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## **Deconstructing Ogbu's Acting White Thesis: An Africentric Critique**

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## **Deconstructing Ogbu's Acting White Thesis: An Africentric Critique**

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This editorial will examine and deconstruct Ogbu's thesis that African American students are resistant to engaging in "White" attitudes and behaviors that would lead to improved academic achievement. So called "White" attitudes and behaviors presumably include studying, valuing school, and caring about grades. Specifically, I will argue that the real problem lies in a pedagogy of marginalization and oppression that is predominant in schools today, and that this pedagogy dampens and circumscribes the hopes, aspirations, and motivation of African American students.

Perhaps no other scholar is as influential and controversial on matters of African American educational underachievement as John Ogbu. After all, it was John Ogbu, along with his colleague Signithia Fordham, who initially canonized the idea that the pursuit of high academic achievement is shunned by African American students because it is associated with behaviors deemed to be acting White. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described a theory whereby involuntary minorities like African Americans develop an oppositional collective and cultural identity, where authentic Blackness is perceived to be rejecting anything (including academic pursuits) that approximates White American values and behaviors.

What makes Ogbu's work so compelling that it is the subject of countless papers, articles, and academic debates? I believe that, in part, its popularity stems from its reliance on an epistemologically Eurocentric analysis. Scholars, educators, and

lay people often are easily seduced by overly simplistic catchphrases or explanations to understand complex behavioral, psychological, and cultural phenomena. While the principle of parsimony (Occam's razor) requires that minimum assumptions and the simplest explanation be chosen to explain a given phenomenon, it does not mean that surface level observations are easily reduced to surface level explanations (see Walsh, 1979, for a good discussion of Occam's razor). In other words, observing and/or recording African American students labeling a high achieving African American student as acting White does not warrant a characterization of African American academic underperformance as a response to the fear of acting White. Relatedly, recording interviews of African American students who fail to rank studying hard as a high priority does not automatically warrant a fear of acting White label. While I have had several African American students admit that at some point they were teased as children or teenagers for acting White, this phenomenon invariably was much more complicated and nuanced than simply an indictment of their academic performance. In fact, as I will argue, this acting White phenomenon has very little to do with attitudes toward academic performance proper.

### **Deficit Thinking**

In spite of his earnest attempt to challenge blaming the victim and culture of poverty deficit theorists, some would argue that Ogbu's analysis was rooted in a blaming the victim and deficit model of African American culture. To be fair to Ogbu, his work is not always fairly critiqued. Foley (2004) pointed out that Ogbu's work often is used and abused by conservative and liberal ideologues to promote their own socio-political agendas. For example, Foley said that it is not accurate to characterize

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Ogbu as a deficit thinker because Ogbu believes that the dysfunctional aspects of African American culture are adaptations to the destructive legacy of racial oppression, and not inherent cultural traits. Foley's attempt to rehabilitate and rescue this underlying premise of Ogbu's work is notable.

However, let us not be misguided. Deficit theories assume that the people in question have problems to be solved, and they draw correlations between the levels of educational achievement and the amount of motivation of the people and their culture (Claveria & Alonso, 2003). In short, deficit theories do not discriminate between notions of dysfunctional adaptations or inherent cultural traits. Whether mutable or immutable, the fundamental belief is that there is a deficiency in African American culture. Lundy (2004) argued that the belief that Black culture needs to be altered is essentially a culture-of-poverty argument. Simply put, a rose called by any other name is still a rose. Additionally, Black neoconservatives like John McWhorter cite Ogbu when making broad sweeping indictments of African American culture as having an ethos anti-intellectualism (McWhorter, 2000). Lundy characterized Ogbu as using a "sleight of hand" by being careful not to blame Black children for having deficient cognitive abilities. Instead, he simply stated that Black children have deficient values and motivations which prevent them from excelling academically.

