High School Context and College Plans: A Comment

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REPLY TO TIGER

Tiger, in his thoughtful comment on my research, makes two points; one, that I have not really tested his central hypothesis; and two, that the method and data I use are not up to the task.

That men and women have functionally specific roles in all societies is not the argument I attempt to test. Nor is the idea that men and women systematically exclude each other from certain groups. The only aspect of Tiger's work that I critically examine is his notion that males have a propensity to form stronger and more enduring ties with each other more often than women bond with other females. My data demonstrate a contrary trend, at least in certain U.S. urban areas. The number, intensity, and longevity of the friendship and kinship ties of women often exceed those of men. Furthermore, while men unquestionably dominate certain types of groups (instrumental ones), female participation in a wide range of such groups was far more active than expected. Thus, it would appear that in industrialized societies which encourage female membership in the labor force, sex differences may be diminishing.

With respect to the methodological aspects of my paper, Tiger questions the representativeness of the sample, the validity of self report data and the omission of cross-cultural data. The fact that women were slightly overrepresented in the sample has little bearing on the basic findings. The analysis of variance design used in the study permits one to compare groups of unrepresentative size providing both are representative with respect to family, occupation, education, and minority status. Thus, one can place confidence in the sex differences revealed by the data.

While self report data are not always consistent with behavior, I believe one can place confidence in self report social participation data. A study of patterns of influence indicates that people will, independently of one another, acknowledge each other's role in reaching decisions (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955:153-161). That is, when an individual reports discussing political candidates, fashions, movies, or other topics with another, his conversation partner also mentions their exchange (without aided recall) in a high proportion of cases. This study's cross validation of social participation activities justifies the use of self report data.

Tiger's call for cross-cultural data to test the hypothesis in question strikes a responsive chord. Data from a sample of industrialized and pre-industrial countries would provide a more severe test of the sex linked bonding patterns of men and women found in my investigation. The absence of such data should not, as Tiger would apparently advocate, discourage scientists from using whatever sources are available to them. Otherwise, little research would be accomplished, since ideal circumstances are rarely available.

Finally, I laud Tiger's call for a systematic study of human social organization. While attempts to show that differences in social initiative and aggression are rooted in physiological mechanisms have shown little promise as yet, few have examined biological, cultural, and social factors in concert. A substantial increase in such couplings will advance our knowledge of human social relations.

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HIGH SCHOOL CONTEXT AND COLLEGE PLANS: A COMMENT

To those not acquainted with the research literature on school context and college plans, Joel Nelson's article (1972:143-148) may give
an exaggerated impression of its originality and significance. The following observations are intended to help place the study in proper perspective.

First, the thesis that school contexts may have negative effects, as well as positive effects, on student aspirations has been suggested in many previous studies (e.g., Davis 1966, Werts 1968, Meyer 1970, Hausner 1971). Nelson's acknowledgment (144) of these is limited to the statement that "previous research suggests that the higher the average level of student intelligence in a school, the less likely any one student will feel academically competent (Myer [sic] 1970)." It should be noted that the focus of Meyer's article is not on feelings of competence but rather on college plans, just as in Nelson's study. Meyer reports that "the status and/or community resources of a high school have only a slight effect upon the student's decision to attend college—indipendently of the characteristics of himself and of his family" (59). He contends that:

The small observed effect of school status upon college intentions masks two contrasting forces. There is a larger supportive effect of school status than has usually been reported. But there is a negative effect also; since higher status schools have more able students, negative ("frog pond") comparisons for any given student tend to lower aspirations. (68-69).

Nelson appears to do little more than duplicate Meyer's finding and, in any case, fails to adequately report the relationship of his study to the former.

Nelson's article is also misleading to the extent that it gives the impression of being a critique of the Sewell-Armer (1966) study which tested the popular thesis that neighborhood status has an important positive influence on educational plans of youth in addition to that of sex, measured intelligence, and socioeconomic status. This is not the central issue in Nelson's study; and, in fact, he acknowledges toward the end of his article that his "findings agree with Sewell and Armer's observations that school status has no significant net effect on aspiration variability" (146). He then argues, however, that Sewell and Armer "explain the case differently" and that they suggest "that school status is theoretically unimportant because it fails to predict aspirations—over and above other variables" (146). For the benefit of those unfamiliar with the original paper, Sewell and Armer's conclusions were as follows:

Consequently, it may be concluded that although neighborhood context makes some contribution to the explained variance in college plans over and above that made by traditional variables, its added contribution is indeed small. These results should not be interpreted to mean that neighborhood context can be dismissed as a factor in educational aspirations of youth... Nevertheless, the results of the analysis reported in this paper indicate that past claims for the importance of neighborhood context in the development of educational aspirations may have been considerably overstated. Whether more direct measures of normative climates than the socioeconomic level of the neighborhood or school, or other measures of neighborhood or school climates, would reveal a closer relationship with educational aspirations must await new evidence based on actual assessment of these climates. Such evidence was not available in this study, nor has it been presented in any of the past studies. Whatever the prospects for future research, the present study clearly casts doubt on the popular notion that the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood in which the youth resides has a substantial influence on his educational aspirations that cannot be explained in terms of his sex, ability, and socioeconomic status. (167-68).

