the cool factor, see pages 58-60.

acteristic of high school life, according to teen culture, is partying and underage consumption of alcohol. Parties are also sites for status differentiation, as it is an opportunity to gain status by throwing a killer party, or lose status by not being invited to the party in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Teens are told that the only way that they can have fun is by drinking, and that it is the “cool” thing to do. Many teens think that they are being rebellious by drinking, when in actuality, they are conforming to the stereotypical standards of teen culture.

My group, however, did not participate in any of these activities. We disagreed with the notion that teenagers should act the way that media sources tell them how normal teens act. We wanted to prove that our experience of high school was just as valid as, and further, more real than, teen culture’s portrayal of high school. We did not like that somebody else was trying to tell us how we should act as teenagers, and the fact that other students around us were buying into this representation and consequently mimicking it both frustrated and disgusted us. Therefore, we rebelled against this ideology by participating in counter hegemonic activities.

My group of friends consisted of smart kids who cared about doing well in school. We were among the top of our class, and we all had great ambitions for the future. We watched many smart students fall off the academic track, as they became more concerned with their image of being “cool,” and thus, stopped caring about doing well in school. Particularly for this reason, we prided ourselves on being smart, knowing that the “cool” factor would only last so long for other students. Further, because we were all smart, we were all in the same classes together, which gave us even more opportunities to socialize and engage in rebellious activities against the institution from within the classroom. For example, during class my

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3. Milner, 2004, 72-73.

neighbor and I would innocently sit in our seats and use our feet to propel a group member into the middle of the room as she sat trying to take notes. We never got in trouble for this action; the teacher would only make a joke and say to our friend, "Oh, nice of you to join us!"

As Scott indicates in his discussion of everyday resistance, because we appeared as though we conformed to the school's hegemony, we had yet another angle from which to practice resistance. Because we were smart, we were able to get away with much more than other students who did not care about school. For instance, in one of the science classrooms in my high school, there was a storage closet that connected my classroom to the next one. During labs, a group member and I would frequently go into the closet to spy on the other class and make funny faces at them. The teacher knew we were doing it, but we never got in trouble. In stark contrast, when another boy in our class engaged in the exact same activity, he got in trouble because he was perceived as a "slacker" and a "troublemaker." Similarly, during AP Biology when we were dissecting cats, my neighbor and I brought our cat into the hallway and chased freshman students with it. We were never reprimanded for this practice, which we conducted every day during the dissection unit. Instead, our teacher just laughed and said, "Oh you two!" Additionally, there were no consequences for our actions because we framed our rebellions in safe ways. Scott reinforces this notion in which protests from below escape the ramifications from above because they continue to observe the rules of society even though they are undermining them.<sup>1</sup> Because my group of friends still played by society's rules while we were rejecting the dominant hegemony, we were able to demonstrate our resistance to the institutions, while at the same time, escape unscathed.

My group did not drink in high school

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1.Scott, 1990, 92-96.

or go to parties. We found other ways to entertain ourselves without conforming to the high school stereotype, and found that we acted crazy enough without alcohol. We would go to parks to hang out and talk, wrestle, and just be with each other. We were happy to not have to see other people from high school acting a certain way just because they thought that was the way they were supposed to act. We did not want to do anything that anyone else was doing, because to us, that would be selling out and conforming. We purposefully did not engage in the "typical" high school activities as a form of resistance against teen culture.

The dynamics of other groups were very different from our own. For instance, other groups prescribed to more traditional gender norms. Most groups were very attentive to their appearance, wearing the latest styles. The boys wore collared button down shirts and cargo pants, while the girls dressed very femininely and wore massive amounts of makeup. Further, the girls would often play the "girl card" for the boys when they wanted to get their way, and the boys usually gave in. For example, one day when it was raining, I witnessed one of the girls from another group make a boy in her group go out to her car during lunch to get her softball bag, claiming that the bag was too heavy for her, and further, that her hair would get messed up from the rain. My group, however, interacted very differently. We dressed in sharp contrast to these groups, with boys and girls both wearing casual clothes usually consisting of tee shirts or sweatshirts and jeans.<sup>2</sup> Also, the girls did not wear makeup that often, if at all. Further, there was barely any division

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2.This is not to say that we were the only group in school that dressed casually, but we did so with much more consistency compared to other groups. We did not worry about what we looked like or spend much time figuring out what we were going to wear to school. Our appearance was another way for us to gain autonomy because we did not want to look like other groups.

along gender lines. None of the girls ever played the “girl card,” and the boys certainly would not have been duped by it. The boys would wrestle just as hard with the girls as they did with each other, and any joke, insult, or action was fair game for either sex.<sup>1</sup> This gender resistance also reinforces the idea of our relationships as sibilingsque. Or, perhaps, it was because of these sibling-like relationships that the boundary between genders was so easily blurred. Our group dynamics differed greatly from other groups, especially since we did not engage in any of the activities that defined other groups’ high school experience. Because we were removed from the status system within our group, our social interactions, even when they contained gossip and put downs, were used as a bonding technique that brought us all closer together as opposed to distancing us in order to achieve elevated status.

## CONCLUSION

My group of friends sought out the experience of high school from a vantage point of resistance against the high school as an institution, as well as the institution of teen culture. Our group interactions were a result of the disgust we felt for how greatly these two institutions shape teenage experiences. We were able to rebel because we had a strong group identity with a safe space

that we fought to protect. Further, we were able to get away with this rebellion without consequences because our protests still observed societal rules. As far as I can tell, we were the only group in my high school that practiced this form of resistance. Because this is the only experience of high school that I have had, I do not know if my experience is a common one. Perhaps my group was prone to this form of resistance identity because of the way our group formed. Because many of us had childhood connections from growing up together, perhaps it was easier to form a close bond that facilitated the kind of reaction we had to stereotypical teen culture. Maybe suburbanization plays a role as well, as it provided me with numerous playmates my age with whom I went to school and with whom I shared experiences from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Or perhaps it was just coincidence and we all developed the identity as a result of some experience that we all had together. Possibly there is a larger societal pattern based on race, class, or geographic location as to why my group of friends all came together under this one identity of resistance. Regardless of how we formed this identity, I am glad that we did, because it demonstrates that there is an alternative to conforming to institutional hegemony, in which individuals have the opportunity to choose for themselves how they experience high school.

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1. For example, one time one of the boys in the group pulled down the pants of one of the girls in the group in the school hallway. Most other groups would not cross this gender boundary, but in my group, instances such as this one happened frequently. Most of the time the lack of gender division was not an issue, and in fact, made us all closer as a group, but every so often a line would indeed be crossed. In this instance, the girl was upset, not because one of the boys pulled her pants down, but because her pants were pulled down. Although we acted like siblings, we were not, and thus it was possible for actions such as the one described above to go too far and for a very fine line to be crossed.

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