
Reviewed by David Underwood (March, 1973)

Inequality, by Christopher Jencks and others, is based primarily upon work started in 1966 with the first analysis of the Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey. The work then broadened into an effort that gathered in the earlier research efforts of various members of the various co-authors. Eventually the work drew upon hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of research studies which bear upon the subject in one way or another.

The scholarly aura of the book is balanced by an effort to make the book palatable to the layman. One notes that the complete title, Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America, is cast in the descriptive and non-committal format of the research paper. The reader almost expects to see next the customary phrase "Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of doctor of philosophy." Each chapter is followed by copious footnotes; in fact, there are 73 pages of footnotes in fine print and only 187 pages of text. In addition, there are 91 pages of fine print in the three appendices: "Estimating the Heritability of IQ Scores," "Path Models of Intergenerational Mobility," and "A Layman's Guide to Statistical Terms." And there is an impressive bibliography.

The Appendices are obviously designed to make the substance of the book accessible to the layman, as are the numerous descriptive chapter and unit headings in the text, the summaries at the ends of the chapters, and the use of an unpretentious, non-scholarly language level throughout the text.
There is some doubt as to whether Jencks succeeds in reaching both the scholar and the layman with the book. It is an honest effort, and a project of impressive magnitude and complexity, but the textual material consists of a tightly knit argument grounded in statistical correlations and percentages, arguments and counter arguments, sifted with the assistance of many computer runs from a vast array of research data. Only the most patient reader will persist in an effort to follow Jenck's painstaking progression toward his conclusion. And make no mistake, the book is more than a "reassessment" of evidence, as the title would have the reader believe; it has the appearance, rather, of an effort to support an a priori judgment.

But the conclusions are clear enough: School quality has little effect on achievement or on economic success; genes and IQ scores have relatively little relationship to economic success; and educational reform cannot bring about economic or social equality. Therefore, if America is interested in achieving economic equality, social and economic reforms are necessary. After considering various alternatives, Jencks states what he thinks needs to be done: "We will have to establish political control over economic institutions that shape our society. This is what other countries usually call socialism."

No doubt Jenck's economic fatalism will excite considerable discussion. And the book will doubtless come to be used in many college courses in education, sociology, and economic problems. In addition to presenting the arguments and conclusions of the author, the book is suited to be used as a textbook since it is a gold mine of reference material. Careless readers will assume Jencks is attacking schools (which he isn't); those who oppose school bussing may read into his logic the notion that school bussing is undesirable (which he would refute); thoroughgoing capitalists may be alarmed.
Whatever else can be said about inequality, it is certainly a formidable work of scholarship that illustrates both the complexity and the possible shortcomings of research efforts in some of the social sciences. The principle shortcomings of the book are rooted in the data itself and in the distribution of the data. One major problem with the statistical research methodology employed is that the reader must accept the validity of the data, however it was collected, or must accept the statistical safeguards designed to insure the validity of the data, in order to accept the conclusions. And of course there is ample room for disputing the interpretation of such data even after accepting its validity.

The distribution of the evidence in inequality may also be an unfortunate weakness. One notes, for example, that the book devotes only three and a half pages to the non-cognitive effects of schools because, as the author states, "data is not available." This appears to be a rather cavalier dismissal of the importance of evidence that could change the interpretation of his data radically.

Elsewhere, after commenting on various non-cognitive factors that could cause income inequality, Jencks admits "We have no way of saying how much of the variation in people's incomes depends on characteristics of this kind, but it could be substantial." Then, a few sentences later, he abandons his statistical approach to declare, "In general, we think luck has far more influence on income than successful people admit. Since we suspect that luck has at least as much effect as competence on income, we have also given some thought to strategies for reducing its effect." And, as it turns out, his recommendations are indeed based as much on what he "suspects" as they are on what he "knows."