

CONTRIBUTIONS, CONTROVERSIES, AND CRITICISMS: IN MEMORY OF JOHN U. OGBU (1939-2003)

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The field of urban education suffered a great loss on August 20, 2003, when John Ogbu passed away due to complications from spinal surgery. Although his ideas on the academic achievement and motivation of minority groups-particularly African Americans-were highly controversial and drew much criticism, there is no denying the tremendous impact that Ogbu had on educational research. In over 40 years as a student and professor of anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, Ogbu was a truly engaged scholar who was widely cited, celebrated, and criticized for his work.

When he wrote his first study of low-income African Americans in Stockton, California in 1974, Ogbu believed that the major theories on Black academic underachievement were lacking. The explanations that he critiqued included: 1) lower expectations of Black students from teachers, based on prejudice and negative stereotypes (e.g., Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968); 2) cultural deprivation (Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965); and 3) genetic deficiency arguments based on IQ differences (Jensen, 1969; Herrnstein, 1973). Ogbu contended that none of these theories accounted for racial stratification in the U.S. and its impact on African Americans. He further argued that Black Americans lived a kind of paradox. They occupied the bottom rungs of a castelike society, yet, they were expected to work as hard as Whites (the favored group) for fewer rewards. As a result of this paradox, he argued that African Americans have chosen not to work as hard as Whites in an effort to reduce the dissonance about expending effort for incommensurate rewards. The flipside of the same coin, Ogbu asserted, is that this lack of effort on the part of African Americans feeds into folk theories that Whites already hold about Black intellectual and cultural inferiority.

In his comparative work, Ogbu (1978; 1987; 1981a) demonstrated that societies in other parts of world (Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Nigeria, India and Great Britain), which are socially stratified in similar ways to the United States, have similar gaps in academic performance between groups, based more on ascribed status than on actual scholastic merit.

It was this two-pronged analysis that lay at the core of Ogbu's "cultural-ecological" model of Black academic underachievement (Ogbu, 1981b). According to this model, African Americans have been systematically prevented from taking full advantage of the American educational system. Black Americans receive an inferior education to begin with, which precludes opportunities for higher education and high status jobs. This leads African Americans to abandon their educational efforts earlier than Whites, due to social and economic hardships.

Ogbu's model attempts to show that after generations of such ill treatment, African Americans have chosen not to compete for scholastic rewards, preferring other means of attainment. They adopted alternative strategies within a limited opportunity structure to reduce their anxiety about school achievement. However, these strategies lead to school failure, excluding African Americans from high status jobs and other social rewards (Ogbu, 1981c). Thus, there is a damaging and never-ending interplay at work, in which the dominant group uses certain mechanisms to encourage school failure among low-income Blacks, who in their distrust of the dominant structure, have developed behaviors and attitudes (blaming the system, clientship, and hustling, for example) that are incompatible with those required for school success.

In an effort to capture ethnic variations in achievement, Ogbu (1978) devised a typology of minority groups. Three main groups emerge: autonomous minorities, immigrant minorities, and castelike minorities. Autonomous minorities have not been subordinated economically and politically, and their numbers tend to be relatively small. In the United States, Ogbu uses Jews and Mormons as representative of this group. Immigrant minorities, also referred to as "voluntary minorities," tend to have emigrated from their homeland to settle in a host country for economic betterment. Castelike minorities, also referred to as involuntary minorities, have usually come to the United States as captives (as in the case of African Americans), or their country has been dominated by the U.S., (as is the case of Puerto Ricans and some Mexicans). These groups tend to be relegated to the most menial jobs and the lowest social position. Ogbu contended that in contrast to autonomous and immigrant minorities, who have an instrumental attitude that impels them to overcome barriers and achieve success, castelike minorities tend to dismiss majority group standards of success and develop alternative strategies for survival (Ogbu, 1985).

In what was arguably his most widely known work, Ogbu and Signithia Fordham (1986) analyzed the affective dimensions of the relationship between Black and White Americans and the implications of this relationship for educational achievement and aspirations. Building on Ogbu's prior work, they argued that African Americans, as castelike minorities, form a sense of identity in

opposition to White Americans (oppositional cultural identity), by which they create and maintain cultural boundaries, which are manifested through various behaviors between themselves and the dominant White American culture (oppositional cultural frame of reference-also later referred to as "cultural inversion"). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) further claimed that these facets of Black identity were reinforced through "fictive kinship," a strong sense of group loyalty among African Americans through which members of the group are sanctioned for violating established norms of behavior. Through the integration of these various ideas, Fordham and Ogbu contended that African Americans faced the "burden of 'acting White'" if they espoused academic success-a behavior said to be the domain of White Americans. The "acting White" hypothesis gained widespread attention in the media as an explanation for Black academic underachievement (see Gregory, 1992; Pearson, 1994).

Building further on these ideas, Ogbu's last ethnographic study focused on academic disengagement among African Americans in the more affluent community of Shaker Heights, Ohio (Ogbu, 2003). In this work, he claimed that Blacks in both poor and affluent communities exhibit many of the same behaviors and attitudes that lead to school failure, namely, disengagement from academic work, inability to focus on the task at hand, blaming teachers for their failure, and having low academic expectations of themselves. Ogbu acknowledged the impact of structural racism and negative stereotyping on Black achievement, but he did not believe these factors could fully explain the Black-White achievement gap.

