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## Peer Pressure Plays Significant Role in Student Behavior

December 1, 2014 | :

by Jamaal Abdul-Alim

Pundits have long pointed to the power of peer pressure when seeking to explain why people—particularly young people—make bad or otherwise questionable decisions.

But is it so powerful that poor students will pass up the chance to take a \$200 online SAT prep course for free just to fit in with their friends? Is being accepted by one's peers more important than increasing one's chances of getting into a good college?

A pair of researchers set out to answer those questions last school year by visiting four low-performing, low-income, predominantly Hispanic high schools in Los Angeles and offering 11th-graders the chance to take a commercially available online SAT prep course for free.

The students were given forms that were identical in all but one respect—some of the forms indicated that their decision to sign up would be kept private from everyone *except* the other students in the room, while other forms stated that their decision would be kept private from everyone, *including* the students in the room.

Among students taking two honors classes, the researchers found that, when students thought their decision to sign up for the free SAT prep course would be known by their peers, it decreased sign-up rates by 25 percentage points when the students were in a regular class, where the sign-up rate among their “no-honors” peers is low.

In stark contrast, the researchers found, publicizing the decision increased sign-up rates by 25 percentage points when such students were in an honors class, where the sign-up rate among their “all-

honors" peers is higher.

The results were similar, they said, among students taking one to three honors courses.

"Beyond understanding student motivation and behavior, we believe the results carry important policy lessons," the researchers, Leonardo Bursztyn, an assistant professor of economics at UCLA, and Robert Jensen, a professor of business economics and public policy at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in their paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research and titled "How Does Peer Pressure Affect Educational Investments?"

"Peer pressure appears to be a powerful force affecting educational choices and whether students undertake important investments that could improve academic performance or outcomes," their paper states.

The researchers also found that, among students who say it is important to be popular, they were less likely to take advantage of the free access to the online SAT prep course when the decision is public, but, among students who don't care about popularity, it made no difference one way or the other.

In honors classes, they found, students who assigned importance to popularity were slightly more likely to sign up when the decision is public, but those who said popularity was unimportant were not affected.

"Thus in both cases, students concerned with popularity move in the direction of the locally prevailing norm when the decision is public, whereas those unconcerned with popularity do not change their behavior at all based on whether they believe their peers will learn of their decision," the paper states.

The researchers note that their findings show how "even very low-income students are willing to forgo free access to an SAT prep course that could improve their educational and possibly later life outcomes, solely in order to avoid having their peers know about it." The students estimated that the value of the course was about \$260, which wasn't far off given that it costs schools about \$200 per student to provide the course.

The study comes at a time when there is an increased emphasis on the need for educators to create a "college-going culture" in schools where such a culture is weak or nonexistent.

Bursztyn and Jensen say that changing either norms or peers is likely to be quite difficult, particularly on a large scale, but that it's easier to change "the extent to which behaviors are observable by peers."

The researchers also note that their findings are consistent with the "Acting White" hypothesis, which holds that minorities face social sanctions from peers for engaging in certain academic behaviors. But they say that, since the schools they studied were 96 percent Hispanic, they could not test that hypothesis for this particular study.

Still, the findings bear relation to the discussion surrounding the "Acting White" hypothesis, particularly as it relates to concerns about being ostracized for doing anything that could indicate plans to "leave" the group from which one came.

"The use of an SAT prep course is particularly relevant given that it signals very specifically, perhaps more than many other education investments, an increased likelihood that the individual will leave the

local community or group (since you only take the SAT if you plan to go to college) and is thus precisely the type of behavior we would expect to be sanctioned under these models," the researchers wrote.

**Semantic Tags:** [Peer Pressure](#)

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