

JNE ScholarOne E-News #10

Happy New Year to all and welcome to the new members of the EAB and ScholarOne! This edition of *E-news* has another interview from an expert in the field and some tips and reminders at the end. So enjoy until next time.

FTE: From the Expert

Interviewed by: Natascha F. Saunders, Doctoral Candidate

The Journal of Negro Education had a chance to interview Dr. Margaret Beale Spencer, a world recognized developmental psychologist, whose human vulnerability and identity-focused research and theorizing considers and integrates the role of ethnicity, gender, class, and race for life course development and ultimate resiliency for diverse humans. She is well known for her expertise in child and adolescent development.

Dr. Spencer is the Marshall Field IV Professor of Urban Education in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. She taught in both the psychology and education departments at Emory University before joining the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania where she became the first African American to be tenured in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn GSE). During her fifteen years at UPenn as the Board of Overseers Professor, she directed the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development (ISHD) Program as well as two major research units: University of Pennsylvania's W. E. B. Du Bois Collective Research Institute as well as the Center for Health Achievement Neighborhoods Growth and Ethnic Studies (CHANGES).



Following the completion of doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, Dr. Spencer's professional career spans approximately 40 years and includes the publication of over 115 articles, book chapters as well as several edited volumes. Her program of research has been funded by multiple federal agencies and foundations. Spencer's research has been cited and used across the globe in classrooms, think tanks, organizations and federal agencies.

Questions & Answers

Q1: Thank you again for just taking a few moments. I was reading a lot about you—your bio, your research interests,

your education, all the numerous awards that you've received. What is it out of all of the things you've accomplished as far as personal, educational, would you want *The Journal* or the readers to know about you?

Dr. Spencer: I think one very important aspect of who I am and my identity is that I've always had a commitment to use science to improve the situation of young people—children specifically. Before attending graduate school for human development and developmental psychology training, my education focused on basic science. In fact, my undergraduate degree was earned in pharmacy because of plans to attend medical school and, ultimately, to practice pediatrics. Thus, I have always been very interested in the use of science and the application of knowledge to improve the situations of children. That has been very much a part of my sense of purpose and, in fact, also my personal and professional identities.

Q2: What do you think has been maybe one or two of your greatest accomplishments, since that is the sense of who you are and your purpose? Have you been able to realize that purpose?

Dr. Spencer: There is no question that I have had the pleasure—indeed—the honor, to have mentored quite a few really impressive young people, young scholars. I am very proud of their accomplishments. I feel very humbled by and have valued the opportunity and pleasure to have mentored social science and education leaders. I have appreciated the fact that young people have allowed me into their lives at a level which provided opportunities to really model and share—through research and mentoring—my “sense of purpose.” The mentoring relationships have allowed me to model a professional identity realized, ultimately, through students' impressive, sophisticated, and nuanced perspectives as young scholars. There is no question that I am incredibly grateful for their commitment and hard work as well as appreciative of their accomplishments. In addition, similarly, I am very indebted that at the same time during which I have mentored students and young scholars, I've been able to support my own family and three now adult professionals of whom I am extraordinarily proud, as well. Having been able to accomplish both focused mentoring and parenting goals, simultaneously, as well as tending a very long-term marriage to my best friend and husband, without question, afford significant feelings of appreciation.

Q3: Taking a quick step back into using science to improve the situations of children, how would you summarize your research interests if you could give us a snapshot?

Dr. Spencer: I am interested in providing a framing for the conceptualization of human development as experienced by diverse individuals across the life course. Making use of writing outlets and presentations, the conceptual goal is sharing the complexity of human development for diverse humans and representing and interpreting their various sources of and levels of human vulnerability while also highlighting their strengths and sources of resilience. To be able to acknowledge that our humanity—i.e., for each and every single one of us—represents a type of human vulnerability that everyone possesses and from which no one escapes (i.e., independent of race, ethnicity, class, gender and identifiability) is incredibly important. In fact—for me—the viewpoint represents a critical and under-acknowledged perspective, which is critical to share.

