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Narratives of the social scientist: understanding the work of John Ogbu

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This article contextualizes the work of the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu in terms of uniquely American narratives that have explanatory and motivational value for different segments of the US population. The narrative Ogbu championed has explanatory value among several educational researchers, and is consistent with an ethnic immigrant narrative that has long held motivational value among African, Asian and European immigrant students in the United States – quite possibly including John Ogbu – who came to the US as an immigrant student himself. While I point out specific problems that undermine the accuracy of Ogbu's assessments and the quality of his analysis, I also point out that (for better or worse), when it comes to the effectiveness and acceptance of such narratives among different groups of people, historical accuracy and objective truth is not as important as the extent to which the explanations offered hold explanatory and motivational value and resonate with individual or group experiences and understandings of the world.

The academic writings of John Ogbu spanned more than 30 years. From 1971 (the year in which he received his Ph.D. from the University of California-Berkeley) to the time of his passing in August 2003, he was a prolific writer, producing work after work that articulated, elaborated upon and refined a cultural-ecological theory of minority student success that related mainly to the different approaches to academic success among those he termed 'voluntary minorities', and those he termed 'involuntary minorities'. According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities – those who immigrated to a host country 'more-or-less by choice' – have an 'instrumental' approach to their host society and its institutions. Meanwhile, involuntary minorities – those whose minority position is a result of historic subjection after conquest or forced migration (enslavement) – have an 'oppositional' approach to their society and its institutions. The end result of these assessments was a comparative analysis that judged voluntary minorities as relatively consistent and effective academic achievers, and involuntary minorities as persistent academic failures.

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Distinguishing among kinds of minorities, and more precisely, understanding that they operated with different understandings of their circumstances, and with different culturally and historically shaped responses to their circumstances, was the centerpiece of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority responses to schooling. According to that theory, these different understandings and the responses they generate 'are not an irrational or random set of activities; they form a part of culturally organized system which evolves through generations of collective experiences in tasks designed to meet environmental demands' (1981, p. 417). Ogbu placed his ideas before a wide range of academic audiences, delivering more than 300 invited presentations and placing his work in many different scholarly outlets. Thus, his influence extended well beyond educational anthropology. Within the field of educational anthropology, his provocative work has shaped debate for decades, with many scholars aligning with or against his assessments, and working to test, incorporate, prove or disprove his overall thesis.

North American scholars who have incorporated or responded to Ogbu's work include Flores-Gonzalez (1999), Foley (1991, 1997), Gibson (1982, 1991), Hemmings (1996), Hubbard (1999), Mehan *et al.* (1996) and Perry *et al.* (2003). Foley (1991) contextualized Ogbu's work in terms of a growing body of anthropological literature that attempted to explain ethnic school failure. He went on to discuss Ogbu's work in terms of a shifting body of deficit theory literature that initially explained minority student 'failure' in terms of genetics but had moved on to culture-based explanations (1997). Meanwhile, Gibson (1982, 1991) found important areas of convergence between her observations of West Indian students and Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory. Hubbard (1999), instead of focusing on the reasons for involuntary minority failure, which was Ogbu's most persistent concern, focused on examples of minority student success. She also considered gender, thereby adding an important dimension to Ogbu's analysis. Along with Hubbard, the importance of Mehan *et al.* (1996) was that their complications of Ogbu's ideas were borne of applied research. They showed that ethnic consciousness and academic success aren't always mutually exclusive among involuntary minorities. Rather than basing their arguments solely in observation and analysis, they incorporated the results of their applied work, which included working with communities to build academic and community programs that positively impacted minority students' school success. Flores-Gonzalez (1999) and Hemmings (1996) challenged central tenets of Ogbu's thesis as they identified instances of compatibility between beliefs and behaviors among involuntary minorities on one hand, and academic success on the other. Perry's (2003) analysis challenged Ogbu's ideas about African Americans' historic responses to discrimination and domination. She showed a historic pattern of African Americans responding to discrimination and oppression with a passionate pursuit of education. The references to Ogbu's work, among these and other detractors and supporters (along with the wide range of responses to his work from psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, educational historians and others), is a testament to Ogbu's enduring importance. In the wake of Ogbu's passing, a recent writing by Hamann (forthcoming), also points to strong opinions about Ogbu's work – in

agreement or disagreement – as well as to the appropriations of his work by scholars and commentators to support a wide range of ideas about minority students.