While it may be believed that Ogbu minimized or downplayed the role of racial discrimination in African American student outcomes, Foster (2004) stated that Ogbu acknowledges the roles of both community and system forces in understanding African American responses to schooling. Ogbu, according to Foster, took the existence of racial discrimination as a given, but consciously chose to focus his attention on the role of African Americans "in their own academic failure" (p. 372). Ogbu

purported to be interested in African American agency in the context of systematic discrimination, but this claim is misleading at best, and disingenuous at worst. Ogbu did not appear to understand what African American agency really means, and makes no coherent theoretical argument about African American student agency (Foster, 2004).

### **Misunderstood or Wrong?**

Interestingly, over the years Ogbu has been defensive about his work. While the best of scientific discourse requires the ebb and flow of constant intellectual interrogations, with theorists responding to the weight of rival plausible hypotheses in light of mounting evidence and alternative interpretations, Ogbu remained relatively impervious to other legitimate interpretations of the phenomenon he labeled acting White. In his last published manuscript, Ogbu (2004) claimed that his critics misinterpreted the problem by constructing a different problem than the one he and Fordham originally discussed in their 1986 article. Ogbu (2004) claimed that his critics "...ignore the historical and community contexts of Black students' behavior and focus almost exclusively on the transactions between the students and their school" (p. 2).

One could also claim that Ogbu ignored the historical and community contexts of Black students' behavior. Specifically, it can be argued that he underestimated the importance of the racialized transactions and interactions between students and their predominantly White teachers while focusing much more on oppositional culture, parental shortcomings, and the negative influence of peer culture. However, for the sake of civil academic discourse, I will not belabor Ogbu's defensiveness of his work. Suffice it to say that while he may have legitimate concerns about

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the mischaracterization and misinterpretation of his work, it also is clear that his final contribution reads more like a "...defense of an entrenched position than objective social science research" (Charles & Torres, 2004).

In defending his work from charges of blaming the victim, Ogbu stated that his work is not politically correct (Burdman, 2003). By that presumably he meant that any analysis that locates the cause of African American students' underachievement in 1) the attitudes and behaviors of the students themselves, and 2) the lack of appropriate guidance and support from their parents will automatically be viewed as blaming the victim. Ogbu argued that by virtue of his anthropological training, he did not think that any culture or language is superior to any other culture or language. Therefore, a language such as Ebonics, which is spoken in the homes of many Black students, was not viewed by Ogbu as inferior. However, Ogbu, like many African Americans, believed that to be successful and accomplish certain goals in this country means that one has to adopt the norms of White culture. Ogbu believed that Blacks could instrumentally adopt the norms of White culture without losing their Black identity. To the extent that Black students do not adopt the norms of White culture, Ogbu believed that Black students are contributors and participants in their academic shortcomings.

In making his argument, in some ways Ogbu sounds like several prominent conservative Black cultural critics. McWhorter (2000) made some similar comments in his book *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, where he argued that the Black students he taught did not have the right attitudes and did not engage in appropriate behaviors to be academically successful. Shelby Steele (1991) made similar comments in his book *The Content of Our Character*, where he argued that an emphasis on racial victimization created a social psychology

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among Blacks that de-emphasizes individual responsibility and emphasizes entitlements based on internalized beliefs of Black inferiority. Even Bill Cosby, (who can not be characterized as politically conservative), joined the growing chorus of critical Black voices during his speech for the NAACP's 50<sup>th</sup> year commemoration of *Brown vs. Education*, by commenting on what he believes to be the poor language skills of Black youth and their failure to take their education seriously.

While the comments of McWhorter, Steele, and Cosby were not without controversy, they were privileged by the cultural and social location of each individual. In short, they have "insider status" by virtue of their African American identity. Using Ogbu's terms, they belong to a caste-like, involuntary minority.

