

Observation Project

Adolescent Psych

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The first adolescent I observed was a male student at a Middleton boys' basketball game. The game was at 7 o'clock on Saturday December 1st. I observed a group of two males and three females. I got both my subjects from this group. For the sake of simplicity from now on I will give the subject the alias of "Billy". Billy was a white Caucasian of approximately 15 to 17 years of age. I estimated this age because Billy was very tall, between 5'10 and 6 feet, but still very skinny. Other physical features of Billy were that he: had brown hair which was styled into a buzz cut, he seemed to be lacking facial hair certainly significant facial hair was not present, and he had significant acne. I would estimate Billy's pubertal development to be middle of adolescence, because of his seemingly full adult height, but still had the signatures of earlier development as stated before a lack of facial hair, a lack of body weight, and acne. The only weakness in this assessment is the facial hair, from the view I had it was difficult to determine whether he had just shaven, didn't grow any facial hair, or just grew very little. I can guarantee he did not have a full beard.

Billy was dressed rather casually in a Middleton High School sweatshirt (hoodie), blue jeans and Nike tennis shoes. He was well groomed; his hair cut was obviously very fresh because of a lack of hair growth around the ears and neck. From the distance I was observing he appeared to have clean white teeth. I'm also going to include his lack of facial hair into the grooming section because of the difficulty of determining the state of his facial hair growth.

The mannerisms I observed Billy perform were mostly consistent with the activity of watching a basketball game. Such as cheering, fist pumps for clapping after made baskets, and alternating between sitting and standing. But there were two mannerisms that I would say were not consistent with viewing a basketball game. He seemed to be prone to putting his hands in his pockets and rubbing the back of his head with one hand. Both these mannerisms seem more consistent with behavior related to interacting with others. I will discuss these mannerisms in more detail later.

Billy was rather passive in concern to interacting with his peers, especially peers of the opposite sex. The majority of the time conversations were initiated by a peer and not by him. During the loud parts of the game when Billy wanted to talk to his male friend he would tap him on the shoulder, but if he wished to start a conversation with a female member of the group he would only do so vocally. This would often cause them to have to ask him to repeat himself due to volume of the crowd. The other members of his group seemed to respond to him well, often with smiles or laughing, and when appropriate a full response to the question or story.

There was definitely a disparity in conversation depth between his conversations with his male friend and the female members of the group. His conversations with his male friend were significantly more in-depth and had a relaxed feeling. His facial expressions while talking to his male friend were varied greatly, in comparison to his expressions to the female sex which always seemed to be a smile or laugh no matter the topic. In regard to Billy's eye contact one would think he would avoid eye contact with his female peers and would be more open to eye contact with his male friend. But I observed the opposite; he seemed to take special care to make eye contact with female members of the group, while making no special effort in making eye contact with his male friend. I would assume this has to do with the comfort level with his male friend were making eye contact isn't a "necessity" anymore.

Overall I would say Billy displayed behaviors related to slight shyness. As stated earlier he had mannerisms that involved putting his hands in his pockets and rubbing the back of his head. The putting his hands in his pockets would occur when talking to a female when she was right in front of him. He seemed to rub the back of his head during a silence in conversation

while keeping the other hand still in his pocket. I would say both these mannerisms indicated a feeling of awkwardness or shyness that was mostly observed in interactions with the opposite sex.

Billy used many words I would describe as slang. He generally referred to his male friend as “dude.” Vary rarely would Billy refer to his male friend by name, and he only would when the slang word failed to gain his friends attention. Something I would almost consider slang would be “fist bumping” and to a degree “high fives” were also commonly used between Billy and his male friend. I would also consider these actions gender specific, especially “fist bumping.” Interestingly enough Billy didn’t use gender specific slang with his female peers, there seemed to be an unspoken formality to his interactions with his female friends. In line with this Billy used “swear words” relatively often but the vast majority was during conversation with his male friend. Billy used a variety of slang words to both sexes. Such as: “tight,” “awesome,” and “hell yeah” which all basically mean good or great.

Billy’s interaction with the other females in the group often showed self-consciousness. Self-consciousness according to John Santrock is, “An Adolescent being preoccupied with, their self-understanding” (137). These moments were often accompanied by the nervous mannerism already discussed, in that it appeared Billy would enter a state of self-reflection temporarily mid-conversation. Billy certainly showed sign of self-consciousness when interacting with the opposite sex. There were many more pauses in conversation seemingly while Billy thought of the appropriate response.

Building on this I think Billy showed signs of the social cognitive theory of gender. Santrock says, “Social cognitive theory of gender emphasizes that children’s and adolescents’ gender development is influenced by observation and imitation of gender behavior, and by rewards and punishment they experience for gender-appropriate and gender-inappropriate behavior” (173). I never witness any obvious rewards or punishments during Billy’s interactions with the female members of the group, but he seemed to be taking that second to gage how his statement was received by them. So in a sense he was keeping a mental tally of rewards and punishments.

Certainly in appearance and speech Billy conformed to the standards of his peers. Santrock defines conformity as, “when individuals adopt the attitudes or behaviors of others because of real or imagined pressure from them” (322). Many students were dressed very similarly to Billy. Specifically casually dressed, many in school apparel, and wearing blue jeans. Almost every male was wearing a main brand of shoe, such as Nike or Adidas. I also thought Billy’s speech was rather conformist to his peers; all his peers used the same slang and speech patterns with very little variety in vocabulary.

