



Jim Coleman: A Personal Story

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Conclusion

Adding a system of design competitions would be a radical shift for educational R&D. Yet it is an essential one. Not until the education research community is able to routinely produce solid, unassailable advances in educational practice will the entire R&D enterprise be taken seriously, be funded adequately, and make a major difference in the lives of children.

Notes

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Jim Coleman: A Personal Story

STEPHEN P. HEYNEMAN

It was one of those cold, dirty winters in Chicago. But it was made worse by being a poor graduate student living in Woodlawn, and having a future which, in a moment of optimism, could only be described as uncertain. I had spent the fall of 1972 generating cross-tabulations and correlations on data carefully collected over the previous year from a random sample of Ugandan primary schools. It was the first such study in Sub-Saharan Africa. The questionnaires had been adapted from the 1966 *Equality of Educational Opportunity Report* (the Coleman Report; United States Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1966). But something

was very wrong. Contrary to prior work, I could find no correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. It terrified me. I recoded the data and redefined the variables. I checked on the variation for each component. I tried different measures of association; different definitions of socioeconomic status; different significance levels; different controls on age and ethnicity; and different genders. Nothing. I didn't know what to do. It wasn't supposed to come out like that.

I had heard that Jim Coleman had shifted from Johns Hopkins to the University of Chicago. Since his photo-

graph had appeared in the press, I knew what he looked like. One January day in a church basement lunch deli, I found him. He was alone, so I got behind him in line and began talking about Uganda as we got our hamburgers. We sat together. As I was telling him the details of the study I was not watching carefully what I was doing. Just at the part where I was reporting no correlation between student socioeconomic status and academic achievement, I looked down at my plate and realized that the top had come off the squeeze bottle of ketchup and that my hamburger had completely disappeared under a pile of red

sauce. He noticed it at the same time. Today I remember his words as though he were here right now: "So no correlation, go on."

He was not the slightest bit distracted or the slightest bit interested in what had occurred on my plate. He remained focused totally on the discussion of the question at hand and the issue of data on that question. As I think now about this great man with whom I had meaningful conversations over the next several decades, I remember this incident with the hamburger frequently, for it represents one of the reasons why Jim Coleman was so brilliant, and in addition reflects one of the causes of why he was often wrong.

Eventually Coleman served on the committee which guided the dissertation *Influences on Academic Achievement in Uganda: A "Coleman Report" From a Non-Industrialized Society* (Heyneman, 1975). Some readers may know the findings of that report, which questioned the degree to which academic performance is determined by ascriptive factors outside the classroom (Heyneman, 1976a, 1977, 1979a, 1980). I suspect that Jim Coleman's sponsorship of the dissertation, which deviated from his own findings, was made possible by the fact that for him Uganda was esoteric. Until that time, his experience had been confined to North America, Europe, and Eastern Europe (Poland in particular). Sub-Saharan Africa was altogether another world, and findings from Africa were perhaps curious but hardly a relevant challenge to his own thinking.

After the dissertation we kept in touch informally. I sent him publications. Over time, the publications began to be about countries in other parts of the world. By the mid-1980s, it was possible to compare the influence of socioeconomic status on academic achievement in developing countries with its influence in Europe and North America (Heyneman and Loxley, 1982, 1983). Though multilevel analysis and other technical advances had raised new issues in the interim, in the end it was possible to make a few generalizations about the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement internationally: that it varies by country, by subject matter, by gender, and over time (Heyneman, 1989).

When these publications were appearing, the United States was em-

broiled in debate over the policy implications of Coleman's original findings, one of which was the use of bussing to desegregate the nation's public school systems. Coleman seemed to believe that survey data provided a true test of theory, and if corroborated, that theory was the appropriate engine for setting social policy. That those policies were controversial, debated, and opposed, often with emotion, was insufficient evidence that they could be wrong. People's opposition reflected the opposite: policies were opposed because they were difficult to accept by those affected. But because the policies were based on a social science, it was possible to argue that those who opposed should in fact be forced into compliance. A dangerous logic.

The 1980s were a period of court-mandated desegregation throughout the United States, in which children, for reasons of equity, were under court order to be bussed to nonlocal schools. In several important cases, Jim Coleman, like a court-appointed psychiatrist, had provided expert testimony as a sociologist. That testimony continued to hold that the most effective way to raise the achievement scores of minorities was to integrate them with nonminorities. Throughout the period he appeared to believe that justice could be driven by scientific results. I think he sensed that the "white flight" to the suburbs and to nonpublic schools was a reaction to people's emotional resistance to racial integration. Like most of us, Coleman believed in integration himself. But more importantly, he suspected that this flight was evidence that those affected by integration were too conservative to adhere to correct social policy, hence justifying the legal mandate to override families' preferences for their children's schools.

