Coming to terms: a discussion of John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority academic achievement

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Over the course of 30 years of academic work, the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu had an enormous influence on educational research, and on educational anthropology in particular. In this paper, I lay out the tenets of his cultural-ecological (CE) theory of minority student responses to schooling. I also offer critical commentary and point out ways in which CE theory can be sharpened to facilitate increasingly nuanced and accurate analyses. Even as I point to specific problems in Dr Ogbu's work, my suggestions for enhancing CE theory do not contradict its basic tenets, which provide a solid resource for researchers who study minority student communities. Rather, they add nuance to it by incorporating recent developments in anthropological theory.

Introduction

Over the course of more than thirty years of academic publishing and speaking, the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu had an enormous influence on educational research, and on educational anthropology in particular. During that time, he developed a compelling narrative of minority academic school performance which is generally referred to as the cultural-ecological (CE) theory of minority student performance. Building upon the work of others before him, Ogbu described cultural ecology as 'the study of institutionalized patterns of behavior interdependent with features of the environment' (Ogbu, 1990a, p. 122). At its most basic, Ogbu's CE theory of minority student performance:

> posits that there are two sets of factors influencing minority school performance: how society at large and the school treats minorities (the system) and how minority groups respond to those treatments and to schooling (community forces). The theory further posits that differences in school performance between immigrant and nonimmigrant minorities are partly due to differences in their community forces. (Ogbu, 1999, p. 156)

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Ogbu fleshed out his broad conceptualization with several additional layers of theorization. Among the most important and consistently articulated aspects of his theory was the idea that, in order to understand the academic achievement of minority students, it is necessary to distinguish between 'different kinds of minorities' (1983a, p. 168; 1985, p. 862). The two groups he focused on most often were those he called 'involuntary minorities' and those he termed 'voluntary minorities.' Voluntary minorities—those who immigrate to a host country 'more-or-less by choice'—were said to have an 'instrumental' approach to their host society and its institutions, while involuntary minorities—those whose minority position is a result of historic subjugation after conquest or forced migration (enslavement)—were said to have an 'oppositional' approach to their society and its institutions (1983a, p. 181; 1983b, p. 76–77; 1985, pp. 864–867; 1995a, p. 197). The end result of Ogbu's assessments was a comparative analysis that judged voluntary minorities as consistent and effective academic achievers, and involuntary minorities as persistent academic failures (1990c, p. 146).

Including the distinction of system and community factors, and the distinction of kinds of minorities, Ogbu's CE theory includes four important layers: (1) the general idea that students' academic success is impacted by community forces and system forces, and that not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which community forces contribute to involuntary minority student failure; (2) the distinction of voluntary, involuntary and autonomous minorities; (3) the recognition of universal, primary and secondary discontinuities between students and the schools they attend; (4) the idea that involuntary minorities have developed survival strategies—some of which facilitate academic success and others of which hinder it—including clientship/ Uncle Tomming, collective struggle, hustling, emulation of whites and camouflage. Ogbu repeated his description of these areas of theorization in numerous publications, a fact that has been greeted with consternation by some, but has also ensured that his ideas have been disseminated to a broad range of academic audiences. Often, he would discuss his ideas in terms of different topics: for instance, African-Americans and IQ (Ogbu, 2002), African-American literacy (Ogbu,1990c,1999) or black achievement across socioeconomic realms (Ogbu, 2003). However, since the content of his analysis changed very little, we have a stable and unambiguous record of Ogbu's thinking.

In a forthcoming article entitled 'Narratives and the social scientist' (Foster, 2004), I argue that Ogbu's corpus—the body of work that developed and expounded upon his CE theory—should be considered within the context of (US) American narratives of adjustment and success that different groups have used to sustain and promote their strivings. I argue that Ogbu's narrative of ethnic minority success is, and has long been, shared among many black (West Indian and African) immigrants to the US. Further, the folk narrative that he intellectualized serves the motivational needs of high-achieving black immigrants in a way that is similar to the way that narratives of racial uplift have historically served middle-class African-Americans in their quest for upward social and economic mobility (Gaines, 1996). In both cases, members of groups look down upon other blacks, either as foils against which they

construct themselves as high-achievers (Foster, forthcoming) or as ignorant masses whom they perceive themselves as called to educate and assist. In addition, I note examples where involuntary minority success is wholly congruent with, indeed grows out of, individuals' community-based understandings of themselves and their community members. I posit these as features of minority academic success to which the CE theory has not yet been applied, but that are consistent with its most basic tenets.

