The Peer Effect: How Your Peers Shape Who You Are and Who You Will Become

Reviewed by Yanzhou (Amy) Niu and B. Bradford Brown

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In *The Peer Effect*, Syed Ali and Margaret M. Chin embark on a sociological odyssey to dissect the ways peer influence permeates different life stages, institutions, and societal constructs. The narrative deftly transitions from the familiar terrain of adolescence into the complex world of adulthood. Leveraging multiple case studies from education to law enforcement and real-world examples, the book discusses peer dynamics across varied settings—schools where educational disparities loom large, workplaces grappling with misconduct and diversity, and police forces entrenched in cultures of violence.

The authors navigate through the multifaceted influences of peers with five chapters. The narratives begin with addressing the divisive labels of "good" and "bad" schools, critiquing the embedded racial and class biases that shape these distinctions and their subsequent impact on educational disparity (Chapter 1). The discussion transitions into the varied landscapes of adolescent peer influence, touching on academic achievement, hookup culture, bullying, and youth suicide in high schools and colleges (Chapter 2). The authors' own research is spotlighted in Chapter 3, where Stuyvesant High School's narrative of social mobility and peer-driven success is posited, albeit through a lens that may carry methodological biases from its sampling method. In the professional realm, Chapter 4 scrutinizes workplace misconduct behaviors and diversity, likening corporate cultures to high school cliques that govern norms independently of

managerial influence. The narrative culminates in a deep dive into police culture in Chapter 5, where a minority within the ranks can dictate a culture of violence, underscoring the need for radical institutional reforms.

The conclusion of the book (p. 177) encapsulates its central thesis: traditional approaches to social problems, whether in education, workplace, or policing, have been largely ineffective. The authors argue that problems in these contexts are not mere byproducts of inadequate funding or training but rather are deeply rooted in the peer cultures of these societal microcosms. They advocate for a paradigm shift, suggesting that changing the peer culture itself could be the key to resolving the very problems defined by society as detrimental. This bold stance underscores the significance of peer influence, contending that our associations define and sculpt our behaviors and identities. At the heart of "The Peer Effect" lies a challenge to the status quo, inviting readers to consider that the solution to systemic issues may not be more supervision or stricter guidelines, but a profound transformation of the peer groups that form the fabric of these communities.

In affirming the central role of peer influence delineated by Ali and Chin, we, as developmental psychologists, advocate for a deeper exploration into the sophisticated mechanisms of peer dynamics, a journey beyond mere socialization to encompass the rich tapestry of individual "selection processes" (Brown & Larson, 2009). The authors portray the peer effect as a cultural construct, replete with its norms, sanctions, and tightly knit boundaries. Although sensible, this approach overlooks the pivotal agency individuals exercise in choosing peers who resonate with their evolving identity. Moreover, the emphasis on group culture may overshadow the nuanced peer dynamics at play on a dyadic level. Advancements in the study of adolescent peer relationships point to the varied and potentially powerful influences emanating from close friends, romantic partners, esteemed peers, adversaries, and social group affiliates —all nested within the expansive network of a school's social ecosystem and broader societal and cultural contexts (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011). A richer analysis that integrates intimate peer connections alongside group influences would provide a better view of the intricate web of peer dynamics.

The authors' investigation into the breadth of external factors affecting peer effect, while insightful, beckons for a deeper, more explicit analysis. In highlighting the peer effect, Ali and Chin occasionally gloss over individual and situational elements crucial to shaping personal outcomes. For example, Chapter 3's narrative credits the peer culture of achievement at Stuyvesant High School for student success, but this perspective might not fully consider the students' pre-admission academic drive that contributed to their exceptional scores on the school's entrance exam. Pointing to peer influence as the sole architect of positive outcomes seems dubious when the narrative uncovers additional contributing factors—Manhattan's vibrant setting, the faculty's unusual approaches to grading, and the role that the school's illustrious reputation plays in launching students into college and professional life. The authors assert that peers "—not parents and not teachers—have the ability to define their cultural worlds and control each other's social standing within those worlds. Parents and teachers have no say in this" (p. 3). While provocative, this may be an oversimplification, ignoring both personological and sociocultural factors and how they interact with peer influence.

The book's exploration of peer effects into adulthood is an important expansion of the discourse, yet it lacks a comprehensive developmental perspective. It overlooks the nuanced shifts in peer influence as individuals progress from the neurologically and socially primed adolescent years, where conformity and peer interaction weigh a lot in daily life, into adulthood, where a solidified

sense of self and a broader, more complex social network dilute the peer primacy of earlier years (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). The authors miss an opportunity to examine how the potency of peer dynamics changes with the maturation of the individuals from high school halls to corporate offices.

When we consider the peer effects —be it in educational settings or within police culture—the authors could further strengthen their analysis by employing theories such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological system model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the Process-Person-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This would illuminate the multifaceted "how" of peer influence, the diversity of individual responses to it, as well as the interaction of multiple environmental layers. These models can also offer a lens to view peer influence as a dynamic interplay that evolves from the formative years of adolescence into the multifarious stages of adulthood, reflecting both the continuity and change in peer interactions.

Moreover, such theoretical grounding could potentially address a notable limitation of the work—the reliance on a narrow selection of case studies and anecdotes. While these narratives provide engaging insights and are appealing to a broad readership, a more robust synthesis of research across diverse fields could offer stronger empirical support for the authors' arguments. By drawing upon a broader spectrum of interdisciplinary studies, Ali and Chin might have fortified their assertions with a richer tapestry of evidence, thereby providing readers with a deeper understanding of peer dynamics that acknowledges the complex interdependence of social worlds and their profound influence on individual development.

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Author Biographies
Yanzhuo (Amy) Niu, PhD, is an assistant professor of psychology in the Department of Social & Behavioral Science at Colorado Mesa University. Dr. Niu teaches courses primarily in human development and research methods. Her research focuses on understanding ways in which adolescents and young adults interact with and are influenced by the digital landscapes they inhabit. Dr. Niu earned a Master's and PhD in Educational Psychology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, with a concentration in human development.

B. Bradford Brown, PhD, is professor emeritus and former chair of the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has authored over 100 publications on adolescent peer interactions, identity development, and parent–child relationships. His current work focuses on social media use among adolescents making school transitions and racial–ethnic identity and adjustment among minoritized group members transitioning to college.