This article

Given the wide range of uses of, and responses to, Ogbu's work over the years, this article contextualizes Ogbu's corpus of work. In a recent piece I wrote about John Ogbu's work, my goal was to identify and discuss the key tenets of the cultural-ecological theory, and to suggest some of the ways in which the theory can be enhanced in light of recent developments in anthropological theory (Foster, 2004). The current article steps back from such particulars of theory to place Ogbu's work in the context of a set of uniquely American narratives – personal narratives and ethnic narratives – that have explanatory and motivational value for different segments of the United States' population. I give an example of each of these narratives and show how they serve those who accept them. In all cases, when it comes to the power and influence of the narratives as explanatory vehicles and as motivational tools, there is a great extent to which historical accuracy or objective truth is not important. If the stories have explanatory value, and if those explanations resonate with individual or group experiences or understandings of the world, then the stories are often accepted.

Following these opening remarks, I offer a personal narrative – a story that I have pieced together over time and have told to myself over and over as I have driven myself to excel in academic arenas – first as a student, and now as a university professor. My personal narrative holds tremendous power over my life and my actions. It is an ever-present reinforcement of values that I have been taught and that I have come to cherish. It is also an implicit call to engage those practices that will help me achieve success according to the dictates of those values.

Once having offered the example of my personal narratives, I move to the crux of this article, namely an argument that Ogbu's analysis of minority student success or failure is best understood as yet another narrative. Like other narratives, the narrative Ogbu championed has explanatory value and has motivational value. His narrative has explanatory value among several educational researchers, and is consistent with an ethnic immigrant narrative that has long held motivational value among African, Asian and European immigrant students in the United States, quite possibly including John Ogbu, who came to the United States as an immigrant student himself. (I offer this possibility despite the fact that Ogbu did not seem to feel that his own status or experience as a voluntary immigrant significantly influenced his thinking (Ogbu, 1992a, p. 287)).

Areas of contention

In the body of this article, I argue that in the case of blacks in the United States, Ogbu's overall framework (whereby minority students are categorized as involuntary, voluntary or autonomous) provides a useful conceptual tool for studying minority

students' responses to schooling. However, beyond the initial usefulness of his framing categories, Ogbu's work has important limitations.

Here I'll mention five points of contention I have with Ogbu's work as it relates to circumstances in the United States. Later, I'll focus on those that are especially important to my understanding of Ogbu's work as an immigrant narrative.

1) Ogbu's theories regarding minority approaches to schooling do not account for a wide range of behaviors that are routinely manifest among large groups of African American students. This is important, as African American students are the minority group that Ogbu most often used as an example of the typical norms, values and behaviors of involuntary minorities.

2) Ogbu's understanding of African American responses to schooling includes, indeed relies upon, an analysis of African American cultural history that is selective, contestable and occasionally inaccurate. Of special note, Ogbu intellectualizes common-sense notions of African Americans that have been present among black (West Indian and African) and other immigrants to the United States throughout the 20th century. Though placed in an intellectual framework, Ogbu's cultural historical analysis is not grounded in any historical data that he presents. To the contrary, it is contradicted by a number of well-documented cultural historical analyses.

3) Ogbu's analysis of voluntary minority approaches to schooling in a host society is incomplete. While an 'instrumental approach' to a host society's institutions is an important facet of voluntary minorities' responses to schooling as Ogbu suggests, this may be only part of the picture. In my work among high-achieving African immigrant students, I have noticed a well-rehearsed folk theory, whereby as part of their effort to envision themselves as high achievers, they speak of non-immigrant minorities as maladapted and deficient (Foster, 2005). The contrast they draw between themselves and other blacks appears critical to their self-conception and to their approach to schooling. Ogbu never reports an awareness of this dimension of black voluntary minority student identity.

4) According to Ogbu's conceptualization, immigrant minorities generally enter a host institution to improve their status. However, many immigrant students come from backgrounds of wealth, status or high educational attainment in their own countries. Their entrance to such a country as the United States in order to pursue additional schooling is both a reflection of their privilege as well as a means by which their privilege becomes more deeply entrenched. Here again, this aspect of the immigrant/voluntary minority circumstance is absent from Ogbu's analysis.