Sewell and Armer do not suggest that "school status is theoretically unimportant"; rather they point out that it does not have the strong positive influence on college plans that, at the time, many claimed it to have. Among the possible reasons for this negligible effect may be (a) measurement limitations, (b) contradictory influences as suggested by Meyer (1970) and repeated by Nelson (1972), (c) less extensive and intensive pressures of school and neighborhood contexts relative to other more proximate influences, (d) variability in school and neighborhood influences on individuals corresponding to differences in ability and background, and (e) other factors. In short, the door is left open for alternative theoretical interpretations of the small effects discovered in the original study. Indeed, before settling on any single interpretation, one would need adequate evidence supporting it and ruling out remaining alternatives; such evidence is not yet available.

Finally, Nelson's claim that "the above data are critical for reopening the debate on the effects of high school status" (147) seems exaggerated. In general, his findings tend to replicate those of Sewell and Armer (1966) in reporting negligible net influences of school context on college plans, and those of Meyer (1970) in testing one plausible interpretation of these results. Without detracting from the merits of the article, these observations will hopefully contribute to its proper evaluation by other readers.

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REPLY TO ARMER AND SEWELL

Numerous studies have examined the influence of the socio-economic status of schools on college aspirations. Although some results have been mixed, a number of recent, carefully designed research efforts (Hauser, 1969; McDill, Myers and Rigsby, 1967; Sewell and Armer, 1966) have reported only meager correlations between the two variables, lending weight to the argument that school status does not explain college aspirations. The assumption implicit in these results has been clear: the search for understanding aspirations had best be directed elsewhere.

My own work was directed to these recent efforts. I argued that the low correlation between school status and college aspirations did not necessarily mean that school status was without consequence. The potential of complex and contradictory effects could not be ignored. My research data suggested that "the direct effects of school status on aspirations are being cancelled out by negative indirect effects of school status on aspirations related through rank placement" (Nelson, 1972:147). School status did appear to have consequences for aspirations—multiple consequences which cancelled each other out.

That these results "duplicated Meyer's findings" is a trivial criticism irrelevant to the scientific process. A central concern of science is to repeatedly document the stability of findings. Whether results are first or last is a matter of gamesmanship—an issue that interjects extraneous criteria into the evaluation of scientific research. In addition, Meyer's (1970) study, the only other piece on the negative effects of high school status on aspirations, does use measures of academic competence as the chief mediating variable. I argued that these are not merely perceptual effects but are probably related to such behavioral indicators of competence as academic rank. Incidentally, the other references cited by Sewell and Armer (Davis, 1966; Wert, 1968) are to college quality and graduate career choice, a somewhat different issue.

I intended to use these findings to critique existing research—particularly Sewell and Armer's which represented a major, widely quoted attempt to analyze the utility of school status. I did not intend to criticize their methodology, which has been treated at length elsewhere (Boyle, 1966; Michael, 1966; Smith, 1969; Spady, 1970; Turner, 1966). I merely argued that their explanation of the low correlation between school status and aspirations was incomplete. The major thrust of the Sewell-Armer piece is that school status can be discounted. My article took pains to show that while this was in one sense true it was also probably clear that school structure had rather complex effects. Such effects are not to be minimized. The routes between prediction and explanation can be traveled two ways: we use such variables as school status to predict and understand college aspirations; if aspirations are predicted successfully, they reveal something about the workings of school structure. The Sewell-Armer piece failed to reveal some important dimensions of school structure. Hence, their understanding of school status was incomplete. I see no reason to change my judgment on that.

Nor will I withdraw my suggestion that the questions on school structure be reopened. As I argued, small correlations cannot be discounted. Furthermore, most literature in this area has had difficulty in not explicitly advancing theories as to why social structures should exert an effect. In the absence of theory, seemingly negative evidence comes to be handled in a bewildering way. Testing for the effects of school structure does not substitute for an explicit test of a theory. In this sense, the debate on school effects has yet to be settled.

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