For individuals who are economically privileged or are born into high status groups, although under-acknowledged, they are still vulnerable. They, too, are burdened by risks and challenges although infrequently acknowledged in the social science literature. Without exception, they have risks *and* protective factors borne of entitlements. In parallel fashion, individuals who are highly vulnerable or severely vulnerable still have strengths. The theoretical stance promulgated in my scholarship allows for insights about the complexity of our humanity expressed as different levels, types, and forms of vulnerability. However, at the same time, the perspective also provides a framing for articulating *various sources of strengths and good outcomes even though also present are risk factors and challenges*. The noted framing is critical given that—particularly for people of color and poor people—a status of vulnerability—is not treated the same as that for the human vulnerability of highly resourced individuals (i.e., those usually associated with significant privilege).

Social science tends to provide very simplistic characterizations about and representations of those considered the “other.” That is, “the other,” in this case, refers to individuals who are different from “the self” although not formally acknowledging the conceptually limited social science mindset imposed. People who are generally thought to be “the other” are frequently viewed as less than “the self.” Thus, for me, to articulate conceptually and to demonstrate empirically through developmental science the complexity of developmental processes, without question, is a critical aspect of my purpose as a developmental scientist. The suggested conceptual approach described allows us to specify the kinds of strengths required for obtaining resiliency. Specifying the myriad strengths that people need to offset the risks that we live with (i.e., for a variety of reasons) is an important goal. Many of the challenges and risks alluded to have to do with factors such as class and caste, skin color, neighborhood of residence, and

assumptions about gender...or some combination of the previous. Thus, for me, being able to articulate the complexity of our humanity, especially the experiences for people too often considered the “other,” is a very critical aspect of who I am and what I consider my major contributions. Stated differently, to understand human vulnerability and to be able to contribute insights concerning the level and types of supports and protective factors required for all of us to be better people, to be better emotionally connected, and to function as agents of support for others—from my viewpoint—makes this work particularly worthwhile. This viewpoint assumes that to be better emotionally connected means that our strengths and sources of challenge need to be supported, which—in turn—promotes resilience (good outcomes in the face of significant challenge). We have to be aware of our own risks, of our shortcomings, in order to secure protective factors and supports that offset those risks—especially for others of limited resources. For example, our propensity to promote and privilege some individuals while, at the same, to manifest social habits which devalue (for various reasons) the nature of others, from my perspective, is immoral and problematic. It compromises everyone’s mental health and well-being. That is, beginning in the very early years of development and as communicated as attitudes, assumptions, values, stigmatizing behavior, and enacted preferences, without question, such proclivities undermine the human development and healthy coping of individuals (and particularly those) viewed as “the other.” It also significantly increases human vulnerability by fostering and reinforcing an *inauthentic identity* for those generally considered privileged.

Q4: If someone, just being introduced to you, and they’re interested in learning more about themselves, about this complexity, out of all of the many publications you have, are there any that you would say should be our starting point?

Dr. Spencer: That is challenging. In many ways, the sequencing of my published life’s work, thus far, represents an unfolding of thoughts and insights about how one needs to interpret the developmentally linked expressions of humanity. Thus, in many ways, the sequential reading of my publications over the several decades of my career discloses learned insight about identity processes of diverse humans, the psychological links which individuals have with each other, and the role of the cultural and physical contexts within which our humanity is expressed. One might say that my research and theoretical publication record suggests an unfolding of my progressive efforts to understand and appreciate the developmentally linked complexity of the socio-cultural and developmental processes that occur in a society of diverse citizens.

As conducted for youth between three years of age to the early adult years as well as parenting and teaching adults, the published work communicates particular insights. The work has aided my understanding of who we are at different stages. A historical reading of the literature suggested that the study of children of color has been “told” as a story of problems, deviance, and pathology rather than one of human vulnerability and resilience associated with a context of under-acknowledged, long-term and institutionalized bias.

