

WHY NERDS ARE UNPOPULAR

by Paul Graham

(from <http://www.paulgraham.com/nerds.html>)

February 2003

When we were in junior high school, my friend Rich and I made a map of the school lunch tables according to popularity. This was easy to do, because kids only ate lunch with others of about the same popularity. We graded them from A to E. A tables were full of football players and cheerleaders and so on. E tables contained the kids with mild cases of Down's Syndrome, what in the language of the time we called "retards."

We sat at a D table, as low as you could get without looking physically different. We were not being especially candid to grade ourselves as D. It would have taken a deliberate lie to say otherwise. Everyone in the school knew exactly how popular everyone else was, including us.

My stock gradually rose during high school. Puberty finally arrived; I became a decent soccer player; I started a scandalous underground newspaper. So I've seen a good part of the popularity landscape.

I know a lot of people who were nerds in school, and they all tell the same story: there is a strong correlation between being smart and being a nerd, and an even stronger inverse correlation between being a nerd and being popular. Being smart seems to make you unpopular.

Why? To someone in school now, that may seem an odd question to ask. The mere fact is so overwhelming that it may seem strange to imagine that it could be any other way. But it could. Being smart doesn't make you an outcast in elementary school. Nor does it harm you in the real world. Nor, as far as I can tell, is the problem so bad in most other countries. But in a typical American secondary school, being smart is likely to make your life difficult. Why?

The key to this mystery is to rephrase the question slightly. Why don't smart kids make themselves popular? If they're so smart, why don't they figure out how popularity works and beat the system, just as they do for standardized tests?

One argument says that this would be impossible, that the smart kids are unpopular because the other kids envy them for being smart, and nothing they could do could make them popular. I wish. If the other kids in junior high school envied me, they did a great job of concealing it. And in any case, if being smart were really an enviable quality, the girls would have broken ranks. The guys that guys envy, girls like.

In the schools I went to, being smart just didn't matter much. Kids didn't admire it or despise it. All other things being equal, they would have preferred to be on the smart side of average rather than the dumb side, but intelligence counted far less than, say, physical appearance, charisma, or athletic ability.

So if intelligence in itself is not a factor in popularity, why are smart kids so consistently unpopular? The answer, I think, is that they don't really want to be popular.

If someone had told me that at the time, I would have laughed at him. Being unpopular in school makes kids miserable, some of them so miserable that they commit suicide. Telling me that I didn't want to be popular would have seemed like telling someone dying of thirst in a desert that he didn't want a glass of water. Of course I wanted to be popular.

But in fact I didn't, not enough. There was something else I wanted more: to be smart. Not simply to do well in school, though that counted for something, but to design beautiful rockets, or to write well, or to understand how to program computers. In general, to make great things.

At the time I never tried to separate my wants and weigh them against one another. If I had, I would have seen that being smart was more important. If someone had offered me the chance to be the most popular kid in school, but only at the price of being of average intelligence (humor me here), I wouldn't have taken it.

Much as they suffer from their unpopularity, I don't think many nerds would. To them the thought of average intelligence is unbearable. But most kids would take that deal. For half of them, it would be a step up. Even for someone in the eightieth percentile (assuming, as everyone seemed to then, that intelligence is a scalar), who wouldn't drop thirty points in exchange for being loved and admired by everyone?

And that, I think, is the root of the problem. Nerds serve two masters. They want to be popular, certainly, but they want even more to be smart. And popularity is not something you can do in your spare time, not in the fiercely competitive environment of an American secondary school.

(end excerpt)

.....

Questions to think about:

- Does your high school experience seem comparable to this one?
- What is a 'nerd'? Did you know any nerds in high school? Were *you* one?
- If 'nerd' is one kind of category of person in high school, what are some other categories of people you can think of?
- Is Paul Graham right that it's harder to be smart in a North American high school than, say, in Korea? Why or why not?