Judith Kelley:

Hello, and welcome, once again, to Policy 360. I'm Judith Kelley, dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm going to play a clip from the 2004 hit movie Mean Girls. Students are in the lunchroom at high school, and a really popular girl, she's the leader of a clique called the plastics, is meeting a new girl.

Popular Girl:

Why don't I know you?

New Girl:

I'm new. I just moved here from Africa.

Popular Girl:

What?

New Girl:

I used to be homeschooled.

Popular Girl:

Wait, what?

New Girl:

My mom taught me at home.

Popular Girl:

No, no. I know what homeschooled is. I'm not retarded. So you've actually never been to a really school before? Shut up.

Judith Kelley:

Cliques like these are in every middle school and high school across the country, and how young people like the new girl in the movie navigate such encounters can have lasting and profound impacts on their lives. My guest is Mitch Prinstein. Mitch's scholarly work examines how our popularity affects our success, our relationships, and our happiness, and why, surprise surprise, why don't always want to be the most popular.

Judith Kelley:

Mitch is a distinguished professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He's the author of the book Popular: Finding Happiness and Success in A World that Cares Too Much about The Wrong Kinds of Relationships. Welcome to Policy 360.

Mitch Prinstein:

Thanks. Happy to be here.

Judith Kelley:

So I'd like to start with your author's note in the book. Will you read it for us?

Mitch Prinstein:

Sure. I began working on this book in earnest about two years prior to its completion, but in a very real sense my research began many years earlier. Perhaps as early as kindergarten. I was always drawn to the study of peer relationships, and to psychological science more broadly. I recall my attempt to create an IQ test using tater tots on the lunch line in grade school. I posited stage models of adjustment to midterms while in eighth grade, and as a teenager, I developed my own taxonomy for different levels of popularity.

Mitch Prinstein:

These examples offer two revelations relevant to this book. First, I was always, without question, a psychology nerd. And second, long before I imagined I would ever write Popular, I had been collecting vignettes from people who never knew that their experiences would become apt examples in the pages that follow.

Judith Kelley:

Excellent. So what was it that interested you in that topic, at such a young age?

Mitch Prinstein:

It's hard to say. I do remember, even at the age of around five or six, noticing that there were some kids who seemed to have a special power. A charisma, a way of getting others' attention, and having the ability to influence others, far more than their peers. And it just fascinated me, where that came from, and why some kids were afforded such a special position in a status hierarchy.

Judith Kelley:

So what is popularity?

Mitch Prinstein:

Well, popularity is actually two very different things. There's one form of popularity that we can notice when kids are around age five, or six, or seven, and that's referred to as likeability. Likeability is a very good thing. We want to be likable, but that's not the kind of popularity most people think about when they think about the word popular. Most people thing of high school, and mean girls and boys, and the kind of cool that comes with a lot of visibility, power, influence, dominance.

Mitch Prinstein:

That's a bad thing.

Judith Kelley:

In your book, you write something towards the beginning about early psychological research that's linked to success in the military, with popularity. Can you tell me about that?

Mitch Prinstein:

It was a study that was done back in the '60s or early '70s, I believe, and it was done to try and understand which people would be dishonorably discharged, and who would remain in service, and the way that the research was done was with a follow back design. They were able to look at old school records and data that had been collected to try and get an idea of what, in early childhood, predicts these outcomes a decade or two later.

Judith Kelley:

Sure.

Mitch Prinstein:

They controlled for IQ, they controlled for behavior problems, SES, socioeconomic status, and none of those factors played as big a role as how much the kids were well liked. The kids who were the most well liked were the ones most likely to continue to serve honorably. But being disliked, and having a reputation of being rejected by peers, predicted psychopathology and dishonorable discharge decades later.

Judith Kelley:

That's very interesting. So how do you think about the difference between status, then, and popularity?

Mitch Prinstein:

Well, there's something that happens at the transition to adolescence. Actually, neuroscientists have told us that it happens in many mammalian species, where we see this area of the brain become ... it matures a bit earlier than the other areas, and it's the part that makes us crave attention and social rewards. That part of the brain leads to this desire to be visible, and powerful, and dominant, and get access to resources.

Mitch Prinstein:

Well, that's what happens in adolescence, and that's what status is really about. We see status as being positively associated with aggression. The more aggressive you are, the higher your status is over time.

Judith Kelley:

So that's not the same as likeability.

