

It's Not Who You're With, It's What You Value: Peer Groups, Norms, and Life Outcomes

By Steven Huang

AUTHOR BIO

Steven Huang is a senior at Mount Airy High School in North Carolina. Curious about how his own social experiences at school may apply in a broader sociological spectrum, he explores how peer groups and norms affect later life outcomes. His research focuses on the social significance of secondary school and how it leads to many paths in post-secondary life and beyond.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how high school peer groups influence long-term educational and career outcomes, arguing that peer norms and values, rather than group labels or status, are the significant factors. Traditional stereotypes of “jocks,” “nerds,” and “populars” usually come with the idea that certain affiliations will achieve certain outcomes later in life. However, this paper demonstrates that the norms within peer groups, values, behaviors, and communication have a stronger correlation with developmental outcomes. Studies across psychology, sociology, and economics show that peer networks function as micro-cultures: growing academic achievement, developing aspirations, and affecting long-term income. Norms that prioritize education and goal setting can be linked with positive outcomes like increased chances of academic excellence, while groups with deviant or violent behaviors often hinder success regardless of social status. This paper examines findings from longitudinal and cross-sectional studies to display that adolescents actively change and affiliate themselves with certain group norms, which then guide the formation of values, post-secondary choices, and career pathways. These ideas affect educators and policymakers as well. Based on the findings of this study, they should move beyond simple peer group categorizations and instead create environments that grow and develop positive peer norms. Ultimately, what matters most is not the label of the group, but the values it accepts, as these have lasting effects on academic, social, and occupational trajectories.

Keywords: *Peer groups, Peer norms, Adolescent development, High school social trajectories, Career trajectories, Micro-cultures, Long-term development, Academic development*

INTRODUCTION

The classic groupings of “nerds,” “jocks,” and “populars” are often depicted in media as having an impact on individuals’ future: shaping everything from college plans to career paths. Oftentimes, education and career outcomes are correlated with one another, however, I will be discussing them separately due to many studies focusing on how peer effects influence either education or career outcome, but very few linking the two. For instance, Bidwell et al. (2000) explains how peer networks impact career aspirations while Vit et al. (2017) focuses solely on peer groups and educational attainment. Separating these two topics allows for deeper examination of both; this results in better connections later on. Curiously, little to no studies provide direct evidence regarding the question of whether or not peer groups in high school have a direct effect on later life outcomes. This gap in research prompts a series of questions: How do peer groups in high school impact development? Are norms and values within peer groups more significant when determining educational and career trajectory? Finally, how do norms and values impact later life trajectory, if at all? It is crucial to understand the relationship between adolescents’ social lives and their long-term trajectories, especially because high school is often the start of when most people begin to explore independence, develop identities, and make decisions that shape adulthood. High school marks a pivotal transition, both socially and legally, as individuals move from adolescence into adulthood.

From a developmental psychology perspective, adolescence is a key stage for identity formation, social learning, and cognitive growth, all of which are heavily influenced by peer interactions (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002). Sociologically, peer groups act as micro-cultures where social norms, behaviors, and expectations

are reinforced (Allen et al., 2005; Kiperman et al., 2023). Micro-cultures are small-group environments where shared meanings, behaviors, and social norms are developed and continued through repeated interactions (Fine, 2015). These dynamics can either foster academic achievement and goal-setting or normalize disengagement and risky behavior (Staff & Kreager, 2008). Understanding these influences is not only important for developmental theory, but also for informing educational policy, school-based interventions, and efforts to address long-term inequality (Li, Sickles, & Williams, 2017; Bifulco et al., 2014).

While peer group affiliation has been associated with some aspects of adolescent development, recent research suggests that it is not the peer group’s label that determines long-term outcomes. Instead, the social norms and peer status within these peer groups (whether academic, deviant, or neutral) play a more important role in shaping educational attainment, career choices, and adult well-being according to a multitude of studies. This paper will explore what peer groups are, how norms shape development, and how these peer groups in adolescence have significant impacts on later life outcomes and how that affects policymakers, educators, and parents.

