

JAMES S. COLEMAN

The Adolescent Society

SOCIETY

*The Social Life of the Teenager
and its Impact on Education*

By James S. Coleman

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With the assistance of JOHN W. C. JOHNSTONE
and KURT JONASSOHN

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To my own high school
du Pont Manual Training High School
Louisville, Kentucky

Introduction

THIS STUDY WAS CONCEIVED IN THE spring of 1955, before the competition with Russia in science brought the current spate of interest in educational matters. It had its origins in two sources: first, a deep concern I have had, since my own high school days, with high schools and with ways to make possible their better functioning, ways to make an adolescent's experiences with learning more profitable and his whole adolescence a more satisfying period. Secondly, though not unrelated to this, was an interest in different kinds of status systems. What are the consequences, upon the people within them, of status systems which give rewards only for achievement in one particular activity, and how do they differ from the consequences of systems which equally reward many activities? Not only the consequences of status systems are of concern, but the sources as well: how does it happen that certain activities have status in a given society, and what changes will alter the distribution of status?

The conjunction of these two interests led naturally to research on high schools, schools which differed in the kinds and number of activities which brought to a boy or girl status among his fellows. One can imagine that the effect of such status systems is great, coming as they do at a time when boys and girls are in a kind of limbo, between childhood and adulthood, and thus highly responsive to the social constraints of their peers. The actual variations between adolescent status systems in high schools are of course far more complex than the single type of variation mentioned above. The research, as it has turned out, has been broadened to consider some of these other variations—such as, for example, the variation between systems where status is gained primarily by achievement and those where status is ascribed more nearly on the basis of some background characteristic, such as a family's position in the community.

The previous research in this area is not extensive, perhaps partly because of the difficulty of examining a social system, however small, in action. The two most closely related works, to which this research is indebted, are A. B. Hollingshead's *Elmtown's Youth*, and Wayne Gordon's *The Social System of the High School*.¹

1. *Elmtown's Youth*, (New York: John Wiley, 1949), *The Social System of the High School*, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957).

Research Design

A proposal for this research was initially written in the Spring of 1955 while I was at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University; in the fall of 1957, when I came to the University of Chicago, a modified proposal was submitted to the U.S. Office of Education, under its Cooperative Research Program, and in January, 1957, funds were allocated for the research.

To indicate the general plan of the research and the questions it aimed to investigate, the proposal on the basis of which the funds were allocated is included in the appendix. Footnotes of two kinds are appended there: to indicate at what points in the report various hypotheses of the research are dealt with; and to indicate points at which the research design was modified. The general design of the research will be described briefly below.

a) Selection of ten schools in varying types of communities, of varying sizes, and with apparent differences in their status systems, in Spring, 1957.

b) Administration of a questionnaire by our field staff to all students in the Fall of 1957, after pretests in the Spring. (This and other questionnaires are reproduced in the appendix.)

c) Administration of a second questionnaire by our field staff to all students in the Spring of 1958.

d) Informal interviews with a number of students in each school in the Spring of 1957 and the Spring of 1958.

e) Collection of information (grades, I.Q., attendance, etc.) for every student, from school records, in Spring, 1958.

f) In addition, questionnaires were distributed to all teachers in the schools and questionnaires were mailed to all parents. However, the results of these questionnaires are used very little in the succeeding report.

The Ten Schools

In chapter 3 there will be a short description of the ten schools, and the communities in which they are located. The schools have been given fictitious names in the pages which follow, and these names give some-

thing of the flavor of the community. The schools, together with sizes of student bodies and communities are listed below.