Just as Billy I observed my female subject at the same Middleton boys’ basketball game. The game was at 7 o’clock on Saturday December 1st. Just as Billy we will call this girl “Jane” from here for simplicity. Jane is also a white Caucasian who appeared to be between 15 and 17 years old. Jane is roughly 5’4 to 5’6 and slightly overweight for her height. Jane has long dark brown hair, and ear piercings. I would say Jane is in the late pubertal stage based on her physical appearance.

Jane was also dressed fairly casually. She was wearing blue jeans, flip-flops, and a v-cut T-shirt. She also carried a purse, wore a belt, and had a jacket sitting at her feet. Jane was very well groomed and clearly took a lot of time to make sure her outfit and her hair were just right before arriving to the event, and constantly pulled at her shirt or ran her hands through her hair. One time while the boys were gone during half time Jane and her friends pulled out their brushes

and combed their hair. Grooming was obviously an important aspect of the girls' appearance including Jane.

As stated before Jane's mannerisms included clothing and hair adjustments with her hands, which show a fixation on appearance. But she was also constantly fumbling with her cell phone in her hands, not necessarily checking the phone, but just turning it over or sliding it open repeatedly. This is only noteworthy because it appeared she did this the most; all the teens in the group were pulling out their cell phones frequently, Jane just almost never put hers away.

Unlike Billy, Jane was very socially outgoing, she was involved in a conversation with some member of the group nearly the entire game. The majority of Jane's conversations were involving two females of the group, only occasionally overlapping conversation involving the males. Jane never initiated a conversation with either male during the event, but she seemed unflustered when one of the male members of the groups started a conversation with her. The other members of the group seemed to respond very well to Jane. I wouldn't go as far as to say they were seeking her approval but she was definitely a focal point in the group.

I was under the impression that a few times Jane would try to listen in to the conversations between other members of the group, specifically between Billy and his male friend. Jane never reacted inappropriately to things said in these conversations but she definitely showed interest in them even if she chose not to participate in them. I'm sure she would have done likewise in conversations between the other two girls in the group but I didn't witness one that didn't involve Jane. Jane's eye-contact was virtually constant. The only thing that ever interfered with that was her cell phone. None of the girls paid much attention to the game being played. For them it was as much of a social event as a sporting event. Jane's facial expressions seemed to be over exaggerated to whatever was said in the conversation. Extreme joy for any positive thing discussed and disgust for anything negatively discussed. She used phrases like, "that's gross" and "sick" with their over exaggerated face. Jane's conversational patterns didn't seem to change very much at all with who she was talking to male or female.

Jane used all the same cross sex slang words that Billy used: "awesome," "tight," and "hell yeah" specifically. But she also used some different slang. "Oh my God" was almost a constantly used phrase and it applied to any statement seemingly. Others included "epic" which meaning is self-explanatory, and "totes" or "for totes" which is a play of the old slang of "totally." Jane never used gender identifying slang like Billy did. But she did use the slang "dude" once just not in the same context that Billy did. Jane's "dude" was a reactionary to a statement; which meant something similar to "really."

Jane is very outgoing in comparison to Billy. Jane is always close to the center of attention if not the center of attention. Sometimes Jane even got sucked into conversations from outside the group. Her cell phone seemed to be the only thing keeping her from being fully sociable.

Jane fell into gender stereotypes in a few categories. First her constant concern with some aspect of her appearance. Secondly her cell phone addiction, which is a cross gender problem but seem to be gender focused stronger on girls. Lastly Jane was stereotypically an outgoing chatter box of a teenage girl.

Jane whether it was real or not expressed empathy multiple times in reaction to her friend's stories. Santrock defines empathy as, "reacting to another's feeling with an emotional response that is similar to the other's feelings" (252). According to research an Adolescent's ability to express empathy can vary greatly. The sensitivity Jane showed may lead her to have the ability to behave altruistically as an adult.

Based on the conversations between Jane and her friends I would say she's in the 3rd stage of Kohlberg's Moral Development theory. Kohlberg's theory says, "Stage 3 is when individuals value trust, caring and loyalty to others as a basis for moral judgments" (242). There were a lot of references to trust and loyalty in the conversations had, especially conversations about close friends or of the opposite sex. I'm not claiming that Jane is incapable of operating above Stage 3, but it appeared that was the level she was on that night. This also seems to back of the findings of Collins, Steinberg, Ruble, Martin and Berenbaum that "When asked to describe their best friends [...] girls refer to intimate conversation and faithfulness more than boys do" (336).

Jane also seemed to converse in rapport talk more than report talk. Tannen states, "Rapport talk is the language of conversation and a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships." While "Report talk is talk that gives more information. Public speaking is an example of report talk" (181). According to Tannen females enjoy rapport talk more than boys do, and boys enjoy report talk more than girls do. I would say both subjects represented this very well. Many of Billy's conversations were informational, while Jane's conversations were more focused on the current affairs of relationships (both romantic and nonromantic).

In conclusion while this experience brought some of the theories and topics of discussion from our class to life, it was essentially a one hour case study. So I'm not going to consider what I saw to be truth for anything but this one instance. Every teenager is different and because of that nothing is going to apply to all my future students. So I have to be prepared to deal with a variety of personality types, back rounds, and learning styles. This observation project shed some light, but no serious conclusions can be made that would apply to more than the two people I observed.