WHAT ARE PEER GROUPS AND WHAT DO THEY IMPACT GENERALLY?

Defining Peer Groups

“Peer groups” is a loosely defined term. The general definition can be described as a group of people who share characteristics, socioeconomic status, academic standing, education, or occupation (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2018). However, researchers describe peer groups or similar relations (like cliques, peer networks, or peer status) differently in each study. For example, Prinstein and La

Greca (2002) describes peer groups in terms of adolescents' self-identified crowd affiliations (such as "Populars," "Brains," or "Burnouts"), which show self-perception and social reputation. This view underlines how perceived group identity can shape psychological outcomes like self-esteem and internalizing distress. On the other hand, Allen et al. (2005) focuses on peer status, defining it through adolescents' popularity and influence within their social circles. Their research suggests that popularity is not inherently positive or negative, but its effects depend on the group's norms. Popular teens benefit from stronger social skills yet may also be more likely to engage in deviant behavior if it is an accepted practice within their peer group. Other researchers emphasize peer networks rather than group labels. For example, the number and quality of adolescent friendships as indicators of social capital, linking higher number of close friendships to increased adult earnings (Lleras-Muney et al., 2024). Similarly, Vit et al. (2024) view peer groups as friendship networks shaped by similarity in academic ambition, with findings that students tend to align their goals and performance with those of their closest peers. Lastly, Kiperman et al. (2023) defines peer groups not by membership but by perceived norms, or shared ideals toward academics, work, and ambition that correlate strongly with achievement even after accounting for family and school-level factors. Overall, definitions of "peer groups" range from those emphasizing identity and self-perception to those focusing on specific behaviors, influence, and shared norms. Each perspective frames adolescent social ties in a significant way that shapes future pathways. Together, these perspectives illustrate the variety of peer groups and norms that I will be exploring in this paper. My definition of peer groups in this paper can be described as a group of people who have similar interests and are viewed as friends.

Impact of Peer Groups

Although there is little research on the impact of peer groups on career and academic outcomes, research has shown some general impacts that peer groups and other peer related connections have on people. Lleras-Muney et al.'s (2022) found a clear example where friends in high school have an impact on later life trajectory, finding with every additional close friend in high school, a 7-14% increase in income is predicted later in life. This significant increase in income shows that friendships in adolescence indeed serve a purpose that is more than companionship. Having more friends during adolescence may function as a source of social capital, opportunity, and networking that may prove beneficial when it comes time to finding a career. These shared experiences and social norms may prove to be what contributes to this increase in income. The study notes that this increase in income still occurs even if many outside variables are accounted for; meaning that the increase in social interaction may lead to development of skills and values that will have a lasting impact on career trajectory, rather than external factors. Though, it is not clear whether an increase in the number of friends or if the skills and experiences shared among friends is what causes a lasting impact on adolescents. Another study that appears later in this review may answer this question regarding causality. Nevertheless, this study underlines the long-term value of being a part of supportive peer networks in adolescence.

The groupings of "nerds," "jocks," and "populars" are actually considered peer group affiliations. These affiliations, according to Prinstein and La Greca (2002), can have long-term effects on emotional development of adolescents. In this study, adolescents who self-reported affiliation with high-status groups, like "populars" or "jocks," were more likely to externalize their distress and have higher

self-esteem. These outcomes have both positive and negative effects. Adolescents who externalize distress are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors, especially if they are a part of a group that supports deviant norms. It can be inferred that social acceptance in and out of peer groups may offer better emotional support and regulation in the short term, but it may also encourage negative coping mechanisms (like smoking) if the group accepts said behavior. It can be inferred from this study that peer norms, accepted behavior within a group, have a strong influence on education and career development.