In this paper, I explore Dr Ogbu's work with greater specificity, laying out the CE theory as it was developed over thirty years of scholarship, and discussing each of the major tenets of Ogbu's analysis of minority education. Ogbu worked toward a global and cross-cultural theory of minority education. In these pages, however, I most often consider his theory in the light of available information about African-American students in the US. This approach is especially appropriate since African-Americans were the group most often discussed in his many writings about minority responses to schooling. In the concluding third of the paper, I offer critical commentary, acknowledging the CE theory as highly influential among educational researchers and foundational in educational anthropology, but also pointing out problems in its application and discussing specific ways in which the theory can be strengthened.

Conceptualization: community forces and system forces

Ogbu's CE theory arose hand-in-hand with his strongly felt sense that, even as anthropologists paid a great deal of attention to the structural aspects of society and schooling that hindered minority academic success, this was only 'half of the problem' (Ogbu, 1983b, p. 77). In addition to such system factors (also referred to as system *forces*), Ogbu believed that the culturally determined responses of minorities to their circumstances were also critical. He called these either community factors or community forces (Ogbu,1992a, p. 287; 2003, pp. vii–viii). Ogbu felt that the impact of community forces upon minority responses to schooling was consistently understudied. To balance out the larger body of research then, Ogbu spent the bulk of his career talking about these forces. Ogbu wrote of the system force/community force dichotomy and the need to focus on community forces in Ogbu (1990d, 1991, 1992a, 1995a, 2003), and elsewhere.

Given Ogbu's idea that community and system forces are both important for understanding minority responses to schooling, it is important to note that, even as he focused on maladapted cultural norms and values of involuntary minorities, he did not assume that there was no discrimination against minorities. Nor did he assume that discrimination did not have direct negative effects upon minority academic outcomes. He did, however, believe that, even within the context of systematic discrimination, there was room for minority agency. Hence, he saw a need for systematic study of community forces to complement analyses of system forces. Unfortunately, according to Ogbu, involuntary minority agency was directed in ways that did not promote minority academic success. Thus, Ogbu's project involved taking the existence of racial discrimination as a well-discussed given, and then moving on to

what he saw as underdeveloped territory—the role of minorities in their own academic failure.

Typology: voluntary, involuntary and autonomous minorities

Even more widely discussed than his conceptualization of community and system factors is Ogbu's distinction of kinds of minorities. Critical to his theory is the distinction of voluntary, involuntary and autonomous minorities. It was his strong contention that it is not possible adequately to address issues of minority academic achievement without distinguishing between kinds of minorities. According to Ogbu, each kind of minority has different sets of experiences that inform their relationships to schools and schooling and, as a result, have developed different approaches to schooling. Articles where Ogbu's explanation of this typology appear include Ogbu (1983a, 1985, 1990b, c, 1991, 1992a–c).

In Ogbu's minority typology, voluntary minorities, those who chose to immigrate to a host country, view the host societies' institutions, including schools, in terms of opportunity. They take an instrumental approach to schooling and view the schools in terms of what they can gain from them. They likewise view teachers as experts in specific areas and as the source of knowledge they need. Even if they face discrimination, they do not internalize the mistreatment, but rather remain focused on the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge and skills. They are also willing to learn, accept and adapt to the cultural norms of the majority group. They see no threat to their own sense of identity as a result of adopting new behaviors. In fact, they expect to learn new ways as necessary for their success in the host country. In Ogbu's conception, voluntary minorities are steady academic achievers (1990c, p. 154).

