

Book Review: Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work by Robert H. Frank

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Frank, Robert H. *Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. viii+ 299 pages. Hardback: \$27.95.

In *Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work*, Robert H. Frank, a Professor of Economics at Cornell University and a columnist for the *New York Times*, examines a novel way of addressing the harms of climate change. He argues that individual actions will not work. Instead, we must utilize the power of peer influences on people's decision-making processes to not only create climate change policies that "shape our choices, but also why failure to do so may threaten our very survival" (p. 6).

As an economist, Frank addresses climate change in terms of monetary costs and future harm to individuals and nations. So, he suggests tackling this "existential threat" through the power of behavior contagion, which is defined as a "tendency to mimic others' behavior" (p. 7). He advocates for using taxation rather than regulation, to motivate people, particularly wealthy voters, to choose options that are socially beneficial to all. In this way, social policies would be drafted that would eliminate economic inequality and climate change, two social problems that he sees as complementary, meaning you cannot solve one unless the other is also mitigated.

A term that Frank uses often across chapters is "the mother of all illusions." This phrase describes "the belief, held by many wealthy voters, that higher top taxes will require painful sacrifices of them" (p. 9). He sees this as a hindrance to both economic equality and climate change policies that work.

In Chapter One, he presents seven premises of his argument that the power of peer influences can be used to change people's behavior. Peer influences are collective actions that develop the contexts, both positive and negative, that shape people's choices to a degree that many people do not realize. The contexts that shape our choices are themselves the result of the

individual choice people make, which has only a negligible effect on those contexts. Therefore, we could often achieve better outcomes through collective steps that encourage choices that promote beneficial contexts and discourage harmful ones. Lastly, to promote better environments, taxation is often more effective and less intrusive than regulation.

One of the strengths of his arguments is the discussions of cases of social change in which behavioral contagion was successful in changing people's actions, behavior, or attitudes which led to changes in social policies, including same-sex marriage, smoking, eating, and drinking, and the sexual revolution. He also discusses "expenditure cascades," which refer to the ways in which people are influenced to overspend, whether it is nations in an arms race or individual citizens buying larger homes and environmentally unfriendly cars.

Another strength is the use of diagrams and past research by economists to demonstrate how context shapes perception. The chapter clearly illustrates that decision-making processes are impacted by people's perception of situations. Also, the addition of Chapter 9, which explains the climate crisis in detail, is helpful for understanding the urgency that can be felt throughout the book. The concept of the mother of all illusions is repeated to the point that it begins to be internalized, which I also view as a strength of the book and his arguments.

One of the weaknesses of the book is the use of scientific jargon that could make it difficult for laypersons to understand or follow the argument. While it is more a book that social scientists will understand, it is the non-scientific audiences whom he wishes to motivate to change their social behaviors in ways that mitigate the harms of climate change. Also, the inclusion of his past research did not appear to add to his arguments.

Overall, it is a timely and necessary book. Certainly, climate change is a social problem that has the potential to cause significant future harm. However, the premise that the wealthy can

be influenced to accept higher taxes for the common good may be overly optimistic, as what is deemed a benefit and what is considered harm are so individualistic. Yet, I think that this book would be good for graduate classes in Economics and Social Psychology, particularly as he argues that many economists have not considered behavior contagion as an option for changing social behavior or taxation over regulation as a way to solve both economic inequality and climate change simultaneously.

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