Bifulco et al. (2018) provides some clarification about peer affiliations and educational outcomes; specifically by explaining how exposure to peers with college-educated mothers affects college attainment. Their findings show a small 1% increase in male peers whose mothers have college degrees may boost a student's likelihood of completing each year of college by 0.6 - 0.9%. This suggests that social environments and peers with college-oriented norms may have *slight* positive educational trajectories. The influence appears to occur through imitation, access to information, and social cues that normalize post-secondary education. However, these effects were less significant for female students and diminished for all students in later adulthood. Indicating that peer group advantages may have relevance, albeit time-sensitive. While this study does not specify what peer behaviors they looked for, it supports the broader argument that norms and expectations in peer groups (in this case, influenced by parental background) can impact academic and career pathways.

Kiperman et al. (2023) found that adolescents who perceived their peers as valuing academic success were more likely to achieve higher academic outcomes themselves. This occurs even after accounting for ecological factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and

school type. This study bolsters the idea that group norms, not just group membership, shape individual behavior. When peers prioritize school performance, that value spreads and can drive increased academic motivation and achievement. Long-term significance of these peer-influenced academic outcomes is further underscored by Watts (2020), who found that academic achievement at age 16 strongly predicts adult earnings through age 50. Math and reading scores were closely associated with income across multiple decades, suggesting that academic performance (potentially shaped by peer norms) has a lasting economic impact. Together, these studies highlight how peer norms around academics don't just affect short-term outcomes like grades or graduation but have lasting effects on career trajectory and strong financial health.

While peer group affiliation may provide a general influence for identity and social belonging, specific values and norms respected within these groups are what truly drive long-term outcomes. This shift from peer membership to peer norms marks a crucial connection between multiple studies.

PEER NORMS INSTEAD OF PEER GROUPS

Peer norms typically indicate shared values, experiences, and what is and isn't accepted within a given group. Peer groups only offer a label or category adolescents may be placed into (e.g. nerds and jocks), while peer norms indicate the specific actions or ideals that are applicable in any peer group. Most research papers that are compiled here imply that peer membership alone is not enough to explain long-term educational and career trajectories. For example, Prinstein and La Greca (2002) found that adolescents' self-identified crowd affiliations (such as "Brains" or "Populars") were linked to differing psychological outcomes,

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but it was the social meaning and behaviors within the environment of those groups (rather than the labels themselves) that shaped long-term emotional and educational success. Similarly, Staff and Kreager (2008) demonstrated that boys in high-status peer groups that had violent norms were more likely to drop out of high school despite their popularity, indicating that the group's values outweighed the benefits of social status. These studies show how social norms and shared expectations within these groups more accurately predict future outcomes.

Staff and Kreager (2008) challenge the conventional belief that popularity inherently leads to success. This common belief is hinted at in Prinstein and La Greca's (2002) study, as they explain that "Jocks" and "Populars" have higher self-esteem and externalize their distress. Staff and Kreager's (2008) study on adolescent boys in high-status, violent peer groups found that these students were significantly more likely to drop out of high school compared to their peers. Despite their high social status, the group's reinforcement of violence and distaste for academics ultimately contributed to negative outcomes. This indicates that the values upheld by the group, rather than status itself, were the more influential factor in shaping educational outcomes. This study does have its limitations, however; it only mentions violent male peer groups, thus, it cannot be applied to women. It is important to create studies that have multiple perspectives such as gender, ethnicity, and age. If this study considered multiple genders and ethnicities, it may create a study that is much more generalized and applicable. This highlights the need for disaggregating peer effects by gender, race, and other factors. Nevertheless, this study provides general evidence that peer norms and values have significant effects regarding academic trajectory.

Similarly, Allen et al. (2005) complicates the idea of popularity as an advantage. Their findings reveal that while popular adolescents tended to display stronger social skills and psychological adaptation, they were also more likely to adopt deviant behaviors when such behaviors were accepted within their social circles. This suggests that peer influence operates not through popularity alone, but through the behaviors that are normalized and rewarded within that context. Although popularity cannot be a defining feature of all peer groups, it functions as a useful lens for understanding social influence.