### **Education or Schooling**

Although Ogbu was Black and African, his experience as a voluntary immigrant minority did not provide him the intellectual authority or capital to fully comprehend the inner dynamics of African American culture. While he apparently felt that not being African American afforded him a level of objectivity that may escape African American scholars and commentators, it was this phenomenological disconnection from his work that placed him squarely in the logic and reasoning of Eurocentric scholarship. Ogbu used ideas of collective identity, acting white, and the history of Black oppression to understand and explain Black student underachievement without interrogating the possibility that his observation of the rejection of so-called White attitudes and behaviors may have been part of a larger movement of African American agency that is demanding of more culturally appropriate and relevant education.

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Mwalimu Shujaa (2003) observed that the community of African-descended people in the United States makes a distinction between education and schooling. Shujaa noted that while it is often assumed that getting an education is the by-product of going to school, people of African descent understand that schooling “can both serve as well as betray their interests” (Shujaa, 2003, p. 245). Shujaa defined schooling as “a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements” while defining education as a “...means of providing for the intergenerational transmission of values, beliefs, traditions, customs, rituals and sensibilities along with the knowledge of why these things must be sustained” (p. 245). Shujaa went on to say that “Through education we learn how to determine what is in our interests, distinguish our interests from those of others, and recognize when our interests are consistent and inconsistent with those of others” (p. 246).

### **Conclusion**

Although Ogbu did not appear to really understand this, he should be credited with fighting notions of Black intellectual inferiority. Additionally, he should be recognized for drawing attention to an educational phenomenon that deserves more careful intellectual scrutiny. While Ogbu’s work can be and has been critiqued on the basis of methodological and interpretive problems, as well as a selective and perhaps self-serving reading of history, I offer additional critical observations and interpretations of his work that are informed by my knowledge, training, and orientation as an African-centered psychologist. First, Ogbu lacked a thorough understanding of how subtle racialized student-teacher interactions significantly contribute to

the collective psychology of African American students. Second, I believe that there is another interpretation for the so-called acting White phenomenon, one that involves a critical analysis regarding the purpose of education. A critical discussion of what the purpose of education should be for African Americans provides the proper context to begin to understand the nature of the attitudes and behaviors of African American students as responses to a personally and culturally irrelevant education.

The second interpretation involves concerns regarding connection to African American culture. My biggest problem with Ogbu was his myopic construction of the problem, that is, he did not try to engage or theorize this real concern of connection. To the extent that his observations of the acting White phenomenon are accurate, I believe that he failed to adequately understand that the concerns of the Black community are real. When you have prominent African American scholars like Henry Louis Gates making comments that he shares more in common with his fellow White Harvard colleagues than the average Black person on the streets, the tensions between schooling and education become clearer. The issue among African Americans primarily is not a lack of encouragement for academic achievement, although this certainly may exist amongst some African Americans. The issue also primarily is not the possession of negative cultural attitudes that deflates Black achievement, although again this may be observed on a surface level among some African Americans.

Instead, I believe that there is and always has been a fundamental concern among African Americans that the pursuit of education vis-à-vis schooling not result in an existential disconnection from our families, from our communities, and from our culture. The many interviews conducted by Ogbu and his associates revealed attitudes and behaviors among African

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American students that were contraindicative for making good grades. These attitudes and behaviors were labeled as a fear of acting White. This was an easy and frankly rather surface-level interpretation of his data.

In this second interpretation, one that requires a deeper and more informed connection to African American culture, I argue that there are social and psychological mechanisms in place in the culture, which seek to maintain the collective ties that bind. In other words, when individuals start to stray from their cultural moorings, forces within the culture will seek to, for lack of a better phrase, bring them back home. The acting white phenomenon may be a subtle way of ensuring that African Americans do not become caught up in White socialization tied to schooling. A perspective that needs to be explored is that African American students are not interested in participating in and perpetuating systems of the White status quo that result in a compromised sense of cultural connection and Black identity.

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**Kevin Cokley's** research and teaching can broadly be categorized in the area of African American psychology. His research interests include the construction of racial and ethnic identities, academic motivation, academic self-concept, and understanding the psychological and environmental factors that impact African American student achievement. Cokley is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

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