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ABSTRACT
                A cooperative project between a university and local
school district can be understood using a theoretical framework
defining social roles in terms of the "natural" (or individual)
person and the "corporate" actor. The project sent a university team
to train counselors and teachers in a rural, predominantly Native
American school district, where school staffs were predominantly
Euro-American. The team's task was to develop and present a
Contemporary Education course to teachers who, preferring a
traditional educational approach, rejected attempts to foster
collaboration. According to the theoretical model, power remains in
the hands of the corporate actor, which might explain the project's
failure. Change from "natural persons" to corporate actors and
certification requirements result in asymmetrical relations. By the
end of the course, assignments and grades were established, placing
the professors in a "corporate" role and mitigating natural-person
interaction. Similarly, the state, as corporate actor, gains
importance at the expense of community schools, populated with
natural persons. Asymmetry also becomes important when social power
inequality is linked to geographic place. The corporate role can be
diminished if the place (or "turf") where the two actors come
together is considered. (TES)

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL ROLES ON PROGRAMMATIC OUTCOME

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"I just refuse to believe that a Third World person who rides a camel can be as smart as I am."

Lt. Dave Leppelmeier, a U.S. fighter pilot in the gulf, on Iraqi pilots
Newsweek, December 10, 1990, p. 23.

For what reasons would a sociologist team up with those who train school administrators, counselors, curriculum specialists and teachers? The task was to present a course on 'Contemporary Education' to a small rural school district. The student population of the school district was predominantly Native American, the faculty predominantly Euro-American. Someone suspected that the social system needed definition or clarification; hence, early involvement of one who might specify the elements of seeming incongruence between two rural cultures. Indeed, my task as a sociologist on the educational team was a complex one, involving the study of the team in course delivery, the reactions of the class participants, as well as serving as a consultant to those who wanted to discover the cultural meanings in the community. The intent of this discussion is to describe my observations within the theoretical framework proposed by Coleman (1982) The elements of this framework suggest social role definition in terms of natural and corporate actors.

Coleman (1982) explains a way to think about the person elements of social systems in terms of the role of the natural person and corporate actor. The natural person is who we are as people, as participating members of a family and community. The intangible role of the corporate actor, commonly referred to as the fictional person, is the role played as an agent of a corporation or bureaucracy. The person's actions are based in the authority of the organization with legal responsibility to accomplish the goals and mission of the organization.

It is believed that the legal system has empowered corporate actors by giving certain rights to organizations. For example, the law of the king of England in the thirteenth century gave charters to towns. Upon the creation of each town, legal rights and responsibilities were decreed and towns could own property, sell or rent land or enter into contracts. The courts were at first baffled about the accountability of the person acting on behalf of the town; thus, the creation of the fictional person or legal person, who represented the town. Coleman summarizes the effects of this history as,

> the law has facilitated, and technological developments have motivated, an enormous growth of a new kind of person in society, a person not like you and me, but one which can and does act, and one whose actions have extensive consequences for natural persons like you and me. (p. 9)

The extent to which the number of corporate actors is consuming the role of natural persons is overwhelming. With both greater numbers and increasingly larger units of corporations, the demand in the twentieth century for corporate acting has replaced the earlier needs for natural person interacting within the corporate structure of the family. Even though there are corporate actors within a family unit, the need for legal representations of corporations differentiated the role of the person across the boundaries of family, church, community or state. People may have several acting roles and can change roles freely.

Two particular consequences to society as a result of the structural changes brought by the changes of natural persons to corporate actors are asymmetry in relations and the nature of authority. Both of these concepts help to explain what might have happened in the rural school district involved in this project.

Asymmetry in relations is explained by an incongruent interaction between a natural person and a corporate actor. Figure 1 (reproduced from Coleman, 1982, p. 20) depicts the three

potential interactions: Type 1 interactions are between natural person and natural persons; Type 2 (a and b) interactions are those between natural person and a corporate actor; and Type 3 interactions are between corporate actors. Type 1 and 3 interactions function with similar expectations and congruency, allowing greater symmetry in the dynamics. The two possible interactions of Type 2 are when the natural person serves as the object of the corporate actor and when the natural person serves as the subject for the corporate actor. These interactions produce an asymmetry, implying an inequality between the object person and the subject person in the interaction.