5) Finally, Ogbu's work relied upon a vision of culture that lacks nuance and complexity, especially given his anthropological training. As the discipline of anthropology progressed – undergoing what Fischer (2004) calls a theoretical and methodological retooling in the 1980s and 1990s – Ogbu's analysis retained a view of culture as singular, bounded and linearly produced. This, as opposed to seeing culture as complex, dynamic, interactional and embedded in shifting contexts. To be sure, Ogbu's analysis is much more sophisticated than the writings of such commentators as McWhorter or D'Souza, but the assessment (such as is found in Shanafelt, 2004) that Ogbu's use of culture was complex and adequately accounted

for dynamic interactions among systemic, community and individual variables, is generous to a fault.

An important aspect of my analysis of Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory is that it mirrors a pre-existent black ethnic immigrant narrative that has long held motivational value for those voluntary immigrants who look with pity upon involuntary minorities and who construct involuntary minorities as the foil against which they imagine themselves as high achievers. This black ethnic immigrant narrative coincides with broader imaginings about immigrant successes and model minorities. It is also similar to some strains of the African American racial uplift tradition, whereby many elite African Americans have looked down upon, and distinguished themselves from, the supposed ignorant masses of blacks, whom they dedicated themselves to lifting up (Gaines, 1996). To commence, I offer the example of my personal narrative.

The gospel of education: an involuntary minority's narrative of racial uplift

Coming to terms with issues of minority academic achievement in the United States has always been more than a simple research interest for me. It has been a matter of personal and family concern stretching at least as far back as Cassie, an enslaved woman in Kentucky, whose red hair, freckles and white complexion did not prevent her from living as a Negro, and as the property of her white father.

As my grandmother tells the story, even in the waning days of slavery my great, great, grandmother Cassie preached the gospel of education. This in turn influenced my great grandfather who grew up to be a circuit rider preacher and eventually received his Ph.D. from Moody Bible College. The family interest in education continued with my grandmother, a Dayton, Ohio schoolteacher who sent one of her sons (my Dad) to Philips Exeter Academy in New England because she believed that the school represented the best education this country had to offer.

The extent to which my father internalized the gospel of education is most evident during my mid-teenage years, when I lived at times in subsidized housing on Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue on the wrong side of the river in Washington DC, as we traded roach-free living for my tuition to an elite prep school in Georgetown. There I studied Latin with the children of senators, ambassadors and $500-per-hour lawyers. My father subsequently removed me from that school after too many instances where I followed my white buddies into drunken after-hours excursions into the National Zoo, too many stories of kids spending their weekends and breaks in unsupervised parties where alcohol flowed freely and cocaine was the drug of distinction, too many indicators that I was taking on the trappings of white privilege without, indeed, being fully white.

My father appreciated the curricular education I was receiving, but ultimately moved me to a strict working and middle-class Catholic High School run by Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. There, the embodied values were of education and religion as the way up – in other words, the same gospel of education as embodied and preached over a century earlier by an enslaved ancestor named Cassie. We had come back to our roots.

From an academic standpoint, this narrative is noteworthy for several reasons. First, this narrative provides me with a sense of identity and serves a motivational role in my life. Second, while the content of this narrative is family-specific, its form and function is well established in the African American community (Banks, 1996). It is simply another expression of the racial uplift tradition that has been a critical aspect of the middle- and upper-class African American experience and that has been reproduced by countless African Americans as they have constructed their stories and found their way in America (Banks, 1996, Gaines, 1996). Third, and perhaps most importantly, this narrative is continually (re)constructed.

To say that the narrative I have offered is constructed is not to say that it is fabricated, for it is based upon my lived experiences and upon the experiences of my elders and ancestors. But it is myopic and selective. After all, Cassie is only one of 16 great, great grandparents. I could have gone in a completely different (but also uniquely American) direction as I constructed my personal narrative. For instance, I could have privileged my more recent immigrant heritage and told a story that would place my immediate family in the framework of the great American melting pot. According to that story, it was less than a century ago that my maternal great grandmother arrived in America from Italy with her new husband, to start a new life. She had been a member of wealthy family outside of Rome, but had fallen in love across the lines of class and status and had been forced to make a choice. She chose love, youth and possibility. She chose America. Not long after her arrival she gave birth to my grandfather, Giovanni Joseppi DaVinci Diorsey Duo, who changed his name to John Vincent Dorsey, grew up in New York as a hearty survivor of the Great Depression, and went on to be the head of a family that would include professional athletes, business owners and educators. Both stories – that of an Italian immigrant family's journey to inclusion, and that of an African American family's dedication to uplift through religion and education – are deeply American: both stories are mine; both stories are selective remembrances of the past. However, as I strive as a young scholar, it is the thought of my paternal grandmother, Thelma Moore Foster, the granddaughter of a slave, and of her pride in her family's journey from slavery into the halls of academe, that motivates me daily.