Mitch Prinstein:

It's, in fact, quite the opposite in many ways. Most people who are high in status are not only not likable, but are often very much hated by their peers.

Judith Kelley:

So can it be hurtful for us to try to achieve status? Can that hurt us?

Mitch Prinstein:

It can. So some researchers have been looking at what happens to those really cool kids in high school, who had high status, but also looks at those who are high in status as adults; CEOs, and presidents, perhaps. And the results are clear. The higher the status, the greater the risk for depression, anxiety,

addictions, relationship problems, and performing more poorly at work. It seems to be because this craving for status leads to a way of interacting with others merely as pawns to increase one's own status.

Mitch Prinstein:

There's this fixation on trying to become more dominant, more visible and powerful, and of course, that's not a good thing.

Judith Kelley:

You wrote something that is astounding, which is that popularity can be inherited. Can you elaborate on that?

Mitch Prinstein:

There is some research on likeability, specifically, as being something that might have a variety of heritable components.

Judith Kelley:

So likeability, or popularity?

Mitch Prinstein:

Likeability, it seems to be. I should say that status is very strongly associated with physical attractiveness in adolescence, and of course, that's something that is inherited. Likeability is related to physical attractiveness, as well, but it's also related to good social problem solving skills, IQ. It's a little bit related to extraversion, and generally, temperament for being willing to engage with new stimuli. Kind of the opposite of behavioral inhibition.

Mitch Prinstein:

Those things, we all know, have heritable components.

Judith Kelley:

So that makes sense. But how does popularity affect kids in the long run? I mean, if we start with kids who are likable, how does that affect their lives?

Mitch Prinstein:

You know, it's really fascinating to look at the research. Research, actually, that started right here at Duke University, has been really looking at decades after grade school. What happens to these very likable, and these very rejected, kids? The results are pretty impressive, especially for something we barely talk about in policy circles.

Mitch Prinstein:

Likable kids, they are healthier, they get better grades, they're more likely to stay in school, they have a lower risk of psychopathology. They're even likely to live longer. They're less likely to suffer from disease, and they have a longer life expectancy. Likeability is an incredibly powerful piece of the puzzle when we're trying to understand longterm outcomes. We just don't talk about it very much.

Judith Kelley:

Is that because likeability leads to having a better set of relationships, and we know that having relationships is associated with better health, and such things? Because we know that loneliness is terrible, right?

Mitch Prinstein:

That's right.

Judith Kelley:

So how does that figure in? The relationships, versus the likeability.

Mitch Prinstein:

That's a very important part of it, is the way that likable people are able to form good relationships, and the support that those relationships will afford. But there's another piece, too, and it's the idea that developmental psychologists call a transactional model, and the idea that likable people create a world in which they're constantly given new opportunities. Opportunities to learn, to excel in their environment, and with each of those opportunities, they learn new skills or competencies that make them more likable.

Mitch Prinstein:

It creates this cycle. It's remarkably powerful in making likable people not simply favorited, but actually, more skilled than their less likable counterparts, because they have had more opportunities to learn and grow. And if you think about that in the converse, so those who are rejected, not only are they not learning extra skills, but they are being deprived of opportunities to learn skills that most other kids would learn through the natural course of development.

Judith Kelley:

Right. 'Cause they didn't get to go to that party. Right?

Mitch Prinstein:

That's right. That's right, and with each missed opportunity to learn, they become less competent and less likable.

Judith Kelley:

So being likable is a good thing in the long run. What about having high status? Does that lead to success in life, or how do those kids tend to do in life?

Mitch Prinstein:

Well, this is a big debate, because it depends on how you define success. It is true that high status might be something that's related to quicker promotion, let's say. But if you look at the bigger picture, these folks who get promoted quickly also get demoted soon after, because they don't necessarily have people who follow them out of loyalty and allegiance. It seems that those who have high status learn that the world is a place where we act aggressively towards others as a way of making ourselves seem higher.

Mitch Prinstein:

We put others down to make our own positions ascend. They're aggressive, they're focused on themselves. They're focused on standing out from others, rather than forming connections and valuing others. Anyone who's been in a relationship, any kind of relationship, knows that those are generally not good ways to live one's life.

Judith Kelley:

So you're saying, in the book, that Donald Trump is a perfect example of somebody that illustrates a difference between likeability and status, but some people might disagree. Some people might like him, very much. So is that your political position on that, or is that a true scientific example, here? Or can you think of other examples?