	<i>School</i>	<i>School size</i>	<i>Community Population</i>
	0 Farmdale	150	1000
	1 Marketville	350	4000
small towns	2 Elmtown	500	7000
	3 Maple Grove	400	6000
	4 Green Junction	500	5000
large city (parochial)	5 St. John's High	750 (boys)	(Chicago)
suburb	6 Newlawn	1050	9000
small city	7 Millburg	1400	25,000
small city	8 Midcity	1950	100,000
suburb	9 Executive Heights	1850	17,000

The schools are all located in northern Illinois, but are not intended to be "representative" of this section. To the contrary, they were selected with diversity in mind. For example, it is likely that there are more similarities between Executive Heights, a well-to-do midwestern suburb, and Scarsdale, New York, and more similarity between Green Junction and a farm town of 5000 population in Oregon, than there are between Executive Heights and Green Junction. The results of the study, then, are not intended to apply to "schools in northern Illinois," but to all schools encompassed within the range of community composition exhibited by these schools. This range, roughly, is from prosperous farming or farming and industrial community (the five smallest schools) to working-class parochial boy's school in the center of a large city (St. John's), to new working class suburbs (Newlawn) to small cities (Millburg—heavy industry; Midcity—light industry) to well-to-do suburb (Executive Heights).

Some parts of the analysis will examine all schools together; other parts will examine each school separately. Thus the common characteristics of the adolescent culture will be examined, along with those which vary from one kind of school to another.

Acknowledgments

This research owes most of all to the ten schools who agreed to subject themselves to this research. I have come to feel that the task of a high school principal is one of the most difficult and complex of any in

our society. The willingness of principals (and their school boards and teachers) to add to this difficulty and complexity by participating in research of this sort is an indication of their interest in finding ways to better carry out the task of educating adolescents.

To Roy Clark, Assistant Illinois State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and his colleagues, thanks are due for information which aided the selection of schools.

Kurt Jonassohn, John Johnstone, and I constituted the core personnel of the project throughout its whole period, from questionnaire design to analysis. Though the report thus represents the results of a cooperative effort, in particular that part of Chapter 8 dealing with mass media was analyzed and written by John Johnstone as part of his Ph.D. thesis which examines leisure use of these adolescents in general, as a function of their high school experience.¹ Kurt Jonassohn's Ph.D. thesis, parts of which were intended to be included here, will be an examination of the social structure of the communities in the study.

Of the other project personnel, those whose special efforts were particularly important to its success were Eugene Selmanoff, Thomas Long, Wayne Dockery and a two-man team who recorded grades and test scores for every student: Robert Behrens and Peter Vea. The coding staff included Robert Brown, Dorothy Chacarestos, Betty Fackler, Carolyn Huson, Nancy Johnstone, Ethan Kaplan, Claire Kuhne, and Andre Saumier.

Besides the project staff, the project received help from many persons during the research, including, among others, Jack Feldman, Clyde Hart, Everett Hughes, Paul Lazarsfeld, Martin Lipset, William McPhee, David Riesman, Albert Reiss, Natalie Rozoff, Peter Rossi, and Martin Trow. Arnold Anderson, Peter Blau, Jan Hajda, and Arthur Stinchcombe read an earlier draft of the research report and made extremely helpful comments, many of which are incorporated here. Kathy Blakeslee, a high school student, read the manuscript, and made valuable comments in the course of several interviews. To my wife, I am thankful for continued encouragement in this venture, despite the hardships it created for her.

I am grateful to Malle Lauritis, whose aid in the final stages of research was invaluable, and whose detailed editorial work on the manuscript greatly increased its readability. I am pleased also to acknowledge the aid of Martin Levin, who constructed the index, and Virginia Bonhage, who aided in general preparation of the manuscript.

1. John Johnstone, "Social Structure and Patterns of Mass Media Consumption." unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Chicago, 1961.

The National Opinion Research Center and the Operations Analysis Laboratory at the University of Chicago have been of great assistance in the use of their facilities.

Besides the grant from the U.S. Office of Education which made this research possible, financial support from three other sources made possible a far more comprehensive analysis than could otherwise have been carried out: a) a grant from the Ford Foundation to facilitate the basic research of the author; b) free time from teaching duties at the University of Chicago for the author; c) and free time from teaching duties at the Johns Hopkins University, to complete work on the manuscript.