The cultural-ecological theory: a narrative of minority approaches to schooling

Just as my personal narrative provides me with a sense of identity and encourages specific conduct on my part, Ogbu's ideas represent a reification and furtherance of a voluntary immigrant ethos and narrative. Although Ogbu built upon his work over time, the overall story that emerged is remarkably consistent, with each of his periods of fieldwork producing analyses that sometimes deepened, but never challenged his initial articulations. Thus, as with my personal narrative, Ogbu's narrative of minority academic success is not difficult to succinctly articulate.

According to Ogbu, in order to understand the relative academic success or failure of minority students, it is first necessary 'to conceptually distinguish among different

kinds of minorities' (1983a, p. 168). Although his language shifted subtly, Ogbu consistently identified three kinds of minorities: autonomous; voluntary/immigrant; and castelike/involuntary/subordinate (Ogbu 1983a, pp. 169–172, 1985, p. 862, 1990a, pp. 46–47, 1991, pp. 436–437, 1992c, ch. 8 , 1995a, pp. 202–203, 1999, p. 153; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 178). Castelike minorities are 'those that have been incorporated into society more-or-less against their will and then relegated to menial status' (1983b, p. 76). They are best represented in the United States by African Americans and Native Americans. Meanwhile, immigrant minorities 'have usually entered the host society more-or-less voluntarily in order to improve their social, political and economic status' (p. 76). Finally, autonomous minorities include those who are minorities primarily in a numerical sense, and are not generally subject to subordinate status in society (p. 76).

Ogbu paid greatest attention to involuntary and voluntary minorities and, critical to his analysis, consistently contrasted them to one another. Through his contrasts, he argued the effectiveness of voluntary minority approaches to schooling and the relative ineffectiveness of involuntary minority approaches to schooling (1990b, p. 146). According to Ogbu, whereas voluntary minorities view schools 'instrumentally' – that is, as sites where they will learn and develop skills that will promote their economic advancement – involuntary minorities are said to view schools 'oppositionally' – that is as alien and hostile threats to the groups' cultural integrity (1983a, p. 181, 1983b, p. 77, 1985, pp. 864–867, 1995a, p. 197). Moreover, while both groups might be subject to discrimination by the majority population, the voluntary minorities are more likely to compare their circumstances to those of their homeland and conclude that they live with better opportunities in their new land (Ogbu, 1983a, p. 170, 1985, p. 862, 1990b, pp. 151–152, 1995a, p. 200). On the other hand, the involuntary minorities, for historical reasons, distrust the schools and do not view them as sites of opportunity. The result of these disparate views of schools and schooling is that voluntary minorities do relatively well in schools, while involuntary minorities experience persistent failure.

In his work, Ogbu also acknowledged the existence of what he would come to call 'system factors' or 'system forces' – structural features of schools and society that impede minority success (1983a, p. 174, 1985, p. 864, 2003, pp. vii–viii,45). But his primary point, over 30 years of work, was that community forces, that is the collective response of involuntary minorities to their circumstances, were more important components of minority student failure than was typically acknowledged by researchers (Ogbu, 1990c, p. 428, 1991, pp. 433–437, 1992a, p. 287, 1995a, p. 190, 2003, p. viii). Even as he attempted balance, by for instance, referring to community forces as 'the other half of the problem' (1983b, p. 77), his work leaves the clear impression that he felt that involuntary minority maladaptive responses to their circumstances were actually more than half of the problem. This becomes especially clear in his last work where, as Gibson notes, he refers to African American students' academic underachievement (otherwise referred to as 'persistent academic failure') to be due 'primarily' to their ineffective practices (Gibson, 2005; Ogbu, 2003, pp. 46,55).

