

Education Research and Policy: A Commentary on Jabbar and Menashy's "Economic Imperialism in Education Research: A Conceptual Review"

Don A. Affognon

Department of Educational Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

4505 South Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, Nevada 89154, USA

Tel: 210-773-7303 E-mail: affognon@unlv.nevada.edu

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Abstract

In light of recent suggestions by Jabbar and Menashy that economics has colonized other social sciences and influenced the way policymakers enact education reforms, I examine the question whether economic imperialism warps education policy. For many reasons, I find the hypothesis unrealistic. It ignores that the term "economic imperialism" implies that there is a deliberate or concerted attempt among economists to subjugate other social scientists. It is weakened by the acceptance and enduring application of economic theory in law, psychology, corporate finance, sociology, healthcare, and so on. And it erodes one of the pillars upon which the academy rests: the collaborative production of knowledge which requires interactions and exchanges. I contest the claim that economics has taken over other disciplines and undermined the education reform process. I disagree that an overreliance on economic theory suffuses policymaking, and I find it hard to believe that by focusing primarily on economic outcomes, policymakers disregard other important aims of education. The hypothesis that the preponderance of economics in education policy is attributable to its usefulness is intrinsically realistic and avoids all undue antagonisms.

Keywords: Education policy, Economic imperialism, Education research, Economic theory, Education reform

1. Introduction

In a reflective article appearing in *Educational Researcher*, Jabbar and Menashy (2022) clearly describe economic imperialism as the concept that "captures the phenomenon of a single discipline's power over so many aspects of social life and policy—including

education” (p. 279). The article or its authors (JM henceforth) have been cited by many social scientists but also by medical professionals (Aguilar-Smith, 2023; Poncelet et al., 2023). The abstract of JM claims explicitly that (1) economics “has colonized other disciplines, narrowing the lens through which policymakers have designed education reforms,” that (2) “an overreliance on economic rationale for human behavior neglects other explanations,” and that (3) “a focus on the economic outcomes of education has subjugated other important aims of education” (p. 279).

In this triple claim, the keywords are “imperialism,” “colonize,” and “subjugate,” with the last two in semantic alignment with the first. Etymologically, imperialism evokes the forced or hegemonic control of one nation’s political and socio-economic life by another (Ndem Okon & Ojakorotu, 2018). It is, for example, the means by which many European countries concerted themselves to colonize or subjugate African countries and assume unrestricted control over their socio-political systems and their economic resources (Bunche, 1936). Following this logic, what JM are arguing is that economic imperialism is the process by which economics, and therefore economists, have organized themselves to assume total control over social science by indirectly or directly thrusting their will upon other social scientists. JM go on to speculate that although most of the research on economic imperialism has been theoretical, researchers ought to put the economic imperialism hypothesis through real empirical testing in order to “trace the influence of economists and economic ideas, track how this influence happens, and by whom” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 284). As if to promptly reassure the reader, the authors explain that economic principles, such as human capital theory and rational choice, could be leveraged in other social sciences “in ways that are interdisciplinary but not imperialist” (p. 279). But these speculations, together with JM’s triple claim, are a complete departure from Jabbar’s earlier position.

In *The behavioral economics of education: New directions for research*, Huriya Jabbar admits that although for decades social scientists have been relying on economics to address a number of issues in education policy, some of them have defined economics so narrowly as to neglect the fundamental aspects of it that cut across disciplinary boundaries. In the same article, the author identifies behavioral economics as a subdiscipline of economics that could enhance “the economic models of decision making ...” (Jabbar, 2011, p. 446). The author goes on to say that for many issues in the economics of education, “conventional economics will be sufficient for the task,” but that for other problems involving “student decision making, performance pay for teachers, behavioral economics provides new and useful concepts” (p. 450).

In spite of the contradiction between Jabbar (2011) and Jabbar and Menashy (2022), the topic in discussion is of interest. And it matters to observe that the economic imperialism debate dates to Lazear (2000), who has been on the receiving end of harsh criticism for having dared to portray economics as the “premier social science” that by comparison to other social sciences is a “genuine science” (p. 99). What the critics seem to overlook is that a few pages later, the same author explained those phrases by emphasizing that the reason economics succeeds where other social sciences fail lies in its adoption of the

scientific method, which requires “stating a formal refutable theory, testing the theory, and revising the theory based on the evidence” (p. 102).

