

Peers and Crime: A Control Theory Perspective

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Four questions:

1. What are the mechanisms of peer influence toward deviance? (Costello and Hope 2016)
2. How common is positive peer influence, and what mechanisms are involved? (Costello and Hope 2016)
3. Can control theory variables explain positive peer influence? (Costello and Hope 2016)
4. What motivates youths to influence their friends either toward or away from deviance, and what does that tell us about the nature of crime and peer influence toward crime? (Costello and Zozula, in progress)

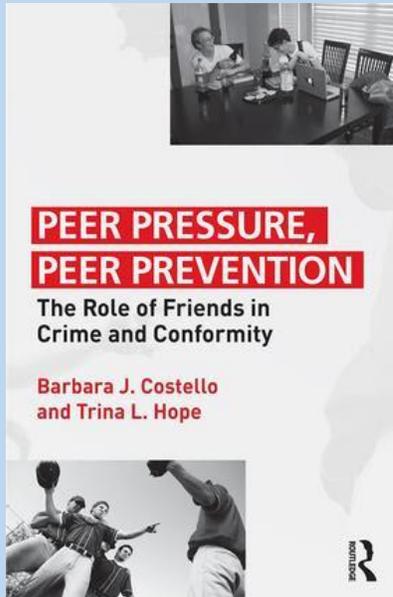
Peers and Crime: A Control Theory Perspective

- Sociologists studying peers and delinquency have typically argued for a causal effect of peers on delinquency, generally through norm transference or positive reinforcement (Sutherland, Akers.)
 - Cultural theories assume that learning is required for crime to occur.
 - In this view, crime and non-crime are equally social behaviors.
- Control theorists (Hirschi, Gottfredson and Hirschi) have denied a causal impact of peers on delinquency, and argued that self-selection explains the delinquency/peer delinquency connection.
 - Control theories assume that deviance is natural in the absence of social ties.
 - In this view, crime is asocial, and social bonds always deter deviance.

A correlation between peer and individual deviance ". . . says nothing about the process or mechanism of influence that gave rise to it, and the number of possibilities is large . . ."

Mark Warr, *Companions in Crime*, 2002

- Despite decades of research, we still know little about the mechanisms linking peer and individual deviance.
- Self-selection explains about half of the effect – researchers typically simply assume that any remaining causal effect is due to learning.
- My recent book, with Trina Hope, explores other alternatives by simply asking youths to report on their experiences with peer influence.



“Peer influence gets little respect. It is commonplace to blame peers for deviance, delinquency, drugs, dropout, and other developmental disasters. Yet peer influence is rarely credited for good things, including the transmission of moral values, academic excellence, and courageous acts.”

Cairns and Cairns (1994: 90).

“No one has ever reported that having friends is correlated with undesirable social attributes.”

Bukowski, Newcomb, and Hartup (1996: 5).

- Unlike psychologists, criminologists have almost completely ignored the possibility of positive peer influence.
- Any correlation between delinquent friends and delinquency is also a correlation between conforming friends and conformity, consistent with control theory.
- Another focus of the book is to explore the types and mechanisms of positive peer influence.

Data and Methods

Two sources of qualitative data:

1. Detailed accounts of incidents of peer influence were drawn from 81 papers written by students in an introductory sociology course at the University of Rhode Island (URI) in the Fall 2009 semester.
2. Student responses to two open-ended questions on a survey of 108 URI students and 723 University of Oklahoma (OU) students conducted in Spring semester 2012.

Quantitative data:

Drawn from the survey of URI and OU students, focusing on explaining positive peer influence, and testing hypotheses from control theory.

Qualitative Results – Most Common Types of Negative and Positive Influence Attempts

Negative Influence

Type	N	Percent
Simple Offer or Invitation	69	36%
Coercion	44	23%
Minimize Negative Consequences	28	15%
Benefit of Onlookers	24	13%
Emulation of Models	21	11%
Status	7	4%
Totals	189	102%

Positive Influence

Type	N	Percent
Coercion	99	36%
Maximize Negative Consequences	83	30%
Simple Offer or Invitation	54	20%
Emulation of Models	16	6%
Benefit of Onlookers	5	2%
Status	2	0.7%
Totals	276	95%

Conclusions from Analysis of Negative Peer Influence Types

- Contrary to control theories, there is a causal effect of peers on each other's delinquency.
- Contrary to social learning theories, there is very little evidence that peer influence happens through teaching norms conducive to deviant behavior – there were only two instances in our data of negative peer influence in which moral concerns were even mentioned.
- Consistent with opportunity-based theories, much peer influence is trivial, simply the result of presenting opportunities for deviance.
- Unanswered question – **why** do peers try to get each other to engage in deviance? What is the motivation for peer influence toward deviance?