Involuntary minorities, those who did not choose their minority status through migration, but rather occupy that demographic status as a result of conquest, forced migration or enslavement, have an oppositional approach to schools. Because of long periods of discrimination by the dominant society and its institutions, involuntary minorities have developed responses and behaviors that emphasize their distrust of and opposition to the dominant society and its institutions, including schools. In addition, they maintain alternative self-affirming norms and values that maintain boundaries between themselves and the majority group (1990c, p. 155)—norms and values that undermine academics. Further, involuntary minorities' actions and attitudes reflect the fact that they come to school with distinctive cultural and language patterns that distinguish them from the majority cultural behaviors. In fact, they will go so far as to defend their 'alternative' behaviors, even though the behaviors—having been disapproved by the school—facilitate academic failure. In addition, rather than adapting their behaviors for maximum efficiency and efficacy in the quest for academic success, involuntary minorities 'will devote disproportionate effort fighting for political, social, and economic equality with the dominant group members' (Ogbu, 1983a, p. 172).

Ogbu's final kind of minority was the autonomous minority. This group received little attention in his typology beyond persistent mention. Autonomous minorities

'may have a distinctive racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural identity that is guaranteed by national constitution or by tradition. They may be victims of prejudice, but are not subordinated groups in a system of rigid stratification' (1983a, p. 169). Ogbu offered that minority groups in this category, which in the US include Jews, Amish and Mormons, have a 'cultural frame of reference' which demonstrates and encourages success (1985, p. 862).

Perhaps the first thing to note about Ogbu's typology is its apparent usefulness on a broad conceptual level. Several scholars, who have at different times agreed or disagreed with aspects of his analysis, have nonetheless found that Ogbu's categories hold in a number of different national contexts, and often provide useful units for analysis. For instance, Gibson found the involuntary/voluntary minority distinction useful in her studies of youth in the West Indies (Gibson, 1991). Valenzuela also was able to apply the distinctions to her studies of US–Mexican youth in Texas (Valenzuela, 1999). I too have encountered important differences in black college students' responses to schooling (and to one another) which fall along the lines of involuntary/ voluntary minorities (Foster, 2003). Of specific note, I found African and West Indian immigrant students careful to distinguish themselves from African-Americans, whom they viewed as maladapted underachievers and in terms that are in substance the same as those offered by Dr Ogbu. In other settings, however, scholars have noted circumstances where the CE typology of minority students is complicated by local circumstances and by the varied circumstances and understandings under which minorities choose to immigrate. Examples from this volume include Hermans and Kalekin–Fishman.

As the typologies hold in specific settings but not others and are complicated by local circumstances, it is more useful to view the categories as ideal types instead of absolutes. Ogbu hinted at this when he stated, 'the terms for different types of minorities are intended as stereotypes and point to individual differences within groups' (1985, pp. 864–865). Nonetheless, in most cases, distinguishing between kinds of minorities and then describing the characteristics of each were the only further levels of delineation and complication that were applied to the problem of understanding minority responses to schooling. It was critically important to Ogbu, for instance, to note the differences between (functional) African immigrants and (dysfunctional) African-Americans. It was not as important to note the range of attitudes and behaviors within each of these categories. Even in those instances where he did offer the possibility of difference within such categories as the involuntary minority, he did not veer from his totalizing analysis, which ascribed characteristics to each 'kind' of minority he encountered and described.

Cultural differences/discontinuities

After the establishment of his basic typology, Ogbu's next level of analysis distinguished between levels of cultural difference between majority and minority populations and within minority populations. In some places, he spoke of universal, primary and secondary cultural discontinuities between students' backgrounds on one hand,

and the behavioral and performance expectations of schools on the other. In other places, he spoke of primary and secondary cultural differences between minority students' cultural backgrounds and school cultures.

In Ogbu's conceptualization, universal discontinuities are differences between home and school culture that occur for all students. Some schools feature a reward system (grades) based upon impersonality, universal standards, individualism, specificity and achievement norms, while homes promote intimacy, particularity in relationships and interdependence among family members (1982). This area of discontinuity however, was not Ogbu's focus. Rather, because his main concern was with minority responses to schooling, he spent more time considering those areas of discontinuity and difference that he felt were specific to minority students.