Intellectualizing a folk theory

Just as Ogbu's analysis is stable over time, it is also remarkably similar to that of several black immigrant students I interacted with during my fieldwork among black students on a predominantly white university campus in the United States (Foster, 2001). It is also prevalent among non-black immigrants, including Asians and Europeans. In the course of my fieldwork, several African students expressed the opinion that as a result of African Americans' experiences, first in slavery and then facing centuries of discrimination, they have developed ineffective approaches to schooling. Moreover, they view their own study habits and work ethic as superior to what they imagine to be African Americans' poor and ineffective habits and ethic. In results of my ethnographic work (Foster, 2001; Foster, 2005), I provide several examples of this. For present purposes, I'll recall one, that of Steven, a Kenyan who explained to me that while Africans today come to America for opportunity, African Americans 'came in chains'. According to Steven, this difference in how different black people have come to America has made a tremendous difference in whether or not they were prepared to take advantage of the clear opportunities that the United States has to offer. In short, Steven felt that 'African Africans' (as he referred to recent African immigrants) were good students, while African Americans, in general, were not.

Steven's basic assessment was repeated among several high-achieving African students I spent time with. It was also prevalent among other black immigrants as well, including members of the Caribbean Students' Association. Several members of this latter group offered that part of the reason that they existed as a registered student organization was that they wanted to congregate around their heritage, but did not want to be affiliated with African American blacks, whom they viewed as poor students and a potential bad influence. In other words, they actively chose and reproduced an ethnic identity and distanced themselves from a racial one. Their attitudes were consistent with those Waters observed among Caribbean American blacks who claimed an ethnic heritage in order to distance themselves from African Americans (Waters, 1994, 1999; Kasinitz, 1992; Pierre, 2004). In general, high-achieving black immigrant students readily recited an assessment of themselves and African Americans that was wholly consistent with Ogbu's assessment. They recited a narrative of black achievement and underachievement, according to which black immigrant students are well equipped to take advantage of educational opportunities in the United States, while African American blacks are hampered by cultural practices borne of their experiences with historic discrimination. Finally, it is also worth noting that in addition to its prevalence among contemporary black immigrants to the United States, the narrative of the well-adapted voluntary minority and the maladapted involuntary minority is also historically rooted. It is noticeable among African and West Indian immigrants to the United States from at least the early 20th century.

I do not raise the striking similarities between Ogbu's analysis of involuntary minorities and those of other immigrants to the United States in order to question the validity of the narrative that Ogbu so ably championed. In my own work among

African American students, I have seen much of what Ogbu so effectively and repeatedly described. At the same time, I have also seen students whose approaches to schooling do not fit within Ogbu's analysis. My goal here it is to recognize Ogbu's work as the intellectualization and reinforcement of a preexistent narrative that is prevalent among several groups of immigrants to the United States, including black immigrants.

Use of ethnographic and historic data

Even as the narrative embodied by Ogbu's work is prevalent among several immigrant groups, it also selective, myopic and in some cases based on an inaccurate reading of African American cultural and intellectual history. A detailed analysis of the extent to which Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory adequately captures and explains African American responses to schooling is beyond the scope of this article and appears elsewhere (Foster, 2004). For now, it is worth pointing out some areas where in order to sustain the ethnic immigrant narrative, Ogbu had to selectively read his data and to ignore important facets of African American cultural and intellectual history.

First, Ogbu's analysis of minority responses to schooling appears to have been dependent upon the selective collection and unbalanced analysis of ethnographic data. During Ogbu's brief fieldwork in Shaker Heights, for instance, he documented a range of norms, attitudes and behaviors among black students, as well as significant indicators of the possibility of enduring, systemic and structural racial bias among teachers and in the school system in general. He presented several indicators from parents (Ogbu, 2003, p. 117), students (2003, pp. 112, 116–117, 237) and teachers (2003, p. 117) of the likelihood and perception of racial tracking, and of its dire cumulative consequences. However, he discounted his own data as he privileged a theory of black (African American) academic disengagement (2003, pp. 263–264), which is at heart a restatement of his ideas about the maladapted involuntary minority.

Examples of the problematic analysis of his data occur elsewhere as well, for instance, in Ogbu 1985, where he quoted from his work in Stockton, California, 15 years earlier. He provided an excerpt from an interview with the parent of a child in Headstart to show her oppositional stance to schools, and to show how her values were passed on to her son. As he focused on these aspects of the interview, he ignored its other powerful aspects, for instance, failing to appreciate (much less even engage) the parent's lucid account of what she saw as differences and disparities between Headstart and other child development programs (1985, p. 865).