Q5: With that in mind, just taking a step back to the youth in our Black children, I wanted to get your thoughts on Black children going through school and their quest to graduate college and then become career-ready. There’s a lot in that question, but just your overall expertise in what you’ve seen, what do you suggest could help our children be successful as they go through these academic paths and then ultimately into their chosen career?

Dr. Spencer: I think it’s very important to understand that from a very early age, young children obtain certainty about who they are and, most frequently, feel really good about the multiple identifications that make up “the self.” For example, identifications as boys, girls, learners, playmates, and family members provide feedback which result in feelings of value. The perceptual process matters. Children’s psychological well-being can also be linked to community, extended kin networks, friends, and others identified with contexts such as school, and, perhaps, a house of worship. That is, accrued feelings are associated with settings where people appreciate the multiple identifications that represent aspects of self. I believe that all of the diverse “self-referents” noted provide critical sources of positive reflections of self. They serve different purposes as one pursues different developmental tasks across the life course. But collectively, as reflected feedback, each source of identification potentially aids one’s insights about relationships within particular socialization contexts. Collectively, along with proactive socialization, the feedback aids accrued clarity about the self. In sum, beginning in childhood, the accumulated feedback aids children in learning what to externalize as “not you” as well as to embrace, own, and internalize other conceptions of self.

Q6: I wanted to get your thoughts on student engagement and the achievement gap. Any thoughts on those two areas?

Dr. Spencer: I think that people discuss the achievement gap in limited ways. Often the gaps represent gaps between views of self and inferred undervaluing suggested by outside sources. The achievement gap sometimes more represents one’s emotional

reaction to the character of learning “opportunities;” that is, actual experiences had in academic settings from preschool to postsecondary levels, unfortunately, are *not designed to function as learning supports*. Learning opportunities, too frequently, include occasions which function to crystalize that one is not valued. Reported gaps in achievement and learning often narrowly focus on cognitive or intellectual tasks. However, for myself, successes and failures represent, as well, affective themes. The latter suggests the complication of information processing of significance for “self-portrayals.” As shared a few minutes ago, knowing who you are and what’s real and what’s not real—as well as being able to externalize and drop feedback about the self which is not authentic—are critical tasks. This is particularly the case when growing and developing in a society where social science and education scholarship still depict “difference” as deficit or deviance.

Often individuals (and particularly children) are unable to “differentiate feedback” effectively. Thus, the character of children’s inferred assessments matter as do how gaps are framed in the literature as teacher training content, policy perspectives, and published in the popular press as non-academic but strongly worded stereotypic fodder delivered to the classroom (i.e., as attitudes, assumptions, and biases). That is, is an achievement gap the real concern or should the focus be on how different individuals are treated and, unavoidably, process the communicated beliefs in developmentally specific ways.

Objectively considered, one might be in a learning situation, but from verbal and non-verbal communications exchanged, one too frequently infers a lack of feeling valued, respected, and embraced as a learner. Unfortunately, the additional sources of information (i.e., inferred about “the self”) is too infrequently a part of achievement gap discussions. The achievement gaps in scores are emphasized rather than the processes and outcomes of academic achievement efforts which, too frequently, occur in hostile contexts. Of course, I acknowledge that *there are* achievement gaps. However, our thought processes around difference, power, and privilege impact our ways of analyzing achievement efforts (i.e., both as context linked processes and outcomes). And most certainly the contributions of inference linked normal human development cognition associated behavioral translations are inadequately considered as part of the process.

In summary, I am suggesting that achievement gap analyses, in general, should not narrowly focus on the intellectual or cognitive domain (re: having intellectual prowess or not). A thoughtful discussion should also integrate contributions having to do with context character as well as culturally salient social and emotional experiences.

Q7: Have there been any instances, situations, influences in history that have impacted you personally?