Using the symmetry concept assists in the analysis of the alliance project. Thinking in terms of the relationship of the teachers and administrators in the rural, but wealthy school district and the Native American community, asymmetric relations may explain why vast differences were perceived by each side. The teachers and administrators were agents of the public school district, hence corporate actors. They diligently reported how they developed programs, designed projects and invited community members to the school. When parents as natural persons came to the school, they may have experienced discomfort and mistrust because the teacher was representing the school, the agency that may be perceived as wanting their children to abandon cultural customs in favor of a different way or perspective. The parent as a natural person is greeted by a corporate actor sitting behind the desk, asking for better attendance or reporting a low test score or grade.

The corporate actor usually is a member of a small group; whereas, the natural persons may be hundreds. The Euro-American teachers and administrators seem few in number compared to the number of families in the community and the extension of each family throughout the state or Indian Country. Yet, the control or power remains in the hands of the

corporate actor. As Coleman states, "the corporate actor nearly always controls most of the conditions surrounding the relation" (p. 22).

The seemingly symmetrical relationship between corporate actors and corporate actors, Type 3 relations in Figure 1, may produce asymmetry in terms of perceived 'size' of the actor. Remember that the corporate actor is a legal mask or fictional person represented by the person. Depending on the value attributed to the position by society, an inequality between the object person and subject person may once again occur. This concept may be helpful in the analysis of the interaction between the university faculty team and the school district faculty. Although the first few classes attempted to establish a collaborative spirit between natural persons, the frustration by the university team was increasing as suggestion after suggestion was rejected by the school personnel. Some suggestions were subtle and meant to be informational; yet, by the end of the class, assignments were made so "grades" could be established. The rules of the corporation placed the professors in a corporate actor role mitigating against the natural person interaction. The school personnel fell into the student role as corporate actors early in the course. They wanted a syllabus and required readings and definition to each "lecture." Unwilling to trust that a new relationship may be established they were guarded in self disclosure and failed to mention cultural conflicts existing in their school. One elementary teacher reported to the faculty members, "I don't know which of my children are Indian or not. They are all children who need to be taught. When I talk about Indian, they look around and think they are all the same." This comment emerged during one session when faculty members were probing for community definition and possible ways to learn more about differences.

The intended outcome for the university class would be described differently by everyone involved. The teachers at the local school district may have believed that three hours of

graduate credit would be earned with the factual knowledge of Native American culture. The administrators may have believed that the community would perceive greater sensitivity on the part of the school if teachers attempted to learn more about the culture of the community. The university team members believed their roles were not the traditional instructional role of information providing; rather multiple perspective consultation work.

By way of a conclusion, the role of the school in American society reflect the social change occurring in the community and nation. The neighborhood school still exists in muted form. The certification requirements for teachers and administrators (professionalism) move the school further into asymmetric relationships. The state as reflected in the corporate actor has gained in importance at the expense of the grassroots community populated with natural persons. The credentialed corporate actor unknowingly and knowingly imposes deference and authority at each turn when confronting the parents of school children. The frustration and asymmetry is doubly compounded when the natural person is from a minority group in a predominantly all white corporate actor school system. Blocked communication, misunderstanding, hostility, court battles are a few of the inevitable outcomes of living in an asymmetric society.

Asymmetry gains in importance when the social power inequality is anchored in geographic place. University faculty were "on the turf" of school people. This created a conflict and misunderstanding as to which corporate actor role (university or school faculty) would predominate. When school patrons (parents) come to the school, the corporate actor role of the teacher and administrator is operational. When teachers visit the homes of their school children or participate in community activities, the corporate actor role is diminished. In short asymmetrical social relations can be lessened if the place factor is taken into consideration.

As you consider the conflicting roles of the corporate actor-natural person, the U.S. fighter pilot's judgement of waging war with an Iraqi fighter pilot is revealing: "I just refuse to believe that a Third World person who rides a camel can be as smart as I am."

References

Coleman, J. S. (1982). The asymmetric society. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

For additional discussion of corporate action-natural person, see, Foundations of Social Theory, James S. Coleman, Cambridge, Maine: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990.

Figure 1. Symmetry and Asymmetry in Relations

Object

	P e r s o n	**Corporate Actor**
Person	1	2a
Corporate Actor	2b	3

Subject

Coleman, J. S. (1992). *The asymmetric society.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, p. 20.