> *Parent:* But you know, a lot of parents that I have talked to with kids in the head start, for instance, this lady, she says, 'Do you know what?' She says, 'They don't teach my little boy nothing'. He will go there and he will be shoutin' and runnin' and playing'.' And this is true. I feel that to upgrade a person is teach them at headstart. At headstart I think they should be learnin' them how to write their names. I think they should learn how to write their numbers, a little bit of their ABC. Do you know (that) you are in third grade (in our school) before you even say ABC. *And you can't tell me that you can read without learning your ABC.*

Ogbu: No.
Parent: And this is where I think that headstart should begin. But in the school the Whiteman's system is that the headstart is goin' to learn you how to get along together. Tell me, who gets along better than children? At the headstart I think that they should learn these children something better than goin' there and eatin' some food and layin' about on the floor and rollin' over and playin' with balls and all that crap … (In contrast) I went to a day-care center (in North Stockton, predominantly white people's part of the city) and these kids at the day-care center … weren't layin' on the floor and playin'.
Ogbu: What were they doing?
Parent: They were sittin' up there and sayin' A B C D E F G. This is what they were doing.
Son: Like I say, the Whiteman is for the Whiteman. He will teach his kids more than he will teach the black child. You know, he really don't care.
Parent: In headstart – honestly, I believe that the only thing that headstart is doin' … for the kids out in the Southside of town (predominantly minority part of the city) is givin' their parents a rest.

Ogbu made narrow use of this rich excerpt. He lead into it by arguing that the 'historical pattern of denying [involuntary minority black Americans] minorities access to good education' has resulted in their mistrust of schools (1985, p. 864), and followed it with this assessment:

> Minority parents discuss the discrepancies they perceive in the education system not only with the anthropologist but also among themselves *and* they do so in the presence of their children. Thus, children growing up knowing and/or believing that there are discrepancies and this contributes to their distrust of white people and schools. And it seems likely that children who have learned to distrust the schools and people who control the schools would have greater difficulty accepting and following school rules of behavior for achievement. (Ogbu, 1985, p. 866).

This is the extent of Ogbu's analysis, and it may be true as far as it goes. But there are several problems with this. First, since the parent provided a concrete comparison to show how the schools were inequitable (lines 13–22) and also offered that other parents had similar complaints about the lack of teaching at Headstart (lines 1–4), the excerpt does not back Ogbu's contention of one page earlier that *contemporary* mistrust in schools is based in *historical* patterns of discrimination. Rather it points to an alternative possibility – that attitudes of distrust reflect contemporary circumstances. In the excerpt, the parent's distrust was solidly informed by two sources – 1) her own observations, and 2) the experiences and opinions of other parents in her network.

Secondly, while Ogbu's narrow focus on community forces lead him to point to a socialization process whereby one generation after another is taught to distrust schools, he ignored other aspects of the data, including not only that which tells us something about the system forces at play, but more importantly for Ogbu's stated interests in community forces, how the community forces are influenced by the system forces. In the excerpt he provided, the transmission of distrust of the 'Whiteman's system' seems to be facilitated because the parent directly observed structural inequities that she felt worthy of discussion. The decision to engage such conversation

in front of her son is perhaps worthy of Ogbu's comment. One supposes that she could have sent him into another room while the anthropologist interviewed her. But it is equally likely that given the other things going in her speech, that to focus only on that is a mistake. It is also a mistake to use her speech as part of an overall argument the historic discrimination is the seat of black parents' distrust of schools. The parent does not just repeat something passed on to her. Rather her comments are a response to her clear sense of the racism her family is up against as she tries to secure an education for her child.

A final problem in Ogbu's analysis is that while he is willing to opine about the possible effects of the parents' speech upon youth – that it will result in their 'greater difficulty accepting and following school rules of behavior for achievement' – he offers no sense of why the parents would engage such speech in front of their kids. Ogbu's original cultural-ecological conception was that there is a logical reason for parents' childrearing practices. So his transcript and commentary beg the question, what might be the reason for parent's willingness to disparage the 'Whiteman's' schools in front of their kids? Describing a practice as ineffective is one thing. At the same time, the production of a robust analysis also requires exploring the possible reasons that a parent might engage that process.

The point here is not that Ogbu's analysis was wrong, but rather that it was overly narrow and selective, and that in order to demonstrate some points, he ignored additional information that was nonetheless relevant to his project. Such selective use of data effectively sustains an overarching story in Ogbu's work of how involuntary minority behaviors undermine their own educational achievement, and is analogous to the circumstances of my narrative, where I ignore 15 of 16 great, great, grandparents in order to sustain a personally fulfilling gospel of education.

