

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Invisible Influence: How Our Decisions Are Rarely Ever Our Own

By CommonLit Staff
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Jonah Berger is a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior, in which he discusses the impacts of social influence. In this informational text, the author discusses Berger's work, as well as how individuals are affected by social influence. As you read, take notes on evidence that supports how individuals are affected by social influence.

- [1] Think about a choice you've made recently, whether it was what to have for lunch, or what to do during recess. You might think that those choices are driven by you and the things you prefer. You might believe you choose the things you like to eat and avoid the things you don't like to eat; that you do what you like to do and avoid the things you dislike.



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Well, that's not completely true, says Dr. Jonah Berger, a marketing professor at University of Pennsylvania.

Berger has spent over 15 years studying how social influence works and is the author of the book *Invisible Influence: The Hidden Forces that Shape Behavior*. The book describes how even though we like to think our choices are driven by what we prefer, other people have an influence over almost everything we do.

Berger describes this influence as something invisible that constantly surrounds us. It is like a magnet, sometimes it attracts and leads us to do the same thing as others, and sometimes it repels and leads us to do the opposite of what others are doing. But regardless, the point he stresses is that it often has this effect without us even realizing it. We think we make our own choices, but other people are actually making them for us.

- [5] "Our likes and dislikes are often driven in subtle, and in surprising ways, by people around us," Berger says. "If a lot of students are picking up certain things in the lunch line, that might make you more likely to pick up that thing. If a bunch of kids are playing with a certain toy, that might make that toy seem better and might make you want to play with it as well. At the same time, if too many people are doing something, that might make you want to avoid that thing, or not like it anymore. Or if there are kids you don't want to be associated with or don't like, you might choose to avoid doing whatever it is they're doing,"

Berger insists that everyone is susceptible¹ to influence. However, young people tend to be a little more susceptible to influence. There are many more things to learn when you are 10 years old than when you are, say, 50 or 60 years old, and so you often look to others to help you learn. As teenagers, we are also developing our independence and that sometimes means doing the opposite of what others are doing, particularly our parents. This type of response to influence is called a “reactant”. Remember the example of a magnet and avoiding what others are doing? In some cases, influence is at work when we are doing the opposite to what people are doing or asking of us. If your parents tell you to eat your vegetables, you might say, “No I don’t want to eat my vegetables, I’m not going to do what you tell me”. If your parents say, “No you can’t watch this movie,” it might make you want to watch the movie more. You want to assert the fact that you are independent. This is interesting, because according to Berger, if you take steps to do something simply because your parents told you not to, you’re not being independent, you’re still being influenced.

The power of social influence is everywhere but yet, Berger says, the first place we never seem to see the effect of that influence is with ourselves. “If you stop to take a look around, you’ll see influence — other kids dressing the same way, people listening to the same music as their friends,” he says, “but we never seem to think we are influenced by others. When we look to other people we see their behavior. Sure enough, other people’s clothes look a lot alike to one another, most kids wear t-shirts and jeans or t-shirts and shorts, so they look the same. Most people listen to the same music on the same radio station, most people eat similar sorts of food to their friends. But when we look at our own choices we think less about our behavior and more about our thoughts. We say: ‘Well, I don’t think I bought that shirt because I wanted to fit in and be like everybody else. I thought I bought it because I like the color.’ Or, ‘I think I bought this food because it is really tasty, not because my best friend just chose the same thing.’ And so when we look to our own behavior we don’t find any evidence of trying to fit in, or of trying to imitate others and so we don’t think influence affects us, even though it often does. It’s just invisible.”

Berger also says that there is a cultural bias² that we have towards influence. “We often think influence is a bad thing, particularly in American culture. We think in terms like ‘If Jimmy jumped off a bridge, would you jump off a bridge too?’ and ‘Don’t be a mindless sheep just following the crowd.’ So influence is seen in a negative light, as a bad thing that we don’t want to see ourselves as being susceptible to.”

What’s interesting is that influence isn’t always bad when you think about it. Imagine you had to make a choice without having any information on what other people liked. What if you had to try a new food without asking anyone what that food was like or seeing other people’s reactions to eating that food? How would you know if that food was any good? How would you know if a movie or a book was any good if you didn’t know what other people thought about it? Life would be a lot more difficult without the influence of others. Influence often helps us make faster and easier decisions, yet we tend to think of it as a bad thing, that “to be influenced” is a negative thing.

1. **Susceptible** (*adjective*): easily affected by something
2. the tendency for people to judge and interpret things based on their own culture

[10] Berger wants people to recognize that social influence alone is neither a good nor a bad thing. He wants people to use their understanding of it to help make better choices and live happier and healthier lives. "It's only by understanding how influence works that we can take advantage of its power," he says. "We can choose our influences, pick their upsides and avoid their downsides. So I would say to young people to use influence for good things and not for bad things. Influence can lead us at times to make better choices, to do good things and find good options; at other times, it leads us astray, it leads us to bully a kid because other kids are bullying them, or make bad choices just because some other kids have made some bad choices."

So, the next time you have a big decision to make, stop and ask yourself if you're making that decision because you like what it leads to, or if you are making that decision because it's the right thing to do and other good people are making the decision. Is that decision a negative influence? Are you avoiding something because you feel that way or because of how other people feel? By understanding influence, you can identify it, and once you've identified it, you can take advantage of its power.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the main idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Social influence is a way in which humans are able to navigate the world and make quick decisions, making it important not to resist its influence.
 - B. Social influence is unavoidable and usually undetectable, but if identified, it can be used to an individual's benefit when making decisions.
 - C. The results of social influence are overwhelmingly negative, which is why it is important to carefully consider what you are being influenced to do.
 - D. Being susceptible to social influence is a sign of weakness and should be carefully monitored when individuals are in social situations.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Berger insists that everyone is susceptible to influence. However, young people tend to be a little more susceptible to influence." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "'We often think influence is a bad thing, particularly in American culture. We think of terms like 'If Jimmy jumped off a bridge, would you jump off a bridge too?'" (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "How would you know if a movie or a book was any good if you didn't know what other people thought about it?" (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "'We can choose our influences, pick their upsides and avoid their downsides. So I would say to young people to use influence for good things and not for bad things.'" (Paragraph 10)

3. PART A: How do people's perceptions of influence compare to its reality? [RI.3]
 - A. Most people think influence is a bad thing, when in reality it can be either good or bad depending on how you use it.
 - B. Most people think their choices are only positively affected by social influence, when in reality all of their choices are somehow influenced by other people.
 - C. Most people think that social influence helps them make decisions, when in reality it can encourage them to make poor choices.
 - D. Most people think they can determine when they are being influenced and control it, when in reality social influence is impossible to detect.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "But regardless, the point he stresses is that it often has this effect without us even realizing it. We think we make our own choices but other people are actually making them for us." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "if you take steps to do something simply because your parents told you not to, you're not being independent, you're still being influenced." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "'but we never seem to think we are influenced by others. Part of that is that when we look to other people we see their behavior.'" (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "Influence often helps us make faster and easier decisions, yet we tend to think of it as a bad thing" (Paragraph 9)

5. What evidence does the author provide to support their claim regarding the extent to [RI.8] which social influence affects people?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Think of a time when you felt affected by social influence. Describe the experience. Why did you feel compelled to take part in this behavior or activity?
2. Dr. Jonah Berger doesn't believe that social influence is either good or bad. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? What has been your experience with the effects of social influence?
3. In the context of the text, why do people follow the crowd? Why do people feel driven to do what other people are doing? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. How could social influence encourage people to take part in bad or dangerous behavior? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.