In this paper, I examine the syllogism behind JM’s three claims and find every one of them unpersuasive. I will evaluate the evidence and come to a reading at odds with the authors’. I will then propose a realistic interpretation of the evidence. The claims in JM seem thoroughly hedged, and the authors could say that they are only reviewing what other researchers have said or that they did not intend to use the words “imperialism,” “colonize,” and “subjugate” in their etymological sense. I am not so much interested in finding who intended what as in taking JM’s claims seriously enough.

2. Literature Review

I organize this literature review in line with JM, setting economic theory apart from economic methodology and investigating how the two underwrite education policy.

3. Economic Theory

Let us start with the primary claim that economics has colonized other social sciences and narrowed the lens through which policymakers design education reforms. JM adduce two key arguments to support this claim. The first is a Web search they conducted using keywords such as *economic imperialism*, *economic hegemony* and *economic dominance*, and popular databases like ERIC, EBSCOHost, EconLit, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, and Google Scholar. From this search, the authors retrieved 734 articles—from which they reviewed 134 before settling on the 62 most relevant ones. Using this search and review procedure as a basis, JM conclude that: “most of the literature on economics imperialism describes how economic concepts and theories have invaded noneconomic fields, using the word ‘colonization’ to describe how economics has infiltrated other social sciences” (Abreu, 2012, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 281). And this would be reliable evidence of the imperialist nature of economics.

In itself, the claim that economists have colonized other social scientists and narrowed the lens through which policymakers go about education reform is highly questionable. One reason is that like “imperialism,” the word “colonization” evokes the hegemonic control that for decades industrialized countries exerted on the political and economic life of an Oceania nation like New Zealand, where the Māori people had to become British subjects in their own land (Stuart, 2016), or on an African nation like Benin, where the natives were constrained to accept French as their national language (Whittlesey, 1937). When one looks at JM’s first claim from this hegemonic angle, it is hard to accept that on one side there are economists (the imperialists) and that on the other side there are anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and other social scientists who are so browbeaten or powerless that they are incapable “to keep the economic imperialists out” (Chuah, 2006, p. 1). The other reason that this claim is highly questionable is the proportion of relevant to irrelevant articles that JM report having retrieved: 62 out of 734 articles, of which only 6 appeared in education journals. The implicit message seems to be that while economic imperialism is a big problem for education researchers, very little has been published about it.

What is clear is that right from the start, JM rely on Edward Lazear to define economic imperialism as: “the extension of economics to topics that go far beyond the classical scope of issues, which include consumer choice, theory of the firm, (explicit) markets, macroeconomic activity ... to explain all social behavior by using the tools of economic (Lazear, 2000, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2020, p. 280). But then JM tacitly frown upon this definition and argue that in being chauvinistic about mainstream economics, both Buckley and Casson (1993), and Lazear (2000) have rendered themselves guilty of advocating for economic imperialism on the grounds that the methods and theories that economics claims as its own are superior to those of other social sciences (Jabbar & Menashy, 2020, p. 280). The problem with this extrapolation is that there is a subtle yet unmistakable nuance between what these three mainstream economists and others mean when they use “economic imperialism” and when the critics do (Blank, 2002).

In Gary Lazear’s understanding and use of the term, as in those of all his allies, economic imperialism is the process by which economics extends its scope to include issues having to do with “consumer choice, theory of the firm, (explicit) markets, macroeconomic activity, and the fields spawned directly by these areas” (Lazear, 2000, p. 99). Up to this point in the passage that the critics like to quote, the author has said nothing to evoke imperialism in its etymological or literal sense—a concerted endeavor to exert hegemonic control over a country, a people, or in this case multiple groups of social scientists. In Lazear’s (2000) conception of it, imperialism is a means by which economists extend the scope of their activity for the purpose of adding value to the work other social scientists are doing. This positive conception is widely shared in social science circles where imperialism is conceived to be “a term sometimes used for characterizing certain kinds of interdisciplinary relations in science ... We have physics imperialism, economic imperialism, and sometimes even sociology imperialism” (Mäki, 2013, p. 325).