Conclusions from Qualitative Analysis of Positive Peer Influence

- In our sample, positive influence was even more common than negative influence.
- Contrary to predictions from social learning theory, moral issues were rarely mentioned by our respondents. Friends were more likely to invoke chances of getting caught, negative consequences other than moral concerns.
- Consistent with control theory, social ties are a source of conformity, and being a member of integrated groups can reduce deviance.
- Again, we are left with the question of **why** peers influence each other toward conformity. What is the motivation?

Quantitative Analysis of Positive Peer Influence

Basic Hypotheses:

Those with higher levels of social and self-control will be more likely to try to influence their friends toward conformity, and those influence attempts will be more likely to be successful.

More deviant respondents will experience more positive influence attempts.

Quantitative Analysis of Positive Peer Influence

Key Findings:

- The best predictor of trying to control one's friends' behavior is their level of deviance, and the best predictor of friends trying to control the individual's behavior is the individual's level of deviance.
 - In other words, the respondents who are **most** deviant experience the **most pro-conformity influence** from their friends, even though their friends are also likely to engage in deviant behavior.
- Results are consistent with opportunity-based theories such as routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979; Osgood and Anderson, 2004).
- Results are damaging to learning theories of crime and delinquency – no evidence that members of deviant peer groups “socialize” one another to non-normative values.

Quantitative Analysis of Positive Peer Influence

Key Findings, continued:

- Measures of social control and self-control were not consistently related to being the target of prosocial influence attempts, or of trying to control peers' behavior.
 - Control theory measures were, however, positively related to the **success** of both types of influence attempts, consistent with our predictions.
 - The stronger our social bonds, the more likely we are to be influenced by others' direct attempts at controlling our behavior.

What are the *motives* for peer influence? (Costello and Zozula)

- Previous findings suggested selfish motivation for peer influence toward deviance.
- Qualitative data asking students to write about why they have tried to influence their friends toward and away from deviance.
- Data were coded by influence motive, and further, by whether the motive was selfish, altruistic, or both.
- For learning theories, there should be no difference in motives for peer influence toward deviance or conformity.
- For control theories, we should find that influence toward deviance is more likely to be selfishly motivated than influence toward conformity.

Examples of motives for peer influence

Selfish:

“...there was no real reason to do what I did. The majority of it was just that I knew that I could easily manipulate him and have him do something for my enjoyment. I believe it was all just for enjoyment.”

-man, convinced a friend to suction his face with a plunger, later revealed that the plunger was recently used to unclog a toilet

Altruistic:

“Lung cancer is something that hits home for me, watching my friends potentially raise their risk of getting cancer scared me after I lost loved ones to the disease.”

- man, convinced friend to quit smoking cigarettes.

Results of Analysis of Peer Influence Motives

Direction of Motivations for Each Reported Motive							
	Altruistic		Selfish		Neither/Unclear		N
Positive Influence Attempt	83%	134	12%	19	6%	9	162
Negative Influence Attempt	36%	52	53%	76	10%	15	143

Summary and Conclusions

Based on our results, traditional cultural and social learning explanations of crime and deviance hold little value in explaining peer influence processes.

- Moral concerns are almost never mentioned in accounts of peer influence, even when respondents were trying to convince reluctant friends to engage in deviance.
- The most deviant people with the most deviant friends are most likely to experience positive peer influence, suggesting that even those who engage in deviance know that they shouldn't.

Both the mechanisms and motivations for peer influence uncovered in our data are more consistent with control and opportunity theories.

- Opportunity explains much of the causal effect of deviant friends on deviance.
- Analysis of motives for peer influence shows clear differences in the motives for positive and negative peer influence.
- This supports the control theory view of deviance as motivated by selfish concerns, and the view of deviance as fundamentally different from conforming behavior.