



Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World

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The fearless Tina Rosenberg has spent her career tackling some of the world's hardest problems. *The Haunted Land*, her searing work on how Eastern Europe faced the crimes of Communism, garnered both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In *Join the Club*, she identifies a brewing social revolution that is changing the way people live, based on harnessing the positive force of peer pressure. Her stories of peer power in action show how it has reduced teen smoking in the United States, made villages in India healthier and more prosperous, helped minority students get top grades in college calculus, and even led to the fall of Slobodan Milosevic. She tells how creative social entrepreneurs are starting to use peer pressure to accomplish goals as personal as losing weight and as global as fighting terrorism. Inspiring and engrossing, *Join the Club* explains how we can better our world through humanity's most powerful and abundant resource: our connections with one another.

Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World Details

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From Reader Review Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World for online ebook

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

I thought the title seemed a bit overreaching when I first read about this book, but I was hopeful. Wouldn't it be lovely to discover that something as simple as peer pressure could actually transform the world?

Of course, as I had anticipated, the title was too good to be true. Rosenberg offers up story after story of ways that peer pressure is working to improve the world. Reducing rates of smoking. Cutting AIDS levels. Improving calculus scores in African-American men. Improving rates of infant mortality. All happy stories.

A good book, yes. A cure-all? No.

I suppose by now I should approach any book that offers quick fixes with skepticism instead of starry-eyed eagerness. As should we all. Still one can always dream....

Angela says

I've always been fascinated with the concept of peer pressure. I have a tendency to think of myself as someone who doesn't allow themselves to be pressured by the group. My need to fit in hasn't been allowed to keep me from doing what my conscience says is the right thing to do even if there is a price to pay. Peer pressure is often thought of as taking the easy road. Roads that stray from the rest of the group have always been considered the hard road. What makes this book such a fascinating read is that Rosenberg looks at peer pressure from both a positive and negative aspect. Which is contrary to how we normally view peer pressure.

When I was in high school, I ran across a news article in the local newspaper that referred to peer pressure as "evil companions." I believe the article said that "evil companions" was an old phrase used for the more commonly known term "peer pressure". My 17 year old self found this antiquated term to be both fascinating and hilariously funny. So fascinating that I cut the article out and took it to school and shared it with my group of friends. We found it to be such a great term that we had it made into t-shirts for all of us. They read "Evil Companions" across the back and on the front we had Summer '93 printed. I loved that t-shirt. We all did. At the time, I think we thought of peer pressure as this term used to place blame for bad behavior. It was an excuse that parents used to justify our actions as teens. Blame it on the friends and the individual isn't guilty. But looking back at it now, I may not have realized it but I think we found it so amusing because we were lucky to belong to a group that didn't pressure at all. We were accepted as we were. We weren't expected to dress a certain way, like certain things, or listen to specific music. We varied immensely and that is what made our group so great. To us, the whole concept of peer pressure was a farce. In hindsight, being able to do what we wanted and not be judged was what made those the greatest friends I've ever had. And when I say this, I mean it. I've met thousands of people in my 20 years since high school and I've found few people that sit at the level of my friends from high school. To this day, we remain vastly different in many ways but we are all still friends. We value each other for our differences still to this day.

Tina Rosenberg, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for *The Haunted Land* is back with another fascinating book. *Join the Club: How Peer Pressure can Transform the World* takes a close look at social change and how powerful it can be in the mindset of the individual and the collective soul of a group.

Throughout this book, Rosenberg delves into specific examples of social pressure and evaluates how it influences the individual and the group. She looks at how an individual's base need to belong, can so strongly influence their actions even at the detriment to their health, safety and well-being. But she also shows how their need to belong to the group can lead them down positive roads as well.

My Thoughts

This book was nothing like I thought it would be. I expected it to view peer pressure from an entirely negative perspective. Since peer pressure is most often presented in a highly negative light, it's an assumption I think many readers would have when delving into this book. But Rosenberg doesn't entirely place her focus on the negative when it comes to this social perspective. Rather, she chooses to look at peer pressure in terms of a means of achieving social change. That change could be bad but it could also be good. By looking at how peer pressure can be both good and bad for an individual and a group she successfully shows how something that seems so simple or unimportant can actually instigate significant social change when done correctly.