Primary discontinuities are the differences between the cultural norms and language of students and the culture and language norms of the schools they attend. They are most often associated with 'immigrants attending schools in their host countries and with non-western peoples being introduced to western-type schools' (1983a, p. 294). However, they can exist among both voluntary and involuntary minorities (1985). In either case, Ogbu offered that primary cultural and language differences initially distinguish many minorities from members of the majority group, that these differences lead to 'learning and social adjustment problems initially' (Ogbu, 1985, p. 861) and that they can be overcome by learning the given school's cultural and language expectations (1985, p. 862). Ogbu argued that, in the case of primary discontinuities, there are several reasons that students are willing to 'overcome these discontinuities in order to succeed' (1982, p. 298). These are primarily due to students' sense of the tangible benefits that will accrue to them as a result of their academic success and credentialing.

Secondary cultural discontinuities 'arise after groups have come in contact' (Ogbu, 1985, p. 862) and are associated with castelike/involuntary minorities (Ogbu, 1982, p. 300), who perceive discrimination against themselves and who perceive this discrimination to be institutional and ongoing. In some cases, there may be legislated discrimination against these groups. In other cases, while there may be no prohibitions from 'behaving like dominant group members', caste-like minorities may maintain alternative (separate and distinct) cultural and linguistic practices 'in order to maintain their identity and sense of security or out of dislike for their superiors' (Ogbu, 1982, pp. 299–300). Secondary differences are characterized by oppositional culture—the establishment and embracing of behaviors that are intended as an alternative to or opposite of the accepted behaviors of the dominant group. These behaviors help maintain group identity, but ensure the academic failure of the group's members.

Speaking of language, Ogbu also framed dialect difference in terms of cultural differences, arguing that, 'it is not only the degree of difference that counts. What also counts is the cultural meanings attached to those dialect differences' (Ogbu, 1999, p. 148). He went on to discuss the differences in terms of voluntary and involuntary minorities:

> The cultural models of minorities are shaped by the initial terms of their incorporation in American society, and their subsequent treatment by white Americans. The formative model of immigrants from that of non-immigrants or involuntary minorities is the initial

term of incorporation—voluntary incorporation in the case of immigrants, involuntary incorporation in the case of non-immigrants. (pp. 149–150)

While both voluntary and involuntary minorities are said often to possess primary cultural differences, according to Ogbu, it is the voluntary minorities who are more willing to 'overcome' these differences in order to succeed (Ogbu, 1995b). By contrast, involuntary minorities cling to these differences, defend them and even build upon them a level of secondary differences—although doing so has negative consequences in terms of school success and failure, and in terms of success and failure in the larger society (ibid.). This articulation of differences/discontinuities maps closely on to the previously discussed notions of involuntary and voluntary minorities and is thus an extension of this earlier part of the CE model.

Involuntary minority survival strategies

To address the behavior of involuntary minorities further, Ogbu offered that involuntary minorities, who are largely academic failures, have adapted several specific 'survival' strategies, most of which undermine academic success (1983a, pp. 177–180; 1983b, p. 78; 1990b, p. 49; 1990c, pp. 159–163; 1991, pp. 448–449; 1992b, p. 11). These include clientship/Uncle Tomming, collective struggle, and hustling (see especially 1983a, pp. 177–180; 1991, pp. 448–449).

In his discussion of Uncle Tomming, Ogbu offers that

> Blacks have learned since slavery that the way to get ahead even within the limited universe open to them in the status-mobility system is not through merit and talent but through white patronage or favoritism. They have also learned that the way to solicit that favoritism is by playing some version of the 'Uncle Tom' role, being compliant, dependent and manipulative. (1983a, p. 177)

Meanwhile, 'collective struggle includes what white Americans regard as legitimate 'civil rights activities'; for the minorities, these include rioting and other forms of collective action that promise to increase the opportunities of the pool of resources available to them' (1990c, p. 154). Finally, hustling, which is also mentioned with 'pimping' is associated with a 'reverse work ethic, which insists that one should 'make it' without working, especially for whites, but by manipulating others to work for you' (1983a, p. 180).