Viewed in this light, economics is an imperial science that admits all its weaknesses and recognizes that the “broader thinking sociologists, anthropologists, and perhaps psychologists may be better at identifying issues, but worse at providing concrete solutions ...” (Lazear, 2000, p. 103). But even if we presumed that Edward Lazear’s endorsement of economic imperialism was the voicing of an insatiable appetite for hegemony, we would stumble over the inevitable question of what could explain the acceptance and enduring application of economic theory in law, psychology, accounting, sociology, healthcare, anthropology, and so on (Lazear, 2000).

The second key reason that JM put forward in support of the argument that economists are hegemon is that in the sample they studied, rational choice (the economic theory that says that people make decisions that benefit or align with their objectives) cropped up most often as an example of economic imperialism. The authors portray this dominant occurrence of rational choice as evidence that economists have been working outside their areas of expertise, so that they shape decisions affecting society and colonize such things as the notion of culture, which was a domain reserved for anthropologists (Chuah, 2006, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). And this, too, would be real evidence that “economic imperialism is not about merging fields or interdisciplinary, but about imposing economic

views on other fields” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 281). The inference is disquieting: How could the preponderance of rational choice theory in a web search result be evidence that “economics has colonized other disciplines” (p.1)? What is more disquieting is the authors’ insinuation that anthropologists ought to be on the lookout for economists, because those who use culture as a research tool are known for advancing the idea that Western values promote economic growth and for using language, religion, and a number of other such measures to explain economic behaviors (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

To prop up this last insinuation, JM cite Swee-Hoon Chuah, whose position could not be more nuanced. According to Chuah (2006): “The concept of culture has traditionally been the exclusive domain of anthropologists. However, economists have annexed this concept. This is viewed by some intellectual camps in anthropology as an encroachment in their territory, and they are doing battle to keep the economic ‘imperialists’ out” (p. 1). But citing Camerer (2003), Chuah (2006) goes on to suggest that the reason mainstream economists have made culture an integral part of their research machinery is that they are more aware of the impact that society and culture have on behavior and that as a result, they have been expanding their research to the traditional sphere of other social sciences (Camerer, 2003, as cited in Chuah, 2006). At this point, the overall picture is that in concluding that economics has colonized or subjugated other social sciences, JM are dismissing the quantitative nature of economics, which bears a strong appeal and explains its emergence in other social sciences. What the evidence really suggests is that the social scientists who include economics in their research studies do so not as a result of subjugation but rather as a result of the reliability of the quantitative tools that economists use.

3.1 Economic Methodology

The claim that an overreliance on economic rationales for human behavior neglects other explanations, and the claim that a focus on the economic outcomes of education has subjugated other important aims of education reveal more details about the imperialist hypothesis à la JM that we have been discussing. In this second and third claims, the words and phrases to remember are: “overreliance,” “economic rationales,” “neglects other explanations,” and “subjugated other important aims of education.” In an attempt to show how overreliant policymakers generally are on economic rationale, the authors quote Buckley and Casson (1993) as saying that “economics is a method of analysis, not just a field of study” and that any social and political factors could be “incorporated in economic models as interdependent preferences” (p. 1035). The underlying message is understandable but irrelevant in that it offers no grounds for concluding that there is an overreliance-on-economics problem in education policy. To apparently provide more of the same sort of evidence, JM go on to cite one critic after another to emphasize that: “Economics does not have to be quantitative ...” that “it is just that these are the methods that have become dominant and spread to other fields,” that “economics rarely use influence policy through direct advice but rather through the prevalence of economic styles of reasoning ...” or that “economics has imperialism of scope ...” (Hirshman & Berman, 2014, p. 781; Manic, 2016, p. 153; Kessar, 2011, p. 403; Klaes, 2012, p. 17, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