Dr. Spencer: That is actually quite challenging. Given where I am developmentally, I would say that one event which impacted me quite tremendously was the horrific and sustained situation of the child murder crisis, which occurred in Atlanta, Georgia in the early 1980s. There is no question that it made quite a significant impact on me as an academic, as a mother, as a resident of that city, and as a citizen of this nation. I could not believe that—post slavery—there could be the occasion of the systematic killing of children and parental reports were ignored. That is, for a period of time, individuals in power and representing elected office did not believe that Black children were accurately reported as missing and, over time, found murdered. It was hard to believe that such a heinous event was happening. It took the deliberate marching of parents, a few protesting national community advocates, and the international press obtaining the ear of the nation for finally obtaining attention to the atrocity: The systematic killing of Black, mainly male, middle childhood youngsters (!).

Additionally, I was a child when Emmett Till was lynched; thus, I had long been aware that Black children's experiences were "adultified" and that youth were not always viewed in a youthful manner as individuals to be protected. Instead, a too frequent perspective communicated—like recent contemporary killings in Ferguson, MO and elsewhere—Black youth are expendable, not valued and may be killed. Thus, on the one hand, the Atlanta Killings was not a historically unique event. Nonetheless, for this developmental psychologist, it was a turning point in regards to my understanding about the depth of Black child devaluation.

As noted, it was a horrific historical point that had a tremendous impact on me in terms of aiding my realization regarding how much hatred exists for kids of color. I still believe that living and working in Atlanta, GA was a professional turning point. Both while actively parenting my own children, researching and assisting the community in response to such an event, in combination, the experiencing of the period was personally historic, distressing, and indelibly imprinted in my psyche. It was life-changing. There was the realization that this awful period—the systematic killing of Black children—somehow was not elevated to the level of national outrage expected. Black children's lives did not matter. It communicated that the basic developmental needs of children including the need for safety (i.e., both physical and psychological) somehow was not salient for the human needs of urban youth of color. In fact, there was an expressed public stance enacted which, at best, suggested a level of disregard for human life which, for this mother and

social scientist, remains nothing less than “suspect” and inhumane, at best; in fact, the situation communicated plain evil if candidly considered. Although still viewed as devastating and indescribably wrong, I remain clear that the situation would never have occurred—minus the Holocaust—if these young lives were poor...but White. Thus, for me, “the social science story” continues as one of White privilege and power.

Q8: Were you working on one of your degrees during that time?

Dr. Spencer: No. I was an assistant professor at that time.

Q9: Regarding either current graduates students or recent doctoral graduates, any thoughts on which was like for them to contribute to this body of research that you have already begun.

Dr. Spencer: As suggested, I feel that each of my students has taken the ideas and expressed them as unique insights important to them and which fit their sense of purpose. For that fact and the incredibly focused, intellectually generous, and general effort expended by many, I am very proud. It is one thing to internalize the work values and intellectual effort manifested in terms of how one does science, thinks about theory, uses and references literatures, and imitates the intellectual orientation, rigor and work effort given mentoring models. However, it is quite something else and really important to *also express those insights in ways that represent one’s own passion, purpose, and lived values*. I’m very proud of my students.

In a variety of ways, they have maintained their identities (i.e., their unique interests), but also conducted scientific contributions in ways which have been respectful of their research participants and project partners. Their research and scientific practices represent the values and the insights front and center of their training. Relative to the level of inferred success achieved as a mentor: Nothing is 100%. Nevertheless, when considering and reporting about the significant majority of young people with whom I have worked, as noted, I am enormously pleased. Young scholars have accepted mentoring, proffered training, as well as modeled efforts to support each other. Thus, over the decades, for each of the cohorts referenced, I am indescribably proud.