Even affiliation with "positive" group labels does not guarantee positive outcomes. These positive labels may mask negative emotional and developmental outcomes; especially if the group's internal values are misaligned with an individual's emotional needs. While academically oriented peer groups are typically assumed to be advantageous when it comes to career and educational outcomes, affiliation with such groups does not always result in positive emotional or developmental outcomes. Prinstein and La Greca (2002) studied adolescents' self-identified crowd affiliations and found that individuals who aligned themselves with the "Brains" (a group generally associated with academic achievement and intellectual ability) had significantly higher levels of internalized distress over the longitudinal study of 6-8 years. In contrast to previously mentioned adolescents who identified as "Populars" or "Jocks" experienced decreases in distress and reported higher self-esteem as they grew up into high school. This difference suggests that affiliation with an academically high-achieving peer group may not determine later life outcomes but rather come at a psychological cost, especially when academic excellence is not socially valued within the school context. The study's longitudinal design emphasizes that these patterns of distress

accumulate over time. The elevated levels of loneliness, anxiety, and lower self-worth seen in “Brains” may be the result of a difference between their identity and social acceptance. In settings where academic ability is viewed less than or where peers prioritize athleticism and other values over intellectual performance, “Brains” may experience social isolation or bullying. Thus, despite an academically inclined peer group’s values, they may not translate into social skills or emotional well-being. In this way, the study underscores how group norms, such as how intelligence is viewed by peers, can interact with a person’s environment causing difficulties. Instead of assuming that academically high-achieving groups are always beneficial, Prinstein and La Greca’s findings show a more nuanced perspective. Academic orientation alone does not protect adolescents from emotional challenges. On the contrary it may worsen the issue if the surrounding peer environment fails to support those values. This study strongly reinforces the broader argument that it is not just group affiliation, but the social meaning and norms of that affiliation, that shapes both psychological development and long-term educational attainment.

Together, these studies suggest a shift in focus from peer groups to the norms and behaviors prioritized within them. Group membership may provide an outline for social identity, but it is the specific values, whether related to academics, aggression, or emotional expression, that shape students’ academic engagement and psychological well-being. Understanding this distinction is essential for identifying what is behind academic, and therefore, later career trajectory.

PEER NORMS AS THE DECIDER OF LONG-TERM SUCCESS

After the correlation of research studies that disprove the assumption that peer group

affiliation alone predicts adolescent and later life outcomes, the question remains: what within peer groups actually shapes long-term success? Increasingly, research suggests that the answer lies in peer norms: the unspoken rules, shared values, and expectations that dictate how members of a group behave. While peer labels like “populars” or “brains” offer a shallow level of understanding social dynamics, it is the internal culture of these groups that ultimately shapes educational and career trajectories. Whether a student thrives or struggles often depends less on who they are associated with, and more on what those peers collectively believe and reinforce. Comparing the following studies highlights how different norms operate across various contexts, from academic performance to post-secondary planning. Unlike peer group labels, which may signal general social identity, norms define what is encouraged, rewarded, or discouraged within those groups.

In Kiperman et al. 's (2023) longitudinal study, adolescents who perceived their peers and peer groups as valuing school performance were significantly more likely to achieve academically. Importantly, these effects remained even after accounting for background factors such as family income, race, and school type. This suggests that peer norms do not merely reflect existing advantages but can function as an independent driver of achievement. When academic effort becomes a socially accepted or admired behavior within a group, students tend to align their behaviors accordingly. It can be inferred that a peer group with values that support activities such as volunteering or sharing career goals and aspirations may strongly impact future life trajectories. One limitation of Kiperman et al. (2023) is that the study supports the idea that peer groups who value academic attainment cause higher academic achievements and generally positive outcomes; but, the study fails to address this situation the other way around. It

can very well be that adolescents who already are academically inclined and high achievers find each other and form a peer group rather than the other way around. This limitation can be applied to many of the following studies, but this conundrum may be solved by the next study, Vit et al. (2024).