3.2 What Sets Economics Apart

Economics is a simple and reliable method of analysis (Cooter, 1982). Policymakers of all stripes can relate to it because people in general find abstract thinking difficult and prefer the assumptions of a theory to be very easy to understand (Buckley & Casson, 1993). In the case of economic theory, two core assumptions take precedence: (1) rational choice, or the assumption that individuals engage in maximizing rational behavior, and (2) equilibrium, or the assumption that conflicting plans or actions are reconciled at some point (Lazear, 2000). In other words, the reliability of economic methodology is based upon the principle that while its core assumptions remain the same, they make room for an infinite number of assumptions that are made on a case-by-case basis. The point is that any predictive economic models derive from a combination of the core assumptions with some specific assumptions that the end user will make. But Buckley and Casson (1993, p. 1037) make another weighty point by emphasizing that: “the combination of assumptions involved in any one prediction means that the falsification of any one prediction does not strike directly at the two core assumptions. It simply invites refinement of the specific assumptions with which the core assumptions are combined ...” (p. 1037). Indeed, these are the particularities that make economic methodology more appealing to education policymakers.

Moreover and contrary to JM’s position, a real focus on economic outcomes does not subjugate the other crucial goals of education. What the authors conceive to be an overreliance on economic rationales in policymaking has an ordinary explanation. According to Economics professor and former member of the US Economic Council Rebecca Blank, policymakers are generally more drawn to economists than to other social scientists, and although the design of a social policy accounts for cultural and social norms, “other social scientists are not invited into the policy arena the way economists are ...” (Blank, 2002, p. 818). The reason, according to the author, is threefold. First, economic models are used to analyze the potential effects of various policy actions; second, economists tend to have a sophisticated understanding of how budget constraints and opportunity costs influence the design of policy; and third, economic models are “good at predicting the interconnectedness of policy effects ...” (Blank, 2002).

JM do have a point when they argue that economists tend to overlook certain important aspects of social problems. Most mainstream economists share the same concern. In recognizing, for example, that “the broader thinking sociologists, anthropologists, and perhaps psychologists may be better at identifying issues, but worse at providing concrete solutions,” the mainstream economist Lazear (2000, p. 103) makes the point. And so does Blank (2002), who has no qualms admitting that “economists often ignore issues of implementation and organizational structures, and that the focus of economic policy analysis is on policy design. How these designs do (or do not) get implemented on the ground is typically not discussed by economists” (p. 820).

Even so, it is important to emphasize that economics does have a record of adaptability and that it seeks to improve itself. When, for example, economists were criticized for assuming perfect competition or perfect certainty, they went back to the drawing board, worked to

address those criticisms, and devised the theory of monopoly and the theory of uncertainty (Buckley & Carson, 1993). Similarly and to address the complaint that economic models are so simplistic as to neglect the contextual, cultural, or behavioral components of any policy, economists reacted and filled the gap by coming up with a completely new subdiscipline: behavioral economics.

And as Jabbar (2011) herself admits: behavioral economics aligns with the approaches and goals of education researchers. Its concepts fit with mixed-methods and interdisciplinary work, and it has important implications for policy. The author goes further and recognizes that “because policies that are informed by behavioral economics retain aspects of consumer choice and the market, they tend to have bipartisan appeal” (p. 451). Returning to the question whether focusing on economic outcomes distracts from other important aims of education, it matters to understand that today “economic progress is one of the central aims of education” (Gilead, 2012, p.113). As well, it matters to point out that international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) invest heavily in education. On the main education page of the OCED, the organization makes the point explicit: “The OECD’s work on education helps individuals and nations to identify and develop the knowledge and skills that drive better jobs and better lives, generate prosperity, and promote social inclusion” (OECD, 2023, Education page). For the individual, the benefit lies in the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also in the economic returns arising from sustained employment. This does not mean that education does not have some noneconomic goals. It evidently does. According to Becker (1996, p. 9), “people start by weighing all the benefits and costs” of education but the “benefits include cultural other nonmonetary gains along with improvement in earnings and occupations.” The main goal of education, in other words, is not just to facilitate economic progress; it is also to promote social welfare. The problem that the critics (JM included) have is that economists tend equate social welfare with the satisfaction of individual preferences, and in so doing they give the impression that education is only about economic outcomes (Gilead, 2012).

But surprisingly, JM do not say whether or not they agree that the uppermost measure of success in education is economic progress. Instead, the authors join Allais (2014) to say that “the increasing preoccupation with education meeting the needs of the economy, together with the prevalence of economic concepts outside of economics, have contributed to the development of policy that mimic economic ideas” (Allais, 2014, p. 252, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

Surprisingly, however, JM do not provide the reader with a single example in which using an economics-driven education policy has had an awful effect on the American education system.