In addition to collective struggle, hustling and Tomming, Ogbu (1992b) offers a longer list of secondary strategies employed by involuntary minorities, some of which are said to complement academic success, some of which are not. Examples include attending private schools to get away from African-American peers, going to church, being a class clown to hide good grades, and emulation of whites (Ogbu, 1992b, p. 11). Of the strategies that promote academic success, most do so by providing means by which individuals can escape the influence of their peers and community, which are seen to be negatives. Ogbu gave two such strategies—camouflage and emulation of whites—more attention than others. Being a class clown in order to divert attention from high grades was part of what Ogbu called camouflage. 'By acting

foolishly, the black youth satisfies the peer expectation that he or she is not very serious about school. The jester, however, takes schoolwork seriously when he is away from his peers and often does well in school' (Ogbu, 1990c, p. 163). Emulation of whites, also referred to as assimilation and as 'cultural passing', involves disassociating from black cultural identity and assuming the cultural norms and values of whites (1990c, p. 162).

> Black youth who choose this strategy seek to disassociate themselves from their black peers, from black cultural identity. They appear to prefer white norms and values, clearly in conflict with those of blacks. They reason that in order to succeed they must repudiate their black peers, black identity, and black cultural frames of reference. Such minority are often academically successful. The price paid is peer criticism and isolation. (1990c, pp. 162–163)

In his many discussions of African-American culture, Ogbu sees little that promotes academic success. To the extent that there are any practices among African-American students that promote their academic success, these involve individuals disassociating from or otherwise countering what Ogbu considered to be the debilitating impact of African-American communal norms. In other words, those African-Americans who experience academic success would be those who find a way to distance themselves from African-American culture. This explanation allowed for the possibility of African-American student success without undermining Ogbu's longstanding and steadfast belief in the incompatibility between African-American culture and academic success.

In the case of each of the strategies that Ogbu identifies, their importance lies (1) in the extent to which they are practiced among different groups of minorities, (2) the outcomes they produce when embodied in practice, and (3) the extent to which they are valued, validated and, hence, rooted in broad segments of minority student communities. The circumstances may be different in each case, with tomming, for instance, a strategy more often ascribed to others than claimed. Hustling—engaging in extralegal or non-comformist activities in order to experience a sense of success—in contrast, may be embodied in practice by several and validated by several more, with negative consequences for the individual and for the group. In short, each strategy deserves additional critical attention, more distinction and more nuances before we can claim a comprehensive CE understanding of minority student behavior. Studies along the lines of Elijah Anderson's *Code of the Street* (1999) though not about minority education *per se*, are useful. Anderson's text describes many inner-city African-Americans' conditions of existence, as well as their responses to those conditions. It shows the complexity and difficulty of the circumstances marginalized groups often face, as well as the complexity of their responses to such conditions. In many respects, this could be considered the essence of the CE work that Ogbu advocates—a comprehensive look at how environment influences patterns of behavior.

Suggestions for the next generation of CE theory

While not shying away from commentary where it would illuminate the discussion of the CE theory and its application, thus far my focus has been on describing the layers

of the CE theory. A detailed articulation of the CE is timely and important, not only because of the recent passing of Dr Ogbu and the desire of many of us to come to terms with his work, but also because his work has been influential among educational researchers and practitioners and has been widely cited in scholarly literature. The CE theory established for countless educational researchers a framework for thinking about minority approaches to schooling. Some insights stand out—for instance, it was the CE theory that most succinctly articulated that the historical circumstances by which a group of people comes to their minority status is critical to understanding their approaches to schooling. In addition, the distinction of layers of cultural difference between groups and schools (universal, primary and secondary) positions researchers to distinguish between cultural traits that students bring with them to school and those that they subsequently actively reproduce.

Nonetheless, even as several researchers have applied tenets of Ogbu's CE theory to their own work, many have resisted his analyses and characterizations of the norms and behaviors of involuntary minorities in particular. It is my contention that, while critics have been correct in finding fault in many of Ogbu's analyses, the problems were not in his theory as much as they were in his application of the framework that he developed. Thus, I turn now to some examples of what I see as shortcomings in Ogbu's findings and analyses, and then offer theoretical interventions that will enrich the CE theory and broaden its application and usefulness.