Ogbu's work generated extensive discussion and criticism, spanning numerous lines of inquiry, throughout his academic career. Some scholars criticized Ogbu for being overly structuralist and determinist in his analysis of minority group experiences (Trueba, 1988) and failing to demonstrate causal relationships between structural factors and behavior (Erickson, 1987). Others critiqued his historical analysis (Cross, 2003) or contended that his view of culture was too static (Bronfenbrenner, 1985). Still others used large, empirical data sets to refute the "acting White" hypothesis and the notion of "oppositional culture" (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). In fact, the authors themselves are among those who sharply disagreed with Ogbu on many points. In particular, we believe Ogbu misunderstood the meaning of "acting White" references among Black youth, and that he did not sufficiently consider issues of racial identity formation and development (Harpalani, 2002; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001; Spencer, Cross, Harpalani, & Goss, in press). We also felt that his work was often co-opted to promote a neoconservative agenda (e.g., McWhorter, 2000; see Gunn, Harpalani, & Brooks, 2001 for a critique), even if Ogbu did not intend for this.

But in the end, there can be no doubt about John Ogbu's significance and scholarly contributions. Not only did he publish extensively, but numerous articles, books, conference sessions, and dissertations around the world were also based on his work. His ideas were provocative, and he did not shy away from controversy. Indeed, he invited criticism and throughout his career, Ogbu revised his theories in response to his critics. The well-known 1986 "acting White" article was in part a result of Fordham's (1981) critique of Ogbu's earlier work (see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.180), which turned into a collaboration between the two. And even as the criticisms remain, scholars in the field of urban education are intellectually indebted to John Ogbu.

In fact, Maurice Berube (2000) argues that John Ogbu, along with John Dewey, Howard Gardiner, and Carol Gilligan, was one of the four most influential figures in the history of American education. This is a well-deserved honor, as Ogbu's work moved the discourse on Black academic achievement towards a greater focus on American racism. The entire field of education was advanced immensely not only through Ogbu's own contributions, but also through the many extensions and criticisms of his work. Perhaps the truest testament to a scholar is the longevity of his/her ideas. John Ogbu has sadly passed on, but we have no doubt that his ideas will live to be debated by future generations of scholars.

John Ogbu's Academic Colleagues Reflect on his Life and Work:

"The social sciences lost a theoretically rigorous thinker when John Ogbu died. Between his early work in the 70's through [his] most recent book, Ogbu demonstrated a willingness to refine and honestly reflect on his arguments. Jim Ainsworth and I have been among his critics, but we both agree we would not have bothered with oppositional culture theory if it were not so theoretically attractive. I expect his ideas to influence scholars for some time. They should."

--Douglas Downey, Associate Professor of Sociology, The Ohio State University

"For 30 years-from the publication of *The Next Generation* in 1974 to his most recent book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (2003)-John Ogbu pushed us to consider the pressing question of why some groups of minority students are less successful in school than others. And he kept us focused on the role that structural inequalities and community forces play in shaping students responses to schooling. Whether we agreed fully with his premises or not, his work has influenced us all. He was a giant in the field of minority education, and he will be sorely missed."

--Margaret A. Gibson, Professor of Education and Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz

"The first time I met John, two words came to mind: scholar and gentle man. I purposefully do not write "gentleman" so that we may all be reminded of how gentle John was as a human being. In the years when his work became the subject of so much

criticism, many young scholars may not have seen this important core of John. He cared about true scholarship, and he never relished or sought out disharmony. He was one of the most widely read anthropologists I know who has undertaken the study of Education, and he honored the tough grind behind accumulation of Evidence."

--Shirley Brice Heath, Professor of Linguistics and English, Stanford University

"[John Ogbu] was probably one of the most influential researchers working on the problem of academic achievement among African Americans. I always appreciated the fact that while he began working on African Americans, he tried to develop an overarching theory about the academic achievement of all minorities in different contexts. Although one can debate the relative merits of his model, it is hard to write or work in this area without thinking of John Ogbu. His presence will certainly be missed in educational research."

--Grace Kao, Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Asian American Studies Program, University of Pennsylvania

"John Ogbu was a friend and colleague of mine at UC Berkeley. Though we disagreed on many issues, I always respected him because I recognized the major contribution that he made to the study of race and schooling. I see two areas in particular as the most significant aspects of his work: 1) The idea that history matters, and that understanding the influence of the effects of history of slavery, colonization and conquest on current attitudes toward schooling on non-voluntary minorities is essential; 2) The attention he gave to immigrant status and the ways in which it affects dispositions toward schooling. These contributions are lasting and have profoundly shaped the way scholars think about race, immigration and schooling. For this reason, John Ogbu's legacy will live on for many years to come."

--Pedro Noguera, Judith K. Dimon Professor in Communities and Schools, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University

"John Ogbu was a colleague with whom I shared significant conceptual differences, as evidenced in published papers. In addition to the perspective differences in our two decades relationship as colleagues, I enjoyed another insight. That is, I also valued having the opportunity of knowing John as the father of his wonderful and successful children, and husband to his very warm and committed wife and colleague, Marcellina. My husband Charles and I enjoyed opportunities to entertain him in our home, and I remain appreciative of the 'balanced exposure.' I am sincerely disappointed about his untimely passing and, in fact, continued to believe that he would alter his analysis....John was a good man and the friendship will be missed."

--Margaret Beale Spencer, Board of Overseers Professor of Human Development and Education and Professor of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

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