

# Review of “The Peer Effect: How Your Peers Shape Who You Are and Who You Will Become”

By Syed Ali and Margaret M. Chin

New York University Press, 2023, 240 pages. Prices: \$28.95 (cloth) <https://nyupress.org/9781479805051/the-peer-effect/>

**Reviewer:** Casey Stockstill, Dartmouth College

Why aren't the stoner kids in Finland chronically absent from school? Syed Ali and Margaret M. Chin (2023) address this and other distinct topics, from police reform failure to kindergarten parents' angst about school choice, with one provocative explanation. It's about peers.

Finnish peer culture in high school prioritizes learning so highly that even the stoner kid still shows up to class. Police reforms fail because cops have a strong, toxic peer culture that requires thoughtful disruption. Affluent parents carefully engineer their children's schooling precisely because they know that their child's peers will matter. *The Peer Effect: How Your Peers Shape Who You Are and Who You Will Become* is ambitious in its scope and convincing in its claim that we overlook the role of peers in shaping trajectories.

As a sociologist of childhood, I was thrilled that the book considers the role of peers well into adulthood. Youth scholars have long known that peer culture is important. This focus on peer culture has inspired great ethnographies of childhood (Corsaro 2003; Thorne 1993). But peers still matter, even when we outgrow the days of the playground. Ali and Chin show us this with their discussion of police workplace culture. This is an extreme case given the strong professional identity among police and the high stakes of police work, which has deadly, racist consequences (Ali and Chin 2023:138). Peer culture among police emphasizes the “thin blue line” and tolerates civilian death. Reforms that fail to disrupt this police peer culture have had little impact.

Ali and Chin balance the example of police culture, a quite distinctive work environment, with a topic more familiar in corporate America: the diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings that intend to improve workplaces. These trainings provide lackluster benefits (Ali and Chin 2023:115). This is because office (peer) culture matters. And peer culture cannot be transformed through a training module alone.

Although the book offers rich insight overall, the section on Stuyvesant High School left me with the most questions. The authors tell a multi-cohort story of success among Stuyvesant High School graduates and dropouts. They attribute the success of former Stuyvesant students to the peer culture above all else. The sense the reader gets is that the role Stuyvesant as an institution played was in composing a good group of students. This resulted in a peer culture that

Received: February 23, 2024. Accepted: March 29, 2024

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: [journals.permissions@oup.com](mailto:journals.permissions@oup.com).

affected the students long into adulthood. For example, the authors note that, despite patchy pre-college counseling, Stuyvesant students developed a culture of college-going and peer support that resulted in high rates of college-going.

Though the role of peers at Stuyvesant was clear, I wondered if the authors deemphasized the role that school adults played in supporting peer culture. In the book's conclusion, the authors argue that adults can indirectly create conditions ripe for peers to construct a positive culture (Ali and Chin 2023:162). Yet this same effect was downplayed in their analysis of Stuyvesant High. What did Stuyvesant staff—from teachers and classroom aides to janitors and front desk staff—do to support the student climate? The discussion of soft policies toward cutting classes (Ali and Chin 2023:90) gives us a tantalizing hint that the adults in the building set the stage for peer culture. I also wonder about the indirect impacts of teachers. Did they teach writing in a way that prepared students to craft compelling college admissions essays? Did their approach to teaching other academic subjects give students chances for achievement that impressed colleges and future employers?

Further interview data with former teachers or school administrators would have rounded out, and perhaps even underlined, the authors' argument about an exceptional peer culture at Stuyvesant. This would also provide insights applicable to readers in communities that do not have selective, specialized schools, but that who nonetheless want to create conditions for positive peer cultures at their local schools.

*The Peer Effect* implores social scientists to seriously consider peers in our research. Ali and Chin walk us across social life to show us that peers matter, and in so doing present an agenda for future work. We need to continue teasing out *how* peers matter. Beyond its uses for research, I would assign *The Peer Effect* in an Introduction to Sociology course and would recommend it to a general audience looking to understand the value of a sociological approach. The book shines at distilling the key insights from academic literature. The authors deliver good insights with an accessible, friendly tone.

## References

- Ali and Chin 2023. *The Peer Effect: How Your Peers Shape Who You Are and Who You Will Become*. New York: NYU Press.
- Corsaro, William A. 2003. *We're Friends, Right? Inside Kids' Culture*. Washington D.C.: Joseph Henry Press.
- Thorne, Barrie 1993. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.