Beyond instances of the unbalanced reading of contemporary data, Ogbu's analysis was also dependent upon a gross summarization and misreading of the past. This is critical, because Ogbu felt that 'what goes on inside the classroom and school is greatly affected by minority group's perceptions of and responses to schooling, and that is related to its *historical* and structural experience in the larger society' (1990b, p. 144; emphasis added). Variously put, he felt that the 'history of educational and other experiences' was critical for understanding the existence of 'persistent disproportionate school failure' among some minorities but not others (1983a, p. 168). Despite these references to the importance of history, Ogbu's analysis of African American cultural historical responses to schooling was dependent upon folkloric, selective and contested readings of black responses to discrimination. Much of his interpretation rests on the argument that as a result of the traumas of discrimination and the historic presence of a 'job ceiling' in the US workplace, blacks have adapted attitudes, norms and values that are maladaptive to contemporary circumstances and opportunities (Ogbu, 1978, 1983a, p. 174, 1983b, p. 77, 1985, p. 863, 1990a, p. 50, 1990b pp. 155–156, 1991, p. 438, 1992a, p. 289, 1995b, p. 288, 2003, pp. 146–148, 252–253). This bears basic conceptual similarities to E. Franklin Frazier's notions about African American life and culture in that both argued that African Americans developed self-defeating norms in response to life in discriminatory

America, and that African Americans were in dire straights as a result (Frazier, 1939, 1949).

As an example of how Ogbu betrays an ignorance of the cultural history of blacks in the United States, we can point to his contention that in order to experience success African Americans have avoided 'white-domains' and instead focused on areas that were not white dominated (Ogbu, 1982, p. 302; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, pp. 181–183). This characterization lacks nuance and ignores not just individual counterexamples, but modes of conduct for entire groups of African Americans throughout American history. For instance, decades ago, Henry Louis Gates ably analyzed enslaved Africans' efforts to reclaim their humanity by means of writing down their life stories in narrative form (Gates, 1987). In the case of the slave narratives, enslaved and recently freed Africans participated in the 'white domain' of literate culture so as to demonstrate their humanity and equal worth. Such engagement with dominant domains is not predicted in Ogbu's analysis of involuntary minority responses to discrimination. Nor is it acknowledged in those historic or contemporary instances where it is present.

To show how African Americans have entered non-white domains as they have avoided white domains, Ogbu offered sports. Ogbu pointed to black sports participation as an 'obvious' example of how African Americans have historically chosen non-white domains in which to excel (1982, p. 302). Whereas in the case of black literacy in historic perspective Ogbu was (apparently) unaware of this important aspect of African American cultural history, in the case of his comments regarding sports participation, from a historic perspective he is simply wrong.

A well-established literature supports the fact that *historically*, African Americans promoted black engagement in the white American sports establishment for a number of reasons, most of which had to do with the understanding of sports as domains where blacks could compete against whites on equal footing, and with the idea that sports offered an arena where African Americans could stand side by side with other (white) Americans to represent the nation in international arenas and thus prove their worth of citizenship (Carter, 1933; Miller, 1995; Harris, 1998; McRae, 2003). So when the Brown Bomber (boxer Joe Louis) or the Say Hey Kid (baseball player Willie Mays), competed successfully against whites, they stood in for all African Americans in a demonstration of Blacks' equality with Whites. Likewise, when the Brown Bomber fought the 'Nazi Stooge' Max Schmeling (who was a German but not a Nazi), and when Jesse Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and in front of Adolf Hitler, these men were seen as making statements about African Americans as patriots and contributors to the life and defense of the nation, and again, as worthy of the full rights of citizenship. Of course, these are no longer among the prominent reasons for sports participation among black youth. I agree with Hoberman's (1997) analysis that sports are a tremendous distraction to many black youth today. But today is not yesterday, and here as elsewhere Ogbu projected a contemporary circumstance into his ideas about the past.

