

“Nineteen Minutes” and High School Stereotypes

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The premise of high school stereotypes have been around for many years. It references the common standardization of grade-school students based on their interests, personality, talents, and appearance. These types of stereotypes are seen in many forms of media like television, movies, and even literature. One piece of literature that has a prevalent theme about high school stereotypes is “Nineteen Minutes” by Jodi Picoult. Picoult’s book tells the tale of Peter Houghton who committed a heinous school shooting, killing ten people and wounding many more. Jodi goes into great detail about some of the students of Sterling High School, especially their associations with Peter, more specifically the “popular kids.” Throughout the novel, certain high school stereotypes are mentioned and implied when describing Sterling High School’s dynamic. More specifically Picoult focuses on the differences between the “popular” kids and the outcasts. She distinguishes the popular kids directly from the other students and shows the journey of Peter throughout school not fitting in and being bullied because of that. Due to Peter not fitting the standard of what the popular kids deemed appropriate it led him down his path to end up committing a heinous crime. In turn, a major theme throughout the book is high school stereotypes and how they impact students in different ways. Even Though, “Nineteen Minutes” is a fictional novel it is based in reality with this phenomenon. High school stereotypes highly affect the way students treat their peers and can lead to damaging issues.

There are many perceptions when it comes to high school stereotypes. The presence of stereotypes in high schools have been heavily depicted in the media. Some examples in film and television include *Glee*, *Mean Girls*, and *The Breakfast Club* as well as others which are very iconic and are many’s first impression of what high school will be like. Most give a very generalized and often romanticized version of what students actually experience socially. These depictions are very focused on the overall assumption of different groups usually with the

addition of perfect ending (Crabbe, Rowena, et al.). This is extremely concerning as it gives society the wrong notion of how high school stereotypes can truly be and how they can impact one's quality of life. Not to mention in reality the conflicts of stereotypes don't always end in a happy way and can potentially never get better until you are out of that situation. The harmful stereotypes pushed by the media, shape adolescents' perception of what actions are considered normal and may encourage them to continue those negative stereotypes. It can also impact the teenagers' brain and prevent the use of cognitive control, making it harder to use self-regulation later in life (Omary). Each piece of media follows the same concept of high school stereotypes that are usually solely based on popularity. In society there are other factors that impact high school stereotypes but popularity is still a huge factor even now. In a study called "Effects of Popularity and Gender on Peers' Perceptions of Prosocial, Antisocial, and Jealousy-Eliciting Behaviors" done by Lara Mayeux for the *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* it is stated that the popularity of students was a very significant factor in how their peers perceived them. Many children made judgements based on how the other student ranked, no matter any other factor. Whether they had hostile or prosocial intent in their actions the status of students impacted the bias towards them. However, a student's popularity isn't directly related to their likability. Likability was based solely on actions (Mayeux). When it comes to likeability it is human nature that people will determine their idea of someone through their actions but when it comes to school stereotypes they can override personality just because of status. This phenomenon causes children to focus on what is considered cool, building their popularity and allowing them to move up in the hierarchy, not necessarily being who they really are. Although, as stated previously, there are other factors that can impact high school stereotypes. In the journal, *The Effects of High School Stereotypes* by Matt Duczeminski he expresses that "More seriously, all minority and lower class

students face the extra battle of succeeding in school, while trying to break out of the niche in which society has placed them. They not only have to work just as hard as all other students do, but they face the ever-looming idea that they'll end up slipping through the cracks”(Duczeminski). Due to minorities being labeled as “different” compared to other majorities they struggle to stay on top of the social hierarchy and break out of what they are already predicted to be leading to potentially less success than their other peers. Society and in turn high school stereotypes ultimately put people in boxes due to many factors. . The perception of stereotypes usually starts with the media but as children experience it in school and the culture of high schools modernize the impacts can be much dire than portrayed.

The perception and issues caused by high school stereotypes can basically be boiled down to as the “stereotype threat.” The stereotype threat is defined in the journal “Stereotype Threat and Academic Achievements in Students of Various Social Groups” by Suman Singh, Dhananjay Kumar, Ashok Kumar Patel, and Shraddhesh Kumar Tiwari as “a situational experience in which an individual feels vulnerable and pressured by the possibility of confirming or being judged by a stereotype” (Singh, Suman, et al.). The overwhelming issue can lead to overall performance decreases, even in those that are highly skilled. The stereotype threat most references the worry that children feel when they show signs of belonging to negative aspects of their predetermined stereotype, usually self-characterized. It can transpire in situations where it is expected that they will be judged based on social group or hierarchy that comes with a negative notion of one's identity group. In addition an important attribute to the stereotype threat is focused on the importance of the domain. Comprehensively, the only participants that are threatened by the roles of stereotypes are the ones that highly identify with the institution. It has

to be relevant enough to the student's identity in which it causes discomfort and is perceived as incompetent, mostly academically (Singh, Suman, et al.). Further, Adam Omary describes in his article "How Stereotypes about Teens Cause Harm" that "researchers found that teens who endorsed more negative stereotypes of adolescence engaged in more risk-taking behaviors during the transition from middle to high school, suggesting a self-fulfilling prophecy of behavior. These associations remained true even after controlling for a host of other variables including parent relationship quality, gender, pubertal status, and socioeconomic status [as well as ethnicity]" (Omary). Basically Omary continues the point made by Suman Singh, Dhananjay Kumar, Ashok Kumar Patel, and Shraddhesh Kumar Tiwari that the stereotype threat is self-characterized and relies on both peer perception and one's perception of themselves. As stated previously the preconceptions of high school are detrimental but can also impact the stereotype threat as well because they are negatively self-fulfilling. When combining the stereotype threat and the perceptions, high school stereotypes can cause major real world effects.