Once I watched as an angry public shouted at him at an AERA meeting. Afterward, we found ourselves alone waiting for a cab. "You are wrong, Jim," I said. "You know that in many countries minority children, even poor minority children, do not necessarily perform worse on average than others."

"Yes," he said, "I have been reading your work on that, but why is that not true in the United States?"

"It is true in the United States," I said. "Those who are poor and are highly motivated do as well as others." I mentioned the distinction made

by John Ogbu between voluntary and involuntary minorities (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991). I reminded him of his own work on the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988). I asked him to read my own speculation on the topic of motivation among U.S. children (Heyneman, 1976b, 1978, 1979b, 1990). He said he would.

We were in a cab together headed downtown. I asked him to consider the possibility that those who flee integration are in fact culturally motivated for the right reasons, not the wrong reasons; that they included not only whites but minorities as well. "Jim, they aren't fleeing integration, they're probably fleeing something else—the likelihood that their children will experience school violence and classroom indiscipline. No responsible parent wants a child in an unsafe environment," I said. I described what I was learning from working on education in Malawi, China, India, and Indonesia: that external examinations had a constructive influence on desire to learn, regardless of a pupil's social background. This foreign experience allowed me to speculate about my own country.

"It isn't poverty which drives scores of U.S. students down," I said, "or race, or even minority status, but rather impoverished spirit. It is the general lack of a desire to learn and this, in turn, is affected by public policy. What differentiates American children from other children in the world—and the explanation of poor performance among minorities and the poor—is American public policy toward children. In general, children in the United States are provided with too much opportunity and too few obligations; too much choice and too few responsibilities."¹

By this time we were almost downtown. I remember him looking at me with that thoughtful expression of his. He was quiet for a long time. "Maybe," he said.

A year or so after that cab ride, I received a draft article in which he cited an essay I had written. On the draft he had written the word "Thanks" next to the citation. The point he was making in that article had to do with American adolescence. His idea of a well-balanced adolescence, and the point made that day in the cab, had to do with the balance between privilege and obligations, and the need of U.S.

adolescents of all races and all language groups to adhere to a common curricular standard, tested by achievement on external examinations—as in other countries.

Summary

I think the confrontation Jim Coleman had with himself provides us all with a lesson. That lesson has to do with the proper role of survey research and the degree to which we can rely on data—any data—to determine social policy. Jim Coleman's life covered the same period as the development of the computer—the means by which we can make hundreds of thousands of observations at once. But the question remains: how are we to interpret these observations?

Much has changed since the first primary school survey in Sub-Saharan Africa in 1972. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remind ourselves of some basic truths. One is that most survey observations still derive from less than 20% of the world's population, mostly from samples in North America and Europe (Fuller & Heyneman, 1989). This is hardly sufficient to suggest we yet have a representative "social science."

We must remember, too, that the theories we test are derived from our own experience. When we have an opportunity to understand the world more broadly it provides us with new explanations for our own society. This may be particularly true in our public policy toward children and adolescents.

The lesson I would derive from Jim Coleman is that we must not allow our science or our desire to help others to taint our perceptions and blind us to the possibility that resistance to our ideas may be rational and justified. We must remind ourselves of the caveats learned in beginning statistics, the necessity for transparency behind our assumptions. We must never allow these basic principles to be forgotten in a world where it is easy to get caught up by the enormous advances we have made in our technologies. In our culture, technical hubris is a common disease.

Jim Coleman was one of the best social scientists of the 20th century, but like all of us, he was fallible. He chose to notice what "the science" told him, at times at the expense of an obvious alternative. He allowed himself to believe that empirical interpretation could guide social policy with suffi-

cient certainty to take precedence over individual choice. His theories were ahead of his science, and his science was ahead of justice. His thinking was motivated by a wish to improve, but neither a good theory nor a wish to improve are sufficient to make wise social policy.

Notes

The views expressed here are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of his employer, the World Bank, or any of its affiliated institutions.

¹In addition, U.S. schoolchildren are influenced by a common assumption that curriculum has to be entertaining, and that there is a scarcity of opportunities to participate in adult roles.

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Proposal for a New AERA Award: The MEANY

RONALD A. BERK

Warning

This article was adapted from a "Triennial Travesty" presentation at the 1996 Annual Meeting in New York. It is intended solely for your entertainment; any other use, such as for policy, research, or scholarly purposes, would be rather shocking and reeeeally bizarre, plus it is strictly prohibited without the prior written and notarized consent of *Moi*.

Disclaimer

No animals were harmed or mistreated during the production of this

article, although the theme from *Free Willy 2* was played during the assembly of the test.

Proposal

Year after year, AERA distributes awards for excellence and outstanding contributions to educational research at its Annual Meeting. Pictures of the winners are presented in the June-July issue of this journal. Although they set examples as the best in our field, their standard of performance may be so high that many of us may feel it is unattainable. Realistically, I would strive