4. “Imperialism” as Metaphor

As we have seen, JM do not say convincingly how economic imperialism narrows the lens through which education policies are viewed. What the authors do instead is: (1) announce that “the concept of economic imperialism may be timely and useful for those seeking to

uncover the intersections between economic dominance and racism,” and (2) discuss the various methods by which policy researchers could “trace the influence of economists and economic ideas, track how this influence happens, and by whom” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, pp. 279-284). By whom? Are JM hinting at a conspiracy that the reader should be aware of? In any case, JM seem poised to enable policy researchers to connect the dots of the hegemonic grip that economists allegedly exert on education policymaking. As a remedy, the authors suggest that interested parties could use network analysis to search for and “identify the paths through which economists influence policy, quantitatively tracing the influence within different dissemination outlets, such as social media, news media, and public testimony” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, pp. 284-285).

But the metaphor is conspicuous. There seems to be a great discomfort among education researchers about the applications of economic theory and economic methodology to education policy problems. Citing Smelser (1992), Abreu (2012), Chafim (2016), Ellison and Aloe (2019), Stuart (2016), and Tan (2014), JM describe their discomfort as follows: (1) Human capital theory and rational choice overshadow several aspects of education research, “yet teacher performance and parent decision making might not be adequately explained through notions of self-interest or choice”; (2) “economic imperialism captures the dominance of a field that reproduces Whiteness in academia and in policymaking,” and (3) despite relentless criticism, “economic imperialism has moved beyond the colonization of academic disciplines into policy circles in a wide array of social sectors” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, pp. 284-285). Since I have already addressed item #3, let’s look at the passage in which item #2 is noted: “Social network analysis can also empirically trace the influence of economists on policy and practice, both in terms of network structure (for instance, centrality) and relationships (such as the nature of ties and connections). This type of work could identify the paths through which economists influence policy. We posit that, because economic imperialism captures the dominance of a field that reproduces Whiteness in academia and in policymaking, the concept of economic imperialism may be useful for those seeking to uncover the intersections between economic dominance and racism” (Jabbar & Menashy, p. 285).

Here, too, the message is unambiguous. According to JM, it matters to use social network analyses to trace the influence of economics to its sources and to study the intersections between racism and economic dominance. But much like other such observations, the issue with this one is that nowhere in the section of their paper titled *Empirical Evidence for Economic Imperialism* do JM provide any empirical evidence to substantiate their suggestion. Instead, the reader is left wondering whether economic imperialism is a means by which to study not only how Whiteness is reproduced in the academy, but also how it could be used to evaluate the intersections between racism and economic dominance. While it is clear that economic inequality is a big problem, the parallel that JM are drawing between economic dominance, racism, and economic imperialism is unclear. The chief reason is that racism does not appear to have any bearing on the popularity of economic techniques amongst sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and other researchers.

5. Human Capital Theory

The link between this theory and education policy is not as obvious as it appears. For JM, “human capital and rational theory dominate education research, yet issues concerning ‘teacher performance and parent decision making might not be adequately explained through notions of self-interest or choice’” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2020, p. 284). The underlying rationale is that human capital theory and rational choice are not merely incompatible with the study of how parents make school decisions but also inept for solving teacher performance problems. The general concern, according to the authors, is that applying such economic theories as “self-interest” and “choice” displaces important considerations such as equality, social justice, and social cohesion (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). The authors’ high regard for the welfare of society is praiseworthy, but their argument is inconsistent with the facts of the matter.