I found most of Rosenberg's examples to be a fascinating look at how social change is happening for the better. While some, I'm not sure I would define as "peer pressure" in terms of what I've always believed this phrase to mean, they are solid examples of how effective "change" campaigns can be useful in society to curb behavior, to educate and to persuade individuals to think and do differently.

I did however, find one of Rosenberg's arguments to be stretching. I had issues with her arguments concerning terrorism. I simply could not wrap my head around her argument and allow myself to think the way she was suggesting. Perhaps I felt like there was more to it. That the idea and problem of terrorism as a movement was presented in too simple of terms for my liking. For whatever reason, it's the one part of the book I simply did not agree with. I felt like it was one area where "peer pressure" simply couldn't be blamed as the culprit. I wanted more from Rosenberg on this subject and I just didn't get it.

Having read this book, I look back on my group of friends with new light and perspective and realize now that the pressure of my group was to be accepting and open-minded. To value difference. Positive peer-pressure that had a profound affect on me as an adult and allowed me to become a productive member of society who is accepting of differences in a group and recognizes how differences can do great things for the group as a whole and the individuals within the group. Here I was thinking that I was never pressured. I was, just not negatively. I was lucky enough to find positive peer pressure during a time when my peers had great influence on me as an individual and the adult I would eventually become.

Overall, this was an interesting read. Since I've always been fascinated with the idea of peer pressure I'm glad to have read it. While it didn't necessarily look at peer pressure as I have always thought of it, it was eye opening and allowed me to think of it in different terms. I always enjoy books that make me look at something from a different perspective, especially if it successfully expands my view and understanding of the subject.

Andy says

I was left ambivalent about "Join the Club." It has some nice stories with important, interesting information, but the premise overall doesn't pan out. People are sheep--OK, fine. This is nothing new (see "the Lord is my shepherd" in the Bible, e.g.). But peer pressure, i.e. the sheep leading the sheep, is just circular reasoning that doesn't help much for "transforming the world." The author uses smoking as an example, so let's look at that with a peer pressure model. Billy smokes because Jimmy smokes. Jimmy smokes because Billy smokes.

Where does that get us? Nowhere.

Rosenberg accurately describes how the effective Prop 99 and "truth" anti-tobacco campaigns worked. The key was counter-advertising, manipulating people at an emotional level just as cigarette ads did but in the opposite direction. What she emphasizes though to fit with her premise is the role of teen social networking. She also mentions but minimizes the rest of the tobacco control history: taxation, regulation, legislation and litigation. Even within the teen behaviors, I think she misses the central motivation of adolescents, which is to become adults, not to attack adults. She does explain this when she describes the bogus anti-smoking ads from the tobacco companies, but then that contradicts her earlier statements about rebellion, etc. The overall result is a muddle that I am afraid will confuse readers about what the real lessons are.

What she gets right is the crucial concept of changing the "social norm." Behavior change works much better at the population level with mass influence techniques than at the individual level with information.

For a clearer overview of what works for public health and behavior change in general, I would suggest something like *Getting What We Deserve: Health and Medical Care in America* by Sommer. It's not "creative non-fiction" but it is more evidence-based.

Catherine says

I did a lot of thinking based on reading this book. I wrote a whole blog entry (a long one, apologies) about how useless the new FDA cigarette labeling is based on the research Rosenberg reveals in this book combined with what I've learned about marketing in the last couple years. And I was fascinated by how "peer pressure" has been used to build lives and take down despots in so many cases.

Rosenberg really concentrated on Otpor and how this social movement help bring down Milosevic (in Serbia) and how key members of the organization have moved on to try to help others make a difference in their own governments. She credited Otpor with inspiring the various Color Revolutions we've been seeing, which seems reasonable. Rosenberg expressed the feeling that Otpor was one of the best social-change movements out there, although I feel like the applications are limited and highly dependent on circumstances being just right.

I thought the teen antismoking campaigns in Florida and South Carolina (or was it North?) had a more personal impact, and ever since I heard about microcredit years ago I was impressed with how it influenced lives so deeply with so little. I don't know if national revolutions make more impact for good and for longer than small social changes that people make in their health or lifestyle or education that will change individual lives and future generations? Is Otpor better than the Indian health programs Rosenberg saw that used women who would otherwise have been shunned for their low caste and poor education to teach sanitary health practices and help with basic health care in their communities? I think it's hard to say.