Additionally, when combining the stereotype threat and the perceptions, high school stereotypes can cause major real world effects. Stereotypes, themselves, are overgeneralizations. They are based on simplistic thinking of people and ignore all the differences that make individuals special. Although not everyone agrees with the stereotypes determined in society, just the knowledge of these perceptions can cause bias (Aronson, et al.). The results from a study called "Contemporary College Students' Reflections on Their High School Peer Crowds" by Rowena Crabbe, Lilla K. Pivnick, Julia Bates, Rachel A. Gordon, and Robert Crosnoe showed that the former-high school students identified nine peer groups of students with three types of students having no group. The five conventional groups included Populars, Jocks, Good-Ats,

Fine Arts, and Brains as well as one conventional individual labeled Normal. Not only did this mirror findings from prior studies and other sources of media but it also revealed new counterculture groups. These newly analyzed groups and individuals were shown to be the Druggie/Stoners, Anime/Mangas, Emo/Goths, Loners, and Floaters. All of the counterculture groups and individuals were established as the bottom of the social hierarchy, especially the Loners which were also described as being feared by most students and the “most likely to shoot up the school” (Crabbe, Rowena, et al.). This data shows that anything not accepted by society mostly does not succeed socially and are put in boxes even depending on interests. It is also important to note from these findings that it is stated that “[their] sample placed the conventional crowds above the counterculture crowds in the social hierarchy, not surprising, given that conventional activities aligned with school values and increased chances of college acceptance (Crabbe, Rowena, et al.)” furthering the fact that when people aren’t following the expectations they are outcasted. Not only does high school stereotypes impact those on the bottom of the hierarchy but also those on the top. In fact, Lara Mayeux’s article “Effects of Popularity and Gender on Peers' Perceptions of Prosocial, Antisocial, and Jealousy-Eliciting Behaviors.” expresses that “popular teens are also more likely than their well-accepted peers to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol use and early sexual behavior. Popular youths may be popular because their combination of prosocial and antisocial behaviors enables them to garner social power effectively or their negative characteristics may be overlooked in the face of their more desirable attributes, such as humor, style, [interests] and attractiveness (Mayeux).” Essentially, due to the stereotype threat, and stereotypes in general, even children who are considered “popular” and socially advanced struggle with trying to stay on top of the rankings and may resort to unlikely behaviors for them. Despite many people obeying these expectations

there are many people who do not adhere to society's stereotypes, that does not mean that they still aren't impacted by them. Even if they reject the standard they have to contend with the rest of society. They can feel uneasy, or alienated in academic settings if they deem themselves incompetent and inferior to their peers. Overall, it can lead to an undermining performance (Aronson, et al.). Overall, the research shows no matter the label a student is under or if they agree with society, the generalized stereotype they are can very negatively impact them, no matter their standing as well.

Moreover, as society reflects on the impact of high school stereotypes there are outside elements that significantly can make them even more prevalent and problematic. This is especially seen when it comes to athletes. Athletes, or mostly considered as popular kids and jocks when talking about high school stereotypes, are highly regarded as the top of the social hierarchy. It is even highly recognized throughout the school system with the allowing of missed classes, excused homework and other opportunities. A study done by Rhema D. Fuller, S. Malia Lawrence, C. Keith Harrison, Jeff Eyanson, and Lauren Osika called "Perks for Players: High School Teachers' Perceptions of Athletic Privilege." it was stated that "athletic privilege will be allocated when teachers have a favorable attitude toward the behavior. Approximately 60% of the respondents (teachers) displayed a generally positive disposition toward athletic privilege (Fuller, Rhema D., et al.)." This leaves all other students at a disadvantage just because their interests don't line with the attitude that the majority of others have, causing overwhelming privilege for those already predetermined to have success. Long-term, the effect of high school stereotypes on students truly boils down to the desire to succeed against outside factors. As expressed by Suman Singh, Dhananjay Kumar, Ashok Kumar Patel, and Shraddhesh Kumar

Tiwari, “stereotype threat not only creates performance decrements but ultimately may also impact major life decisions (i.e., choice of profession) and prevent individuals from reaching their full potential within a threatened domain (Singh, Suman, et al.)” Unfortunately, this phenomenon may continue as mentioned by Joshua Aronson, and Claude M. Steele, “One reason group pride may heighten stereotype threat is that it often comes along with higher expectations for discrimination.” Basically as time moves along people are most likely going to prepare the younger generation by preparing and shielding them from these stereotypes. This phenomenon perpetuates and almost encourages the stigma of stereotypes throughout time (Aronson, Joshua, et al.). In order to combat the longing impacts it is important for society to reflect and change the stigma through media and other ways.

In spite of all the negative impacts, the presence of high school stereotypes are very much present. Jodie Picoult does a very good job, in her novel “Nineteen Minutes,” to highlight some of the most known stereotypes through her characters like Josie, Peter and Matt. She not only explains the highlights and advantages that come with fitting in but also the harsh truths of how stereotypes actually affect students. Other sources of media like some popular movies and television shows paint different pictures of how generalizations can lead to a happy ending which is sometimes inaccurate. The stereotype threat is a big factor that lowers the success and opportunities of high school students because of the predetermined notion of where they fit in. Despite being self fulfilling, outside factors also truly add to the struggle. These outside factors can include privilege, interests, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and many others but mostly revolve around what society deems as normal and what aligns with expectations.

Ultimately, Jodie Picoult depicts the struggles that real life high school stereotypes cause and how they impact students' lives.

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