Mitch Prinstein:

I may be influenced by politics, but I will say, and I think people on both sides of the aisle would agree, that we've never seen somebody so fixated on their position in the hierarchy. You know, to be in one of the highest status positions on our planet, but still be caring about the size of one's inaugural crowds, or the ratings of the TV show that he vacated to assume his new role. This is an interesting display of status, and desiring more status. The parallels between the tweets that belittle, or use names, to mock adversaries has a very strong parallel with the way that bullies in grade school will increase their own positions of status.

Mitch Prinstein:

So, in many ways, politics aside, I think his behavior is a very good example. But there are other examples, too, and many in history, and in current times, as well, of people who are very high in status, but not liked very much at all.

Judith Kelley:

So I wanna bring gender into it. We know that, for example, just in the world you and I operate in, that female professors tend to get lower ratings. Women who are in the leading roles are more likely to be seen as aggressive, which is not a likable trait, et cetera. Can you speak a little bit about gender, and likeability, and status, and how it affects one's life, and ... ? Yeah.

Mitch Prinstein:

Sure. There's some research that's looked at the relationship between likability and status, and they've looked at how that changes for boys and for girls as they progress from middle school to high school. Well, the results are interesting, because as boys go from middle school to high school, there's a distinction between likability and status that grows quite strong, but you can still find quite a lot of boys who are regarded as being highly liked, well liked, and also high in status. Unfortunately, that's not the case for girls.

Mitch Prinstein:

As girls go from middle school to high school, you have those who are high in status, and by and large, they are hated by many of their, particularly female, peers. And it's a very, very unfortunate and damaging message, because it sets up girls in those young ages to believe that you can have status, or

you can be likable, but perhaps you can't have both. And, of course, that's not true. You can, but our society has unfairly sent the message to girls and young women that those two things come separately.

Judith Kelley:

You say that it might even go deeper than gender, that these experiences can alter our DNA itself. Talk a little bit about that, and is that, then, DNA altered that can get passed on? Or do you mean it truly like that, or what do you mean?

Mitch Prinstein:

It's specifically the expression of our DNA, but there is a epigenetic component here, and what we do see is that the experience of social rejection, in less than 40 minutes, changes the way in which our genes are expressed. And there is a way in which that gene expression ... it's not likely to be passed on, of course, but it is something that can lead to what researchers call molecular regeneration. Because the way in which our bodies prime us to expect and protect against rejection experiences has a deep psychological affect in the way that we perceive the world around us.

Mitch Prinstein:

We start to see rejection, even in places where it might not be. And that, of course, triggers a more aggressive proinflamation or DNA expression response, again, to the point where chronic rejection can lead people to have a more system-wide quick response, and assumption of rejection, in a way that makes people, sadly, repeat their high school years for decades and decades to come, without realizing that they're doing it.

Judith Kelley:

Which goes back to your earlier point, about being likable at a young age, and how that, then, transfers as you grow up.

Mitch Prinstein:

That's right.

Judith Kelley:

So Policy 360 is about policy. So what kind of implications might this have for policymakers who are designing policies, or how should we think about this in practical terms when it comes to policy?

Mitch Prinstein:

I think it would be fascinating to think about ways that we can teach likability, that we can think about a social curriculum within our public education models. I think it's important that we think about media literacy to today's youth, as well, and in particular social media literacy, because unlike a decade or two ago, we now live in a world where status seeking has become the norm, and kids know no other reality than one in which they can mouse click their way to status.

Mitch Prinstein:

I think, in the educational system in particular, we need to be thinking about how we raise this generation of youth. The first generation to be confused between likability and status in a way that none of us had to deal with. When we were in high school, we grew out of it, and entered a world where we

were supposed to form community and connection. That's not what's happening to today's generation, and I think there are important ways that we can think about that within the educational domain in particular.

Judith Kelley:

Well, Mitch, I really appreciate all your insights on this, so thank you so much for being with us today.

Mitch Prinstein:

Oh, thanks for having me.

Judith Kelley:

Mitch Prinstein is the John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, and the director of clinical psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to also being a very likable fellow, he is the author of, Popular: Finding Happiness and Success in A World that Cares Too Much about The Wrong Kinds of Relationships.

Judith Kelley:

Mitch was on the Duke campus to deliver the Sulzberger Distinguished Lecture for the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. That's the for this time. We'll be back soon. I'm Judith Kelley.