I do feel like Rosenberg fell short in her analysis of Otpor's potential when it came to ways that will help the current corruption in Mexico. She mentioned the sweeping changes made in customs, but that was motivated by the nation's need to be a part of NAFTA. Years ago. What about the current problems with mass killings and random shootings? She wants to help Mexico but she admitted that movements like Otpor and social change in general have less influence when behaviors are motivated by the kind of corruption that is rampant among drug traffickers. How can these things be stopped if the people who are responsible don't care about social ideals or individual lives? If there are no consequences because the law can't touch them? Because they're not afraid of eliminating those who stand in their way? Individuals may be able to make a change in Mexico, but I don't think it will come from bored teenagers and university students as it did in Serbia.

I wanted Rosenberg to be more current to have more ideas on how to change the world, but in the end I guess we all have to admit the limitations of social change and peer pressure to solve certain problems. Everything in its place.

Chrishna says

The title is a bold claim, but she gives examples of how peer pressure can change the world. From toppling dictatorships to raising the standard of living for untouchables in India to helping students obtain better calculus grades, she gives concrete examples of positive peer pressure. I found the idea that we are so reliant on group action a bit disturbing (can we ever really act independently?) but I see the good that peer pressure can facilitate. The most interesting chapters were about Optor, the resistance group in Yugoslavia. Basically a group of youths making it seem cool to resist. They used tactics as simple as limited-supply resistance t-shirts to stimulate interest. The difficulty in getting them made the shirts a prized commodity, plus it was free advertising. The end of the book gives productive examples of how to use positive peer pressure to prevent terrorism and assist ex-prisoners in re-entering society without reoffending. This was a fast and good read.

George Slade says

In short, this is a book about using peer pressure for good, instead of in the way it's typically viewed.

The basic theory of the book is that positive social change or social engineering can be accomplished by using the tendency for humans to want to fit in and be part of the crowd, whether it's for good or bad.

There are several very detailed examples of this principle discussed. One compelling story was about how Florida organized the Truth movement to combat the tobacco industry. It goes over how providing mere information is never enough to change the hearts and minds and really get the buy in of the targeted audience. Everyone knows smoking is bad for you, right? People do it anyway. Florida found a way to make it seem cool to not smoke and to fight the big tobacco firms.

This is a very small example of the stories in the book. It also goes through how the "social cure", as it calls it, was used to overthrow a dictator, reduce radicalization, improve the lives of Indian women (In India) and even to help people take their meds on time.

It's not the shortest book, but it's very interesting and detailed.

Overall, if sociology is your thing, check out this one.

Hunter James says

"Other researchers have confirmed this -- if there is litter on the ground or graffiti on the wall, people will not only litter and draw graffiti, they will begin to commit crimes. People adjust their behavior to fit the message sent by their physical surroundings about what a neighborhood finds acceptable."

"Industry Spokesman" was the first in a series of ads that made Big Tobacco a character. In another ad, black rappers attacked the tobacco industry for using menthol cigarettes to get blacks to smoke. The ad ended with

the line: "We used to pick it; now they want us to smoke it."

"A California TV commercial running in 2009, called "Programmed" shows a split screen. A man smokes a cigarette in one half of the screen. In the other half, a laboratory rat in a cage sucks on a spigot marked "nicotine." Carousel music plays. An announcer says, "The tobacco industry designs cigarettes to be addictive. How long will you let them control you?" Words come up: "Undo the manipulation."

"In another commercial, Perez and another teen call an ad agency that advertises cigarettes. They offer the hapless person on the line an award for killing more teens than anyone else. Ad after ad showed teenagers getting people from the tobacco-industrial complex on the phone -- and then torturing them. It is likely that never before in the history of public health had anyone done a media campaign based on prank phone calls. "California came up with the idea that the industry is manipulating you," said Peter Mitchel, who oversaw the "truth" campaign. "No one likes to be manipulated. But Crispin Porter took it to the next step. What do teenagers want? They are shopping for a way to rebel against their parents. Well, these people are even less cool than your parents."