Few have challenged the usefulness of thinking about involuntary and voluntary minorities, although some have presented circumstances where the situation ultimately proved more complicated than that initial conception (Hermans, 2004; Kalekin-Fishman, 2004). Rather, challenges to Ogbu's analyses have addressed his unintended slippage into a culture of poverty argument (Gould, 1999), his failure to recognize the range of normative and status-earning behaviors within the groups of minorities he identified (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Foster, 2001; Zou and Trueba, 1998), and a body of research and writing that is 'overwhelmingly preoccupied with explaining the academic failure of … marginal populations' (O'Connor, 1997, p. 597). A manifestation of these criticized aspects of Ogbu's work is that there is no room in his analysis for the existence of involuntary minority high-achievers whose motivations to strive and succeed are rooted in their experiences as community participants. Nowhere in Ogbu's work, for instance, is there an analysis of racial uplift, a talented tenth or racial responsibility as community-based concepts which facilitate academic success among African-Americans, despite the fact that these are deeply rooted community forces in the African-American community (Banks, 1996; Foster, 1997; Gaines, 1996; Perry, 2003). So the challenge is not to the conception of the involuntary minority—the moniker applies quite aptly to African-Americans. Rather, somehow in his work and analysis Ogbu missed key aspects of the involuntary minority experience and reality.

Likewise, in my work with African immigrants attending US universities, the conception of the voluntary minority holds up well. In fact, many differences between Africans of different ethnicities and nationalities were erased in a process of inscription and ascription that brought these black students together under the voluntary

minority identity of 'African' (Foster, 2003). Meanwhile, other black immigrants similarly came together under the multinational identity of Caribbean or West Indian. Ogbu's descriptions of the success orientation of African voluntary immigrants to the US concurred with my fieldwork findings, and with my ongoing interaction with this 'kind' of student, to the extent that most have been highly motivated and have adopted an instrumental approach to their teachers and to the educational resources that have been available to them. What Ogbu did not notice, but which has come up repeatedly in my experiences, is the extent to which voluntary minorities actively construct themselves in opposition to involuntary minorities as they construct themselves as achievers.

In other work, I point out that among many African students there is an active and actively reproduced willingness to look down upon involuntary minorities with pity—as maladjusted and systematic underachievers—but also to draw upon that same group as a resource for providing social and other extracurricular outlets that will help them to maintain their mental health as they proceed through college (Foster, 2004). Thus, the success of voluntary minorities is in some cases linked to the ways in which they imagine, and interact with, involuntary minorities. This is an important feature of black voluntary minorities' community forces that Ogbu never noticed. In short, in the case of African and African-American students, the basic tenets of the CE model hold up well, while the traits that he ascribed to each group sometimes do, sometimes do not, and in other cases lack nuance.

Ogbu's discussion of the minority survival strategy of tomming provides a final example where the CE framework holds, but the details of his analysis do not. His discussions of tomming do not include observational data of tomming in action (Ogbu, 1983a, b, 1990b, c, 1991). Rather, he offers students' generic descriptions of tomming as something that some other blacks do. Ogbu's data seem to point to the possibility that tomming may exist less as an identified and practiced strategy for self, and more as a strategy assumed to be practiced by others. Since tomming is often cast pejoratively, the ascription of tomming behaviors to others in a given community of black students raises intriguing questions about what critical race theorist Regina Austin calls policing for solidarity among African-Americans (Austin, 1995). Perhaps the use, or threat of use, of this pejorative category to describe some black students encourages all to avoid whatever behaviors would earn the moniker 'Uncle Tom.' Addressing this issue of self-acknowledged identity verse identity as ascribed by others would greatly improve many CE analyses.

