

2-19-2017

Book Review: Peer pressure, peer prevention: The role of friends in crime and conformity

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Recommended Citation

Clinkinbeard, S. S. Peer pressure, peer prevention: The role of Friends in Crime and Conformity. *Criminal Justice Review*, 42(4), 416-417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016817694939>

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Book Review

Costello, B. J., & Hope, T. L. (2016).

***Peer pressure, peer prevention: The role of friends in crime and conformity.* New York, NY: Routledge. ix, 121 pp. \$44.95, ISBN 978-1-138-95169-3.**

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DOI: 10.1177/0734016817694939

Barbara Costello and Trina Hope contribute to the literature on peer influence in the areas of crime and conformity by exploring questions and using simple methodologies that have been long over-looked by criminologists. The authors argue that despite decades of work confirming that delinquent youth often have delinquent friends and a lot of deviant behavior happens in groups, we still know little about the mechanisms of peer influence. The authors note that because criminologists have long operated based on the assumption that peer influence is negative, the field has ignored the potentially positive effects that peers can have on one another. Costello and Hope investigate three questions: (1) Do friends have a causal influence on deviant behavior and what are the mechanisms through which this might happen? (2) Are positive influence attempts by friends commonplace and what are the mechanisms of positive influence? and (3) What is the relationship between social and self-control and the frequency and success of influence attempts?

Costello and Hope argue that the failure to fully understand the inner workings of peer influence exists, in part, because “... the most sophisticated statistical methods cannot overcome the problem of not asking our respondents the right questions” (p. 9). The authors approach the subject of peer influence simply, yet effectively, by directly asking participants to describe how peers influence one another. Utilizing class essays and open-ended survey questions, they asked students at two universities to describe instances in which they witnessed individuals or groups influence, or attempt to

influence, the behavior of others in either negative or positive directions.

The authors begin by reviewing the state of theory and literature on peer influence and identifying the unanswered questions explored in later chapters. In Chapter 3, they explore the qualitative accounts of negative peer influence and find evidence that peers do directly influence each other toward deviant behavior, ruling out self-selection as the sole explanation for peer influence. They find that peers influence each other in a number of ways, supporting aspects of multiple theoretical frames. Consistent with self-selection, self-control, and routine activities, participants frequently reported simple offers or invitations as being enough to encourage deviance. They also found that deviance happened as a result of desires to emulate others or fit into a desired crowd, even without specific prompting. Finally, general peer pressure and coercive attempts, which are more in line with aspects of subcultural explanations and learning theories, were fairly common.

In Chapter 4, the authors presented the findings on positive peer influence, noting that respondents reported more instances of positive influence than negative, contradicting the assumption that peer influence is relegated to the adverse. General pressure was common, as was the use of coercive tactics and emphasizing the consequences, either positive or negative, of the behavior in question. The authors also reported a simple opportunity effect and evidence supportive of direct influence on behavior by peers. Costello and Hope suggest that there is still much to learn about positive influence, including the questions of who does it, when does it happen, and under what circumstances.

In Chapter 5, the authors use survey data to test various hypotheses about peer informal social control. The authors predicted that individuals with higher self-control, peer attachment, and general social bonds would be more likely to attempt to intervene on behalf of their friends. Participants with strong peer attachment were not necessarily more likely to intervene but were more likely to be successful when they did. They were also more likely to be targets of social control attempts. Social control variables were more strongly related to the success of control attempts than to frequency. Contrary to their predictions, individuals with higher self-control were less likely to report administering control which Costello and Hope speculated may indicate that individuals

with high self- control avoid situations in which the need to administer control is likely to arise. Finally, the authors found that respondents with more deviant friends were more likely to both attempt to exert control and to be the target of control attempts by peers, supporting routine activities and opportunity- based explanations.

In the final chapter, Costello and Hope discuss their findings in the broader context of the field, emphasizing evidence supportive of social control theories and opportunity effects. They note that the respondents rarely mentioned anything about morals in their responses and they argue that they saw little evidence consistent with differential association or learning theories, though they cannot “ . . . make any general conclusions about peer influence that might occur over time” (p. 87). The primary critique of the book is that the authors are guilty of the same offense that they appropriately criticize previous researchers of committing. Costello and Hope argue that explanations of learning and norm transference often lack measures of attitudes or normative beliefs and though, the authors themselves did not include such measures, they suggest that their “results are very damaging to aspects of cultural deviance and learning theories.” While their results do not necessarily support learning explanations, they do not directly refute them. Learning is not always a conscious, recognized process that would be easily reported by respondents through direct questioning. Further, it is important to note that their explanations are focused on data collected from a relatively nondeviant college population, thus future research should include younger adolescents and noncollege peers.

Despite these critiques, Costello and Hope make a very important contribution to the study of peer influence by turning attention to peers as potential mechanisms of positive social control and prevention. In addition, they remind us that sometimes different questions need to be asked (e.g., what actually *happens* in the context of peer interaction and influence). Future research should consider the possibility that repeated exposure to situational peer pressure, as described by Costello and Hope, may lead to changes in perceived norms and attitudes toward either prosocial or deviant behavior.