"If it becomes evident that states are going to run antismoking campaigns, the industry is brilliant at getting them to choose ineffective themes. Even the Master Settlement Agreement fell into this trap -- states could use their settlement money only on ads "regarding the addictiveness, health effects and social costs related to the use of tobacco products and shall not be used for any personal attack on, or vilification of, any person (whether by name or business affiliation), company, or governmental agency, whether individually or collectively."

"Early on, Otpor's leaders realized that to keep volunteers happy, they needed to feel responsible and important, that their work and achievement mattered. They also needed to be constantly busy, not sitting around and waiting for instructions from above. So while the central organization set overall strategy, each cluster decided how to carry it out and how best to use local talent. Volunteers trained in Otpor methods and principles of nonviolent struggle then set loose to be the movement in their towns and neighborhoods."

"Masses of people will not become hooligans -- they will only agree to be arrested for activities they know should not be punished. That is the only way to convert arrests into public sympathy."

"Studies of people who joined Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church or Germany's Baaer-Meinhof Gang -- a leftist terrorist group active in the 1970s -- found that, as with Islamic radicals, the social bonds come first, leading people into the ideology. The radicalization is a product of the gradual tightening of that social circle as al moderate voices depart."

Icon Books says

Tina Rosenberg has spent her career tackling some of the world's hardest problems. 'The Haunted Land', her searing book on how Eastern Europe faced the crimes of Communism, was awarded both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in the US. In 'Join the Club' she identifies a brewing social revolution that is changing the way people live, based on harnessing the positive force of peer pressure.

Her stories of peer power in action show how it has reduced teen smoking in the United States, made villages in India healthier and more prosperous, helped minority students get top grades in college calculus, and even led to the fall of Slobodan Milosevic. She tells how creative social entrepreneurs are starting to use peer pressure to accomplish goals as personal as losing weight and as global as fighting terrorism. Inspiring and engrossing, 'Join the Club' explains how we can better our world through humanity's most powerful and

abundant resource: our connections with one another.

“remind (s) us of the importance of social relationships, and of our deep-seated need for respect, approval and connection.”

Prof. Kate Pickett, author of The Spirit Level

Julie says

Eh. Waaaay too wordy to capture my attention. After almost 100 pages of giving it a try, I didn't have any will to finish 300 more.

Dianne says

Well written but the topic wasn't my jam.

barry says

The first couple parts about the AIDS education in South Africa and the anti-smoking campaigns in the US were pretty interesting. But I lost interest after that.

TL;DR: Everyone wants to be "cool", especially teenagers. If you want them to do something, you have to advertise it in a way that seems cool. Whatever that is at the moment. Free t-shirts and bracelets and stuff also help.

Clif Hostetler says

Humans are social animals descended from a long line of hunter gathers who lived in small social groupings of extended families (i.e. tribes). We are programmed to care about what other people think of us. Rugged individualism is probably an imaginary facade in most cases. This book explores ways in which peer pressure can be adjusted to create positive behavioral changes.

The book provides examples of how efforts to motivate people with information or by using fear simply don't work and sometimes have the opposite of the intended effect. Advertisers have known for many years one way to sell a product is to associate it with the “in crowd.”

We've heard about how peer pressure can cause people to behave badly (or stupidly). This book suggests that it can also cause good behavior and then proceeds to provide examples related to controlling AIDS, quitting smoking, improving grades, fighting terrorism, overthrowing oppressive governments, and improving infant mortality. This book refers to it as the "social cure."

This book has convinced me that the social cure is real. The problem is that it's difficult to create the required

peer group to exert the required social pressure to cause the desired behavior.

Some quotes that caught my eye:

Quoting from “The Nurture Assumption” by Judith Rich Harris:

“She argued that once parents have passed along the genes, they have very little influence over their children--except to choose their child’s peer group.”

Referencing a study published in JAMA:

“Among children aged three to six, more knew Joe Camel than they did Mickey Mouse.” (prior to 1997 when Joe Camel ads ceased)

Other miscellaneous quotes:

“... joining a group that meets once a month will increase your happiness as much as doubling your income.”

“The short answer to the question of what makes people happy is this: other people.”