Baltimore, Maryland

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EDUCATING ITS YOUNG IS PROBABLY A society's second most fundamental task—second only to the problem of organizing itself to carry out actions as a society. Once organized, if a society is to maintain itself, the young must be so shaped as to fit into the roles on which the society's survival depends.

It might seem that the problem of socializing the young would be handled similarly in every society, for the young, as they enter this world, are much the same everywhere. Yet the problem is faced in very different ways. A good example of this is the recent and continuing conflict between the Amish community in Ohio and the Ohio State Board of Education. The Amish, a small Protestant sect, attempting to maintain their small society as an enclave within the larger society, have views very different from those of the Ohio laws as to what constitutes a reasonable education for their young. To quote at length a news account:

Last week, by a vote of 19-2, the Ohio Board of Education ruled that two Amish high Schools—in Holmes and Tuscarawas counties—would have to measure up to state standards or close. The Amish schools, the board said, have no graded courses in geography, American and Ohio history, natural sciences, government, and other required subjects. Some teachers, the board added, have no more than an eighth-grade education.

With few textbooks, the children spend much of their school day copying phrases from their diaries into composition books. Examples: "I plowed and cleaned raspberry patch." "Ironed all day." "In the forenoon I went to church. In the afternoon I fed the turkey broilers."

Bearded Henry Hershberger, chairman of the Amish School Committee,

admitted the schools didn't meet state standards, but he hoped for a compromise. "It seems that our way is quite different from what the public demands," he said. "Worldly wisdom taught in public schools conflicts with our way of life. Our religion is built around simplicity."¹

One's first reaction to such an education might be one of sympathy for the children deprived of their birthright in a free society. Upon further consideration, however, the example illustrates not the depravity of the Amish parents, but the sharp difference in the educational task of a stable farming society and that of a rapidly changing, highly industrialized society. In a stable farming society—of which the Amish represent one of the few remaining examples within the United States—the problem of the society is simply to *reproduce* itself; to give its young members the values, habits, and skills of their parents. In such a stable, localized, and personalized society—which is not long past in our country as a whole—education is a simple task, and it is carried out as a part of the same "natural process" by which a parent teaches his child to walk or to talk. This is not to say that this process constitutes the "best of all educations in that best of all possible worlds." It is often far from it, for each child is at the mercy of his parents, and whether they are good citizens or ne'er-do-wells, the "natural processes" by which they socialize him makes him a replica of them. Nevertheless, the problem is handled as naturally within the family as is the problem of teaching a child to walk or talk.

By contrast, in an industrial society committed to equality of opportunity, there are two facts that make the task fundamentally different and more complex. The first is the fact of change itself. Our society is changing at an ever increasing rate; adults cannot afford to shape their children in their own image. Parents are often obsolescent in their skills, trained for jobs that are passing out of existence, and thus unable to transmit directly their accumulated knowledge. They come to be "out of touch with the times," and unable to understand, much less inculcate, the standards of a social order that has changed since they were young.

Second is the fact of economic specialization. In an industrial society, each father's skills are highly specialized, while his son, if he is to start on an equal footing with his fellows, must be trained through public schooling as a *generalist*, able to choose the role in society that he wants to fill. Furthermore, the father's activities are carried out far from home, often in a place where his son never sets foot. Neither the son of a steelworker nor the son of a business executive may become an apprentice at age thirteen or fourteen. While their fathers vanish into their respective worlds of work, the sons must prepare themselves for an uncertain future—neither for steelworker nor for business executive, but for a range of possibilities.

1. "Ironed All Day," *Newsweek*, January 26, 1959, p. 64.

The child can no longer help the family economically; in turn, the family has little to offer the child in the way of training for his place in the community. The family becomes less and less an economic unit in society, and the husband-wife pair sheds its appendages: the grandparents maintain a home of their own, often far away, and the children are ensconced more and more in institutions, from nursery school through college.

