

Teacher, Mentor, Colleague

James Coleman generously shared his knowledge and expertise

BY TOM HOFFER

WHEN I STARTED GRADUATE SCHOOL at the University of Chicago in 1979, I knew James Coleman by reputation only. As a college student in sociology, I had read about his work on *Equality of Educational Opportunity* and the controversy it had generated. When I got to know Coleman as a teacher, a mentor, and a colleague, the experience was transformative.

In the introductory course “Sociological Inquiry,” which Coleman co-taught, I saw that his approach to teaching sociology was unique. First, he expected his students to produce clear, concise writing on real social problems, omitting jargon and grand, abstract theory. Second, he was intrigued by the realities of society, and found comparative-historical and ethnographic approaches to sociology just as engaging as the large-scale quantitative data analyses and mathematical formulations for which he was famous. Third, he conveyed a strong sense that something important was at stake in sociological research, that understanding what was going on in the world made a difference, and that getting it right was imperative.

I had initially planned to earn a master’s degree and teach social science in high school. But by the end of the first quarter, I realized that my graduate program in the sociology of education had little to do with teaching high school and everything to do with learning how to conduct rigorous social research from real masters of the craft. I also realized that I needed money to live on. In January 1980, I went to see Coleman to inquire about a job. In my interview, he asked about my undergraduate studies, and found it genuinely interesting that I had spent four years reading Durkheim, Sartre, Marx, Weber, and Freud. He never mentioned probability, statistics, calculus, or programming—but he must have surmised that I had little of the technical knowledge and skills so central to his research. Nor did he ask for my views on the proper role of private schools in American education, or even how I thought private schools compared with public schools.

But Coleman hired me, and before long he asked me to work with him on one of five reports commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education to conduct baseline analyses of the data derived from the “High School and Beyond” surveys. Our report

would center on a comparison of public and private high schools.

Coleman had a relentless work ethic and adherence to deadlines that swept the whole project along through weeks of outlines, analyses, informal presentations, drafts, rewrites, and more rewrites. He would go through every detail of the graduate assistants’ drafts, and sometimes, particularly in the early stages, he would restructure and rewrite nearly every paragraph and sentence. His approach and standards were clearly illustrated with a lot of red ink.

Late one night I mentioned to Coleman that I was having “a little trouble” keeping up with my graduate courses while doing all of this. He expressed genuine sympathy but pointed out that I was learning much more about social research on his project, and that I shouldn’t worry if some of my coursework wasn’t as good as I’d like it to be: “This work will get you through grad school just fine,” I recall him saying. “Remember that the best graduate student is one who is finished.”

When our report on public and private schools became a lightning rod for policy and research debates, Coleman placed his graduate students squarely in the middle of the storm, expecting us to participate in conferences and symposia. At the same time, he was a strong advocate of integrating the research experience with the graduate school requirements of exams,

course papers, and theses. When I asked him if he thought it was acceptable for me to build my master’s thesis around a chapter in the 1980 *Public and Private Schools* report on which I’d worked especially long and hard, he responded, “The research work you’re doing isn’t a sideshow, it’s the core. The more you can build on it, the better.” A few years later, as I began to develop my doctoral dissertation, he gave me essentially the same advice.

Today, James Coleman is remembered as an extraordinary thinker and empirical researcher. To those of us who were lucky enough to work and study with him, his abundant generosity in sharing his expertise and knowledge is just as memorable.



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