Referencing the results of study of body weight issues:

“...weight is socially contagious. If your friends are overweight, your are also likely to be overweight, even controlling for other factors. The contagion also works in the other direction; people with thin friends are more likely to be thin. Oddly, the connection also skipped a link--in the study, participants were significantly more likely to gain weight if a friend of a friend did, even if the friend who connected them gained no weight at all.”

Fred Gorrell says

This wonderful book provides a very encouraging view of the use of peer pressure not as it is often understood pejoratively but as a tool for making the world a better place.

Tony Kushner, the playwright, gives voice succinctly to an idea that threads through many religions and philosophies: “The smallest indivisible human unit is two people, not one; one is a fiction. From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs.” Whether in the concept of minyan in the Jewish faith, in the works of Marx or deTocqueville, or in the miracle of democracy (see James Surowiecki's The Wisdom of Crowds), it has long been understood that humans have a need for connection to one another, and that in this connection, there exists the power to heal, a collective wisdom more consistent and reliable than the wisest of individuals, and a source of strength unachievable by single humans acting alone. Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World gives us examples of this idea in action.

Tina Rosenberg describes a number of initiatives for betterment for which the central organizing principle is to tap peoples' connection to other people. In some of her examples, there is peer pressure not unlike the type traditionally understood to be the tool of drug dealers and gang organizers, put to use instead to discourage teens from smoking or to organize a popular uprising against a despot. She also describes the role human connection can play in getting people to adhere to prescription regimens or behavior modifications that can lead to better health and a lower health care cost burden on society. Through each of her examples, she helps

us see the reparative benefit of organizing outside the traditional formations of society: family, church, faith, or ethnic community. While these may be more enduring sources of human connection when and where they thrive, there are many times in modern society when people have separated from these bonds. They need to find new bonds, and organizations that provide ad hoc needs-based connections can fill a void.

As a journalist who has written compelling reports on the dysfunction of societies, Ms. Rosenberg relies primarily on the examples she has researched, of initiatives with elements of peer pressure. Her descriptions are thorough; she lets each example stand as evidence of the efficacy of the approach it has embraced. The book would be more powerful if the strategies described could be tied to research on human motivation, to offer more of a roadmap for anyone who might want to attempt replication.

While reading this, I was also reading *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*. This book is about initiatives organized atop the asynchronous connections enabled by the Internet, wherein people donate their time, expertise, and access to information to "crowdsource" resources like Wikipedia, the Linux operating system, or websites that aggregate information on violence in Africa. The author of this book, a professor at NYU, delves into numerous academic studies to reveal a paradigm of human motivation upon which he builds his explanation of the success of these endeavors, and provides a prescription to replicate that success. His book complements Ms. Rosenberg's study.

Yu says

Reading *Join The Club* is like to refresh my mind of preparing IELTS, listening to Michael Sandel's public lectures, or reading those academic articles with stats in different magazines. I guess my professor would have been more delighted if I've done this when I did Health Promotion :).

I believe Peer Pressure (PP) has an impact on AA and same kinda behavior changes, but some of the chapters to me are not so related or a bit too farfetched to Peer Pressure as it's called. Such as the Calculus Club, it did not seem to be the pure PP effect/social cure made the stunning changes to the black and Latino American's math scores. It is something else that hasn't been worked out, even Uri Treisman found it challenging to pinpoint just how calculus fits in.

People who share the culture of the people, who share the life of the people, and who come from the community and are more likely leading their villages to change than outsiders, aren't necessarily Peers. It's like choosing an aboriginal prestigious old person to a local tribe for introducing something new. It is more about empowerment, marketing, strategies and prestige. Again, not necessarily Peers.

Religions-church and democratic revolutions against Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia or in other parts of the globe are far beyond my knowledge, although always interest and plan to read Bible and revolutionary documents. Yet I have not and likely not in near future. But what fascinates me is that Tina talks about these issues in a way that Harvard Business Review does. And, she points out that there might be something we could make effort to exploit to cure social issues. It, probably, seems ridiculous when you think about thousands or millions of people, who don't see the problem as a problem or not as severe as it is, join a group of democratic revolution (or any sorts) only because it is trendy and fashionable, or maybe rebellious. Because everybody else around them are doing so. But, it worked and still works. Interesting indeed.

Blaine says

Join the Club was a good book with tons of great information that was hard to stay attentive to.