Over the past several decades, the idea that education should be looked upon as a means to promote economic growth has played a defining role in education policy (Gilead, 2012). The reason is twofold. One, America has a comparative advantage in producing goods and services that make intensive use of educated labor. Two, in order to keep this advantage, the country has to keep producing educated labor more cost effectively than its competitors (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003). That means the United States cannot be insensitive about the falling productivity issue plaguing its schools, given the adverse effect that poor performing schools could have on American jobs (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003). So if the social focus of this macroeconomic way of thinking about education is explicit enough, then what JM seem to ignore is that it reflects the fundamentals of human capital theory, which seeks to treat education as an investment and its products as capital (Gilead, 2012). The theory is appealing to policymakers because it posits that: (1) the primary goal of education is to increase students future productivity and earnings, (2) government has a key role to play in the financing and regulation of public education, (3) the structure of economic theory is most useful in policy design (Holden & Biddle, 2017). In practice, the theory operates as follows: A person acquires knowledge and skills through education and training, namely human capital. These knowledge and skills increase his/her productivity on in the workplace. In the ideal market, this increased productivity would increase the person’s earnings, the point being that people should invest in education up to the point where its benefits to the person outweigh its costs (Marginson, 1989).

JM find these theoretical assumptions and the trivial idea that a high school or college graduate could be regarded as a product extremely troubling. The two authors have expressed these views in other articles. For Francine Menashy, economic assumptions are so narrow that they pose many ethical challenges to the noneconomic aims of education and the treatment of students (Menashy, 2018). For Huriya Jabbar, the same assumptions are extremely disquieting because they treat schools like businesses and parents like consumers, when in truth education markets are such that by and large, consumers do not directly purchase services (Jabbar, 2016). These are genuine concerns with which I sympathize. They remind us all that education is not just about learning enough to get a job, or growing

the economy; it's also about such values as equality, civic engagement, honesty, social cohesion, and so on (Jabbar, 2016; Menashy, 2018).

6. Rational Choice Theory

We finally turn to rational choice (the economic principle that says that people generally make decisions that benefit or align with their objectives). In education, rational choice theory is evidenced in school choice policies which have been the subject of ample debate. Citing Abreu (2012), Chafim (2016), Smelser (1992), Stuart (2016) but especially Tan (2014), JM impliedly question the reflection of this theory in school choice initiatives, arguing it may not be adequate for understanding parents' decision-making mechanisms or for addressing teacher performance problems. Here, the core argument is that since school choice is the analog of rational choice in education, and given that the theory has certain inherent limitations, any rational-choice-driven policies are suspect. The limitations that rational choice and school choice have in common are:

(1) bounded rationality, (2) bounded self-interest, and (3) bounded willpower (Tan, 2014).

Whereas bounded rationality implies that humans have limited computational skills and weak memories, bounded self-interest and bounded willpower respectively imply that people do not always act in their own interest and that they sometimes behave in ways that are inconsistent with their long-term welfare (Tan, 2014). In context, this means that giving parents the choice to pick a school for their children presupposes that parents are somehow immune to bounded rationality, bounded self-interest, and bounded willpower do not apply to parents (Tan, 2014). Furthermore, choice means competition not just between public schools but also between private and public schools. And this makes school choice decisions more complicated than they seem (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). More specifically, it is unlikely that less educated/low-income families react to the marketing materials they receive from competing schools in the same way that educated affluent families do (Jabbar, 2016). The author goes on to say that even as school choice policies give parents more choices, they also significantly increase the "invisible hand" of local governments in decisions that affect student enrollment and teacher performance. For JM, the concern is that the prevalence of rational choice theory in school policies—together with the competition and focus on efficiency that come with it, may displace the noneconomic aims of education—equality, community building, social justice, and so on (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

However cogent JM's take on school choice seems, Stanford economics teacher and education researcher Caroline Hoxby has several reasons to disagree. The first is that school choice is not as new as JM appear to make it sound. In American elementary and secondary schooling, traditional school choice is by far the most pervasive and important form of choice among public school districts today (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003). Which is to say that traditional choice is precisely what occurs when parents choose a school district by making the economic decision to buy a house in a given area. The second reason is that independent public schools have revenues that depend largely on local property taxes. So as parents select among school districts, they favor those

that produce higher achievement for a given tax liability or those that have a lower tax liability for a given level of achievement (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003).

It follows that the concerns that JM are expressing about the individual rationality and utility maximization that characterize rational choice theory are irrelevant. The evidence appears to suggest that “self-interest” does play a role in the decisions that parents make when selecting a school for their children. The third reason why Hoxby disagrees with JM’s view on the impacts of rational choice theory on school choice policy is that traditional school choice has a very long history that can be assessed to determine if more choice is good or bad. The question is whether it is risky to have public schools compete with one another but also with various private schools.