This point is addressed in Vit et al. (2024), who found that students' academic ambitions and achievements tend to converge with those of their close friends over time. While it's possible that students initially choose friends with similar goals, the study also suggests an opposite influence: as students interact more, their goals evolve together. Although, Vit's study only encompasses around 3 years during middle school. Their findings may not be as accurate when compared to Kuperman's study on high school students. However, this limitation may instead complement Kuperman's study despite exploring a younger experimental group. Since Vit's study suggests that students initially choose friends based on shared academic values, it is possible that adolescents who remain in the same school system from middle school through high school form peer group affiliations based on shared norms early on. These peer groups then deepen and evolve throughout high school, reinforcing the points made in Kuperman's study. So, between the two studies it can be inferred that adolescents may choose to align themselves with other students who share similar values; but as they grow, these peer groups develop new ambitions together, supporting the idea that peer values influence outcomes. However, In contrast to Kuperman's focus on perceived peer norms, Vit's findings show how observable peer behavior can shape academic self-concept and ambition. Together, both studies provide important new insight that adolescents are not passively influenced by peers, but actively adjust their expectations and behaviors to fit within the group's dominant values.

The long-term effects of peer norms permeate beyond high school academic performance and into important post-secondary decisions. Li, Sickles, and Williams (2020) claim that peer influence plays a significant role in shaping both college attendance and career choice. Their findings show that students are more likely to pursue higher education and certain career paths when those choices are shared by their peers or by their peers' parents. This social reinforcement, where certain outcomes are normalized and expected, underlines how peer norms act as outlines for what students think as realistic or desirable futures. These effects were stronger in cases where both the student's own family and their peer networks supported higher education, implying that peer norms can either strengthen or contradict family influence. Bifulco et al.'s (2018) research offers support for the argument made by Li et al. (2017). Their research shows that exposure to peers with college-educated mothers slightly increases college attainment, especially for male students. While the study does not isolate specific peer behaviors, the findings imply that students surrounded by peers from more educated backgrounds may take norms that prioritize post-secondary education to heart. These two studies show that peer norms are not limited to influencing random behaviors, but extend into the expectation of positive academic and career ambitions. It is clear that college-oriented values within peer groups (and their families) contribute to a student's view and goal of pursuing higher education.

These broader cultural and social norms that influence career trajectory are further reinforced through communication. Bidwell et al. (2000) found that in peer networks where open and frequent discussions about career aspirations cause more thought out occupational goals and long-term planning. In these groups, conversations about each other's future are not only normalized but expected. This creates a

peer environment where setting goals, exchanging opportunities, and finding paths towards their aspirations are part of everyday interaction. The results suggest that norms are only caused by physical behavior, but are also supported and strengthened through communication. Peer groups that prioritize future planning provide both motivation and experience, which students can use to clarify and refine their aspirations.

Together, these studies uncover that the most important aspect of peer relationships when it comes to adolescents is the internal peer and social norms that peers share and encourage. Whether it is expressed through academic motivation (Kiperman et al., 2023; Vit et al., 2024), encouraged by college-going behavior (Li et al., 2017; Bifulco et al., 2018), or discussed through open conversations about future goals (Bidwell et al., 2000), peer norms shape students' aspirations, behaviors, and long-term success. Adolescents don't simply soak up this peer influence, they are actively participating in their peer groups to form and engage expectations within the group. In a way, these peer groups and their norms are small cultures that are influenced by their environment. Yet, they are each different in their own ways. Understanding this difference shifts the age-old assumption away from typical labels like "popular" or "brain" towards more intricate ideas of influence and socialization. Whether a peer group furthers success or counteracts it depends less on who its members are and more on what they value.

CONCLUSION

High school peer groups clearly play a role in shaping adolescent development and long-term educational, career, and social outcomes. However, the reasoning behind why this occurs is much more complex than the traditional stereotypes of "brains" and "jocks."