This age-segregation is only one consequence of specialization: another is that the child's training period is *longer*. With every decade, more of the jobs available in our society require a high level of training. As our industrial economy comes of age, it has less and less room for laborers and skilled workers, more and more room for engineers and managers. Thus not only do we relegate education to an institution outside the family, we must keep a child there longer before he is "processed" and fit to take his place as an adult in society.

This setting-apart of our children in schools—which take on ever more functions, ever more "extracurricular activities"—for an ever longer period of training has a singular impact on the child of high-school age. He is "cut off" from the rest of society, forced inward toward his own age group, made to carry out his whole social life with others his own age. With his fellows, he comes to constitute a small society, one that has most of its important interactions *within* itself, and maintains only a few threads of connection with the outside adult society. In our modern world of mass communication and rapid diffusion of ideas and knowledge, it is hard to realize that separate subcultures can exist right under the very noses of adults—subcultures with languages all their own, with special symbols, and, most importantly, with value systems that may differ from adults. Any parent who has tried to talk to his adolescent son or daughter recently knows this, as does anyone who has recently visited a high school for the first time since his own adolescence. To put it simply, these young people speak a different language. What is more relevant to the present point, the language they speak is becoming more and more different.²

2. Most students of adolescent behavior have agreed upon the existence of an adolescent subculture, a fact which is indisputable at the extreme of gang behavior. See Frederick Thrasher, *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936, 2nd ed.), and Albert Cohen, *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang*, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955). However, one study in a middle class suburb suggests that such a subculture can hardly be said to exist in modern upper-middle class suburbia. This is discussed in Frederick Elkin and William A. Westley, "The Myth of Adolescent Culture," *American Sociological Review*, XX, 1955, pp. 680-684. The results of the present study are in direct contradiction to Elkin and Westley's thesis, for these results indicate the adolescent society is becoming stronger rather than weaker in modern middle class suburbia.

As if it were not enough that such an institution as today's high school exists segregated from the rest of society, there are other things that reinforce this separateness. For example, adolescents have become an important market, and special kinds of entertainment cater almost exclusively to them. Popular music is the most important, and movies, since television took away their adult audience, have moved more and more toward becoming a special medium for adolescents.

To summarize: in a rapidly changing, highly rationalized society, the "natural processes" of education in the family are no longer adequate. They have been replaced by a more formalized institution that is set apart from the rest of society and that covers an ever longer span of time. As an unintended consequence, society is confronted no longer with a set of *individuals* to be trained toward adulthood, but with distinct *social systems*, which offer a united front to the overtures made by adult society.

Thus, the very changes that society is undergoing have spawned something more than was bargained for. They have taken not only job-training out of the parents' hands, but have quite effectively taken away the whole adolescent himself. The adolescent is dumped into a society of his peers, a society whose habitats are the halls and classrooms of the school, the teen-age canteens, the corner drugstore, the automobile, and numerous other gathering places. Consequently, the non-occupational training that parents once gave to their children via "natural processes" has been taken out of their hands as well, not by the school teachers—many of whom are dismayed at the thought of having to take over parental functions—but by those very social changes that segregated adolescents into a society of their own.

A good index of those changes is given by the number of teen-age youths in high school. We think of high school in our society as having been in existence for a long time. But in 1900, only 11 per cent of this country's high-school-age youth were *in* high school; as late as 1930, the proportion was only 51 per cent. Sometimes this is viewed as "progress" toward making our society more democratic, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that these changes are simply necessary consequences of industrialization. For example, a parallel trend, thirty years delayed in time, has occurred in the Soviet Union.³ Fifty years ago, in an earlier stage of industrialization, comparatively few persons needed the lengthened training that high school represents. The rest were learning their work on the farms or in the stores or in the trades of their parents and neighbors.

3. This is not to say that the increasing level of education is not progress toward a democratic society. Rather, it is to say the cause of such changes is not democratic values, but the necessities of an industrial economy.