There are other cultural historical examples where not only did African Americans enter white domains, but they did so as a response to discrimination. This also is not

adequately accounted for in Ogbu's analysis. Most important, such examples are neither isolated nor anomalous. Rather, each is part and parcel of traditions of proactive engagement with 'white domains' by blacks who knew their worth and sought to enter white domains so as to prove it. And contrary to Ogbu's analysis, many of the most effective contemporary approaches to African American student success today either implicitly or explicitly take these and other race-conscious achievement legacies into account. This notably includes high-achieving African Americans who claim responsibility to their race or racial consciousness as aspects of their academic motivation (Perry, 2003; Foster, 2005).

Surprisingly, to the extent that Ogbu acknowledged that some minorities are motivated by a sense of responsibility to others in the same group, he posited this as a characteristic of voluntary minorities that involuntary minorities would do well to learn and emulate (1992b, p. 13). Contradicting a well-established literature about how the African American racial uplift philosophy has translated into practice among educated and middle class African Americans, Ogbu claimed that '[m]embers of involuntary minorities seem to view professional success as "a ticket" to leave their community both physically and socially, to get away from those who have not "made it".' Moreover, '[t]he middle class [involuntary] minorities do not generally interpret their achievements as an indication that "their community is making it"; neither does the community interpret their achievements as an evidence of the "development" or "progress" of its members' (1992b, p. 13). These claims do not comport well with contemporary or historical realities. They are contradicted first by the reality of late 19th and early 20th century black students who spent their summers teaching blacks in rural areas of the post-reconstruction south (Du Bois, 1903). Nor do his claims fit with the reality of generations of 19th and 20th century middle-class blacks who achieved status through connecting with blacks who were less well off than themselves (Moss, 1988; Gaines, 1996; James, 1997). In fact, in all my reading of Ogbu I come close to the impression that he was somehow unaware of the notion of the talented tenth or of the sense of responsibility that came out of it for many blacks.

While Ogbu's comments about middle-class black disengagement from other blacks certainly have a common-sense ring to them, they are also not backed by contemporary data. Most notably, Patillo-McCoy's (1999) thorough demographic analysis of middle-class blacks, as well as her case study of the norms, values and residential patterns of the black middle class in the Chicago area, shows that if middle-class blacks seek to flee other blacks, than they are not succeeding as often as we might imagine. In the area she studied, she found that many middle-class blacks remained in the urban setting, either next to or among black urban poor. In short, in his off-hand comments about middle-class involuntary minority blacks, Ogbu's analysis is, as elsewhere, poorly grounded.

Over 30 years of scholarly production, Ogbu used his frame of voluntary and involuntary minorities to demonstrate the relative effectiveness of immigrant approaches to schooling and the relative ineffectiveness of involuntary approaches. While his story of maladapted African Americans is not fabricated, and evidence for it readily apparent, so are counterexamples of highly adaptive responses and educationally

advantageous behaviors among African Americans. In this respect, the fact that Ogbu's myopic, selective and negative narrative of involuntary minority maladaptive behavior has carried so much weight for so long is especially troubling. The fact that Ogbu admonished other anthropologists for failing to study successful students (1995a, p. 190) only compounds the problem.

Conclusion

As with each of the other narratives herein presented and discussed, there are important ways in which Ogbu's analysis remains useful. It tells a story that accurately describes the experiences, expectations, norms and behaviors of many African American students who have disengaged from schooling. His basic framework of thinking in terms of involuntary and voluntary minorities has been useful in my own work. At the same time, and much to his disappointment, Ogbu's work has not been as widely accepted as it has been discussed. This circumstance, however, is appropriate. Ogbu's theory of involuntary and voluntary minority responses to schooling illuminates one aspect of an important story. But his corpus of work has limitations. First, his arguments are often based upon poorly researched and folkloric readings of cultural history – in the case of African Americans this includes some ideas that are simply wrong, and others that are the subject of ongoing debate. Second, his theories offer totalizing ascriptions and fail to capture the range of responses of both voluntary as well as involuntary minority students to their circumstances.

This article, however, is not a call to reject Ogbu's analysis. Rather, my goal is to see educational researchers make more careful and appropriate use of his work – neither fully accepting, nor automatically rejecting his provocative analysis. First, we should recognize the continuing usefulness of his categorization of voluntary and involuntary minorities (but recognize them as ideal types given the fluid nature of identity, and recognizing, of course, that there may be instances where this schema may not be applicable). Second, we should see his work as explaining some aspects of different minority students' experiences, but not others, and see his work as one possible explanation of students' attitudes and behaviors in different situations. With his work thus framed, it will be useful to educational researchers for years to come.

Notes on contributor

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