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The Perils of Popularity

There are two kinds of popularity - and one of them is bad.
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“Anyone who is popular,” Yogi Berra once said, “is bound to be disliked.”

As with so many Yogi-isms, this once contains more than a grain of truth. Likability, Mitch Prinstein acknowledges, is a form of popularity conducive to the establishment of satisfying relationships, personal and professional fulfillment, good health, and longevity. He argues, however, that popularity grounded in status, a measurement of visibility, influence and power, can be harmful – to those who seek and attain it and to our society.

In Popular, Prinstein (a professor of psychology and neuroscience and the director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) examines the nature, significance, and impact of both types of popularity; their roots in a part of the brain that matures in adolescence; and the role of celebrity and social media in the increasing influence of status in twenty-first century America. Drawing on the latest empirical studies, his book is an accessible and informative primer on popularity for parents (and, for that matter, anyone interested in the desires that drive behavior).

Citing a comprehensive study conducted by Joe Allen and his colleagues at the University of Virginia, Prinstein indicates that “cool” (and therefore popular) kids in high school – the first to get involved romantically and show signs of minor deviancy – tended to do less well than their former “low status” peers when they hit their twenties. They were, in fact, far more likely to abuse alcohol and marijuana; and less likely to have satisfying romantic relationships or friendships. Other longitudinal studies of adults, Prinstein reports, reveal that the pursuit of
Extrinsic goals (the trappings of popularity: fame, power, wealth, and beauty) often leads to discontent, anxiety, and depression.

Prinstein reminds us as well that social media “likes” offer adolescents (who tend to base self-esteem on how others view them) the rush that accompanies being noticed, approved, and admired by their peers. In an experiment conducted by Prinstein, adolescents became far more likely to drink alcohol, smoke pot, or have unprotected sex (or, at least, say they would) if their popular peers indicated they were doing these things. Such “reflected appraisal,” Prinstein emphasizes, often continues into adulthood. As do other damaging interpretations of social cues, including “rejection sensitivity” bias (a tendency to expect rejection, react emotionally, and create a cycle of lifelong unpopularity); and “hostile attribution bias” (a tendency to see slights as intentional that sometimes results in workplace aggression).

Prinstein concludes with recommendations for parents who want to enhance the likeability of their children and preempt (or restrain) an obsession with popularity based on status. A warm and affectionate social environment, in which parents spend time with and respect their children, he indicates, has a positive and enduring impact. “Scaffolding” the relationship, providing as much support as children need, but no more, may well produce independence, self-confidence, and respect for and trust in others. While noting that when kids enter middle school, parental intervention may seem intrusive and even damaging to relationship-building, Prinstein maintains that discussions about peers can be helpful at any time.

These suggestions, many of which will be familiar to Professor Prinstein’s readers, are certainly useful. But, when measured against the biological and cultural forces supporting status-based popularity, they do not seem all that potent. They do not give us sufficient ammunition to refute the proposition that in the years to come, to paraphrase Anaïs Nin, an increasing percentage of us will not see things as they are, but as we are. Because the next generation – and the next – will continue to look at the world through the wrong kind of “popularity-colored” glasses.