Having examined the achievement and productivity impacts of three fundamental choice reforms (vouchers in Milwaukee, charter schools in Michigan, and charter schools in Arizona), Hoxby and National Bureau of Economic Research (2003) concluded that: (1) “Regular public schools boosted their productivity when exposed to competition,” (2) the regular public schools responded to competitive threats that were surprisingly small, and (3) in each case, “the regular public schools increased productivity by raising achievement, not by lowering spending while maintaining achievement” (p. 339). The underlying logic is that competition between schools provides them with greater incentives to be productive—to produce high achievement in their pupils for each dollar they spend (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003).

But there obviously is a lot of confusion about school choice, in part because too much focus is often placed on polarizing allocation questions, such as: Who exercises school choice? Who chooses which school? How does choice change the allocation of school resources? And How does reallocation of students impact peer effect? Though it is possible that school choice could improve achievement for every student through reallocation, such a result would require that, for each student, the benefits of going to a school that was a better match exceed the costs that school choice places on him/her (Hoxby & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2003). In the final analysis, the application of rational choice theory to school policies is a good thing because it is a window into how parents make important school decisions and a great tool for focusing attention on school productivity—the achievement per dollar spent in a given school.

7. Literature Review Summary

The state of the evidence regarding JM’s triple economic imperialism claim is as follows:

Claim #1: *Economics has colonized other disciplines and narrowed the lens through which policymakers design education reforms.*

To say the least, this claim is extremely surprising. It assumes that by and large, the other social scientists (psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) are either browbeaten or incapable of defending themselves against the “imperialists.” In other words, this claim infantilizes the bright and active social scientists who work hard to advance education policy.

And curiously, nowhere in JM is there any real evidence to support their claim. The only thing the reader is privy to is a cluster of citations and meta-citations that do not amount to substantive evidence that economics is an imperial social science. But this claim is surprising for yet another reason: it insinuates that if the economic imperialism hypothesis were empirically tested, researchers would be able to: (1) trace the influence of economists and economic ideas, (2) track how this influence happens, and (3) identify the people behind this imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). It is unclear, however, what exactly JM expect that the outcomes of all this tracing, tracking, and identifying ought to be.

Claim #2: *An overreliance on economic rationales for the study of human behavior neglects other explanations.*

JM proclaim that economic principles are over-relied upon in the study of human behavior, but here, too, the authors do not provide any substantive evidence. In lieu, JM cite other education researchers to imply, for example, that “in one study political scientists analyzed how economics invaded the study of voting behavior and voter turnouts by its transposition of rational modeling techniques” (Siegelman & Goldfarb, 2012 as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 292). In one other example, JM bring forth a study in which researchers examined economics textbooks to determine if they were imperialistic and found that “while these books convey economics as a superior discipline, they are not imperialistic ...” (Vromen, 2009, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 292). But the most contradictory argument against this second claim comes from Huriya Jabbar. In another article on a similar topic, Jabbar talks broadly about behavioral economics and clearly recognizes that: “For many issues in the economics of education, conventional will be sufficient for the task. However, in areas such as student decision making and performance pay for teachers, behavioral economics provides new useful concepts” (Jabbar, 2011, p. 450). In the same paper, the author notes that while economic methodology is valued in policymaking, it is also questioned by researchers who are skeptical about some of the assumptions that economists make. According to Jabbar (2011), this skepticism “reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of some of the potential contributions of economics to education research” (p. 446).

Claim #3: *A focus on economic outcomes subjugates other important aims of education.*

What are the other important aims of education being subjugated? JM do not directly address this question. Instead, they rely upon citations, such as:

(1) “An increasing preoccupation with education meeting the needs of the economy, together with the prevalence of economic concepts outside of economics, have contributed to the development of education policies that mimic economic ideas” (Allais, 2014, p.252, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022);

(2) As a result of its focus on the economic value of education, “economic imperialism affects teachers through a reduction in their autonomy, spurring tension between economics-driven aims of education and school readiness and antiracist, social-justice-based curriculum and pedagogical practices ...” (Stuart, 2016, as cited in Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 283).