Given these examples where the CE framework holds, but the list of traits associated with each category is incomplete or otherwise faulty, an ideal way to proceed would be to acknowledge what works, and to learn from and adjust for those areas where Ogbu's analyses fell short. My critique is that despite the strengths of the CE model, Dr Ogbu's analyses did not adequately account for the range of academic behaviors and orientations among both involuntary and voluntary minorities. In attempting to come to terms with these shortcomings, I have identified three areas where the CE theory can be further developed to account for aspects of social and cultural process, and thus reduce the possibility of inaccurate analyses. Of note, none

of my critiques contradicts the CE theory. Rather, they enhance it through the incorporation of recent theoretical developments in anthropology.

As scholars apply the CE theory to the circumstances of minority students in different contexts, we would do well to ensure that we (1) operate with a complex and dynamic notion of culture as negotiated and always in process, both within and among groups, and (2) notice the ongoing and dynamic interplay between community and system forces. An additional consideration would include recognizing the possibility of fluidity between such categories as involuntary and voluntary minority, as individual identities are malleable, and as some individuals maintain a voluntary minority identity despite being involuntary minorities, and vice versa.

Operating with a complex notion of culture

The CE theory emphasizes the importance of the ways in which historical and contemporary circumstances and contexts influence the norms, values and behaviors of a group of similarly situated individuals. Thus, it can quite comfortably accommodate a notion of culture as dynamic, constantly negotiated and shifting over time—in other words the important notion that culture is always in process. To this extent, the CE model is well-positioned to incorporate 'the conceptual and methodological retooling' carried out among US cultural anthropologists in the 1980s and 1990s (Fischer, 2004).

In the many instances where Dr Ogbu listed the traits of various involuntary or voluntary minority groups, culture was described in terms of bounded and static units of analysis instead of as dynamic, relational and constantly negotiated and contested. To his credit, Ogbu was true to the concept of what Fischer (2004, p. 3) calls the distinct anthropological voice—the aspiration for cross-culturally comparative, socially grounded, linguistically and culturally attentive perspective. At the same time, the comparisons reduced groups to several characteristics, which he imbedded in a linear description of different cultural groups' development and resultant socio-material circumstance. As the late educational anthropologist Henry Trueba noted years ago, one of the problems with Ogbu's analyses is that they did not account for the shifting identities of individuals he would classify as involuntary or voluntary minorities—especially those individuals whose affiliations, genealogies and loyalties made it difficult to place them neatly into one category or another (Trueba, 1987, pp. 9–10). Nor did Ogbu explain how (much less acknowledge that) attitudes, norms, values and behaviors shift over time among cultural actors.

Fischer may as well have been writing against Ogbu when he described some scientists' use of culture as a 'fixed variable' and when he argued against such use as 'precisely the sort of thing to which anthropological notions of culture cannot be reduced and that lead to the promotion of stereotype thinking and invidious forms of comparative research' (2004, p. 7). To Fischer

> Culture is not a variable; culture is relational, it is elsewhere, it is in passage, it is where meaning is woven and renewed, often through gaps and silences, and forces beyond the

> conscious control of individuals, and yet the space where individual and institutional social responsibility and ethical struggle take place. (2004, p. 7)

Moreover, while culture is 'configured historically', this is to say that culture is forged in context and that it is an ongoing and interactive process. Culture (or the culture of an ideal type group such as the voluntary minority) is not a singular entity that, once formed, simply always is, as is. Rather, to understand culture and cultural process, we must consider what Weber would refer to as the complex interaction of innumerable different historical factors (1992 [1930], p. 49). Culture is also thoroughly contested and constantly negotiated, from within and without, through inscription and ascription, and in conscious response and involuntary reaction (Foster, 2003). Thus, it is precisely 'the coming into form, the work of maintenance, and the processes of decay, the dynamics of the weaving', that is the special purview and interest of the anthropologist (Fischer, 2004, p. 8).

Such a dynamic, complex and even dizzying understanding of culture (more precisely cultural process), disallows the possibility of viewing culture as a fixed variable in analysis. It also allows for the possibility of interesting norm and value permutations, such as those arising from ongoing interaction between black voluntary and involuntary minorities (Foster, forthcoming).