The research discussed in this paper shows that peer group affiliation by itself cannot completely explain educational and occupational trajectories. Instead, the influence of peer groups is determined by the norms, values, and expectations that govern these groups. It is also clear that certain peer groups are not always helpful or harmful: their impacts are strongly determined by the specific behaviors and values enforced within the group.

Across a wide range of studies, the main idea that emerges is that peer norms, rather than group identity or status, are the most consistent and important predictors of long-term success. Adolescents who see their peers as valuing academic success are more likely to perform better academically, even after accounting for socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. Students select peers with similar ambitions and adapt to form new ambitions with those peers over time. Together this suggests that adolescents are not only receiving peer influence, but are actively participating in changing, responding to, and reinforcing group norms. Peer networks influence not just academic performance, but major post-secondary decisions like college attendance and career choice. Shared communication about future goals in peer networks help adolescents form stronger and more concise career paths. These findings articulate that peer groups may act as micro-cultures. For this review, micro-cultures and peer groups serve the same purpose: fostering the development and maintenance of peer norms. This paper contributes to the literature by directly connecting these strands of research to argue that peer norms are not just correlated with academic and career outcomes, but are a cultural force that adolescents help construct over time. Unlike prior studies that treat group affiliation, perceived norms, or goal setting as separate influences, this review integrates them into a single framework. Overall, this paper explains

how values are formed, reinforced, and used to impact long-term trajectories.

The implications of this newfound understanding are critical, particularly for educators and policymakers. Traditional approaches to encourage social interaction often aim to reduce peer pressure or broadly encourage social interaction, but they rarely account for the quality of peer influence. Policies should move beyond simply promoting inclusion and instead emphasize structures that foster positive peer cultures. New policies could prioritize collaborative environments, student leadership opportunities, and programs that encourage goal-setting and academic ambition. By shaping the broader school context, policies can help create conditions where positive norms become the standard.

For educators and school counselors, the challenge is to utilize these ideas into daily practice. Rather than focusing only on individual students, teachers and counselors should reconsider how classroom environments can shape group expectations. Mentoring programs, peer-led activities, and structured group work can normalize behaviors that support achievement, planning, and social development. These methods help instill values universally, allowing different peer groups from all backgrounds to thrive. By actively guiding the culture of peer groups, educators can help ensure that students are not only supported individually but are also surrounded by peer norms that reinforce long-term success.

Despite the evidence on peer norms that were found in this paper, important conceptual and methodological gaps remain. Many studies are relying heavily on self-reported perceptions of peer behavior or status, which can introduce bias or inconsistency. Moreover, much of the existing research lacks conceptual evidence because research is scattered world-wide,

leaving the questions of whether peer norms still function across different cultural or educational systems. However, in this review most papers are based on U.S. high school contexts. In addition, while longitudinal studies like those by Prinstein and La Greca (2002) and Kiperman et al. (2023) provide valuable information on how peer influence evolves over time, there is still a need for more longitudinal studies focusing on specific behavior tracking of how norms are formed and maintained within peer groups. To limit methodological gaps, future research should prioritize cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal studies to better understand the ways that norms are transmitted and reinforced. Exploring peer norms with technology and social media could also provide a more avant-garde study of modern adolescent socialization.

Ultimately, understanding peer groups as a medium for the development of norms that can interact and grow with internal values may redefine how we may view adolescent development. What matters most is not a group's label but the values and norms it reinforces. These internal group values have lasting effects, not only shaping academic outcomes in high school but influencing career decisions, social development, and long-term well-being. Overall, the quality of high school peer groups and the norms within them can have a significant impact on emotional, educational, social, and career trajectory. But my conclusions should be interpreted with caution. Future studies with longitudinal or cross-cultural designs may result in a more conclusive or definitive explanation as to how or why peer groups and peer norms shape development. Regardless, this study allows us to gain a more accurate and deeper understanding of how adolescents may be building their futures in constant collaboration with the friends who surround them.

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