Assuming that what JM are conveying via these citations is that in placing the primary focus on the economic benefits of education, policymakers disregard its noneconomic benefits, this claim is even more puzzling. At least since the story of the Tower of Babel, everyone who has reflected on education has noted the transformative nature of its economic benefits. If it is true that people go to school to learn how to think and solve complex problems, it is also true that whether in a trade school or a community college, education is preparation for employment (Ozturk, 2008).

But in making this third claim, what JM are perhaps implying is that the economic and noneconomic values of education may be mutually exclusive, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. It is unlikely that the noneconomic values of education (equity, civic engagement, or peace) could even exist in a society where lack of education produces unemployment. Actually, there is a correlation between high unemployment rates and social unrest (Pervaiz et al., 2012). The correlation appears to suggest that high unemployment rates is not just bad news for every aspect of social life, but that it also imposes a disproportionately high psychological distress on young people (Tiggemann & Winefield, 1984). Not least, JM's third claim falls entirely apart if one simply asks the question whether without the great economic focus that has conventionally been placed on the economic value of education, its noneconomic benefits will be within reach.

8. Conclusion

Lest I be misinterpreted, I should say how thrilled I am by the contributions that JM have already made to the advancement of education policy. My disagreement with the authors centers on their economic imperialism hypothesis. Given the evidence we've reviewed, I find JM's case that economics is an imperial social science extremely unpersuasive. The claim that presupposes that economists are on a joint mission to colonize and impose their will on other social scientists is weakened by the adoption and enduring applications of economic theory and methodology in law, psychology, accounting, sociology, healthcare, and anthropology. The claim that a reliance on economics for the study of human behavior neglects other explanations is belied by advances in behavioral economics which, by Jabbar's admission, "incorporates a psychological knowledge about human behavior to enhance and extend the economic models of decision making" (Jabbar, 2011, p. 446). The claim that a focus on the economic value of education is problematic because it turns attention away from its noneconomic aims declines to acknowledge that the latter would be out of reach if ever the former was unachievable.

The alternative hypothesis in which economics is an expansive social science that lends itself to the research studies of other social scientists and serves the interests that policymakers have in estimating or predicting the potential outcomes of a given education reform faces none of these problems. It is based on the arguable proposition that the non-economists who rely on the tools and techniques of economics to develop education policies do so not because they are colonized but because they find those tools and techniques reliable. This alternative hypothesis is also congruent with the collaborative production of knowledge on which the academy stands. And it does not require tendentious

arguments such as that “economic imperialism captures the dominance of a field that reproduces Whiteness in academia and in policymaking ...” (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022, p. 285). Most of all, it does not imply that economics is a threat to anthropology, psychology, sociology, or education research but rather that it advances and strengthens each of these disciplines in a manner consistent with the tenets of social science.

As a result, this rebuttal has two practical implications. The first is that it puts into sharp relief the self-perpetuating problem that exists between the publication of questionable literature reviews, the responsibility to cite previous research, and the compulsion to publish. The problem is known in several areas of academic research. In cancer research, for example, a breast-cancer cell line used in more than 1,000 published studies turned out to be a melanoma cell line, and by one tally, every year, roughly 10,000 published science papers cite work based on contaminated cell lines (Sarewitz, 2016). So while the Internet makes it easy to identify relevant studies, it also makes it easier to troll for supporting papers, whether or not they are any good. And the problem seems to be even “worse in policy relevant fields such as nutrition, education, epidemiology, and economics, in which the science is often uncertain and the societal stakes can be high” (Sarewitz, 2016, p. 1). In fact, neither the authors they cite nor JM themselves provide any evidence for their hypothesis—not even in the “Empirical Evidence for Economic Imperialism” part of their paper.

The second implication to consider is that although nothing in social science disallows a group of social scientists to encourage others to leverage a certain theory/methodology, doing so can produce all sorts of apprehensions. In this case, the apprehensions are such that perhaps over time they led critics to presume that economists may be out to colonize or subjugate other social scientists. The adversarial nature of academic debates might also have prevented JM to see that in addition to reviewing the literature, they could have also surveyed a representative sample of economists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, and use their answers as guardrails. Doing so might have led JM to a nuanced conclusion, especially given the unsettling perception that the authors’ review is more likely to advance.

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