Q10: What are some of your career goals within five to ten years? What else would you love to accomplish?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I am currently launching a major project which, in many ways, may be considered my “swan song.” It is conceptualized as a quite large enterprise and incorporates a significant number of the goals hoped for when beginning this

work multiple decades ago. As I shared, if we accept the fact that all humans are vulnerable, then all humans have protective factors that are linked to supports, and we also have risk factors which present challenges, right? So, the work that I am currently invested in moving forward integrates those ideas together in terms of both producing new science but also creating a science to be applied in very significant ways. I am very excited about this “up and coming” effort, which integrates so many “lessons learned.” Thus, I think what I can say to you is that I consider my next steps to be a culmination, synthesis and integration of the work that I’ve been doing for the previous several decades.

Q11: Any final thoughts, words of wisdom for our readers. Anything you want to leave us with?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. I would say that it is important to stand up and tell the truth: To live an integrity framed life re: the “science production process.” Independent of race, ethnicity and gender, too frequently people say things and perform in ways designed to keep themselves “safe” and “accepted” by those who pretty much control knowledge, funding, as well as, science production, its interpretation and dissemination. It is imperative that we tell the truth. We have to get beyond “the self;” that is, it is imperative that we move beyond our own self-interests. We are not islands. We are humans and we are connected to each other and responsible for each other’s well-being. Without question, when we lose insight of that fact (i.e., insights about who we are regarding our connectedness and responsibility), the situation connotes disaster. It compromises “hope” and our ability to function as the kind of people who can embrace our humanity and its various manifestations. Too often when one achieves some modicum of success as a “known name,” there may be a risk of believing that having a “known name” is more important than the science linked and “every day behavior” and decision-making associated with a name worth knowing. That is, it is critical to take on the responsibility of creating and disseminating truth—versus verbalizing what others wish to hear. Too frequently, people do things which they think others value (i.e., thus making them more “likeable” and “acceptable”). This strategy is different from one which represents a perspective of feeling, believing, and knowing that we are responsible for representing the authentic voices of those not present at the “decision making” table. We have a responsibility to provide voice for “study participants *not* invited to the table.” Without such a commitment, we publish papers on “others’ lives” and make a wonderful salary doing so. However, such “short sighted” interpretations about others’ “socially constructed misery” are inherently less than candid. In other words, we owe truth-telling in representing the context linked life course experiences of others.

Stated differently, when we have this much training, and we've enjoyed this much privilege in terms of the ability to "do our passion," then—we owe. That is, we have the obligation to represent lives in as authentic and truthful a manner as possible—and that is the reality no matter how complex and nuanced the story. As might be colloquially framed: We owe "big time;" our professional lives and status are based upon others' stories. Thus, we should feel unsettled and uncomfortable *unless* we are professionally "returning" on that investment of candor and honesty provided by study participants. Anything less suggests the dilemma of "pimping" off more socially challenged lives. Once more, we owe. As suggested, *owing or having a professional debt means that we have to tell the truth and do what's best as opposed to what's comfortable or expedient* for the self.

And we should live the suggested strategy daily. We should feel morally obligated to model it within our families, with our neighbors, with our students, and with our children. Otherwise, it's laboratory knowledge. It's what you do in the laboratory which has little social authenticity in complex social contexts.

In acknowledging that possessing knowledge is power, it is critical to tell the truth, to do what's right, and to keep in mind that it is not narrowly about the self. It is always about others that our "research stories" provide focus. In our status of "owing," the challenge and responsibility is our ability to tell everyone's story and not just our privileged, culture-free, decontextualized, and "safe" interpretations of same. I remain hopeful and believe that the task is manageable. In other words, *we can do this*.

We thank Dr. Spencer for taking time to share her story and experiences. Look for Dr. Spencer's future publications in upcoming JNE editions. Visit website: <https://humdev.uchicago.edu/directory/margaret-beale-spencer>

ScholarOne Tips

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REMINDER: If you don't have time to review or you need more time, drop me a line so I can adjust your profile status or grant an extension.

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The Journal of Negro Education