Noticing the dynamic interplay between system and community forces

Ogbu's stated opinion about community forces and system forces was consistent—that both were important to understanding minority responses to schooling, but that community forces were systematically understudied. Thus, he devoted his time to understanding community forces. A problem that arose is that in his desire to bring attention to community forces, he may have gone too far in that direction, overemphasizing them, overemphasizing their negative impacts and undermining his contention that both sets of forces were important. In his many books, articles and book chapters, Ogbu's mentioning of community and system forces as equally important became a *pro forma* act. It was typically offered in one or two introductory sentences to articles that repeated his assessments about involuntary minorities' roles in their own academic failure. This problem is one of emphasis and impression, but nonetheless important, as Ogbu's work has increasingly been used to bolster culture-of-poverty arguments that he actually saw himself as arguing against (Foley, 2004; Hamann, this issue).

Another problem with Ogbu's discussion of community and system forces reflects a need for deeper engagement with anthropological and sociological theory. In the case of any dichotomy or any set of ideal types, it is important to remember that these are constructions. They help researchers think about problems, but must be used carefully, and with an understanding that categories and types are generally more fluid and unpredictable than the concept actually allows. One understudied aspect of system and community forces is the extent to which they exist interdependently and constantly influence each other. In Ogbu's work, the initial conception that a job

ceiling (Ogbu, 1978), along with other forms of discrimination, led to certain responses by involuntary minorities, is a case where system forces facilitated a set of communal responses which became strongly enough instituted and widely enough shared to become community forces. But the impact of one set of forces upon another does not only occur at a formative period to produce an everlasting result. The system changes, and the community changes, and they continually affect one another.

Especially in terms of accounting for and minimizing those community forces that Ogbu identified as undermining academic success, it is worth paying special attention to how individuals perceive specific system forces, and how the system incorporates and accounts for actions generated by community members. There is an extent to which Ogbu's last major work, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (2003), began to address this complex task. Even there, however, he underplayed or did not provide an analysis for data that seemed to shed light on how system forces affected students' responses to schooling, as well as how system forces affected their academic achievement, placement and outcomes. As discussed in Foster (2004), examples occur throughout the text, but are especially noticeable on pages 112, 117 and 237. In these places, he recorded comments by students, parents and teachers that could have been used to shed light on system forces as perceived by involuntary minorities. Especially in those instances where community members commented on system forces, Ogbu missed an opportunity to analyze how system forces interact with, inform or are challenged by community forces.

In sum, while the point that community forces have not received enough attention is well taken, it remains important to maintain balance and perspective, to examine, in any schooling situation, how both community forces and system forces impact students' academic outcomes, and also to look at the two as they interrelate, reinforce or undermine one another. As elsewhere, greater focus on these areas will not compromise the basic tenets of CE theory, but rather enhance it, by facilitating our understanding of the factors that influence minority responses to schooling as well as how they operate.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to accomplish two tasks simultaneously. First, I have outlined Ogbu's CE theory in a way that is intended to facilitate wider understanding and use of his work. Although Dr Ogbu did not articulate his CE theory in the numbered and layered format I have presented here, this articulation brings together and presents a set of ideas that were developed in over thirty years of scholarship, including dozens of published writings and hundreds of oral presentations. Secondly, I have included in this paper some of my criticisms of Ogbu's work. My hope is that, as future researchers engage Ogbu's CE theory, they are best positioned to utilize it, refine it, build upon its strengths, but also to correct for the shortcomings in its past application. While I have additional criticisms of Dr Ogbu's application of his CE theory, which I will develop elsewhere, the criticisms included here—those related to notions of culture and cultural process—are to my mind the

most critical. I decided to include them here because I believe that actively incorporating more sophisticated notions of culture and cultural process into CE theory will ultimately further, rather than destabilize or undermine, this important set of ideas about minority responses to schooling. Forthrightly laying out this body of theory, as well as engaging in its criticism, not only helps secure John Ogbu's legacy and open up his work to more researchers, but it encourages a dynamic approach to ideas where we see John Ogbu's work not as the final answer to questions of minority student achievement, but as an important and lasting contribution to ongoing discussions.

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