

Acting White and Oppositional Culture: Missing the Forest for the Trees

On July 7, 2004, an Illinois state senator and candidate for the U.S. Senate named Barack Obama delivered the keynote address for the Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts. He was a relatively unknown politician on the national scene, but was viewed as a rising star within the Democratic Party. He was a highly educated, Harvard-trained lawyer and former University of Chicago professor. He was also an incredible speaker. The fact that he was African American, while not explicitly focused on by the Democratic Party, was certainly noted by news organizations and media outlets. In an applause-filled, rousing speech that introduced him to the U.S. public and made him an instant political celebrity, Senator Obama made what many consider to be one of his most brilliant speeches. Among the many topics that he addressed included education. He made the following comments:

Go into any inner-city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn. . . . They know that parents have to teach, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.

In seconds, Senator Obama gave credence to, and perpetuated, the widely reported yet hotly debated notion that Black students do not try to excel in school because of the fear of being labeled as "acting white." No other characterization has received more media attention, been more damning for any group of students, and contributed more to the belief that Black students are anti-intellectual, than the so-called "acting White" phenomenon. If you type "acting white" in Google, approximately 312 million results are generated. Even the most casual observer has heard the phrase and knows that it typically refers to an attitude that is believed to be pervasive among African American students.

The discourse surrounding the so-called acting White phenomenon is part of a larger deficit narrative that is used to characterize not only African American students, but Black culture more generally. What makes these commentaries especially significant is that they are often made by certain Black academics and other high-profile Black individuals (e.g., Bill Cosby, John McWhorter, John Ogbu, Shelby Steele, and Juan Williams). It would be easy to characterize

these individuals as political conservatives; however, this is a much too simplistic and inaccurate categorization. While the journalist Juan Williams and academic Shelby Steele are self-proclaimed Black conservatives, Bill Cosby is a confirmed Democrat, and John McWhorter, who appears to be socially conservative, describes himself as a cranky liberal Democrat. The political affiliation of the anthropology scholar John Ogbu, to the best of my knowledge, was unknown or at least never made public. Political ideology does not fully explain why these criticisms of Black culture are made.

In this chapter I critically interrogate the idea of acting White along with other reductionist characterizations (i.e., oppositional culture) that have been repeatedly used to describe and characterize African American students. Specifically, I critique the work of the prominent anthropology scholars John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, whose research has been the most responsible for the narrative surrounding Black students and acting White. I also briefly review qualitative and quantitative social science evidence that both complicates and challenges the idea that the fear of acting White is what is most responsible for Black student underachievement.

DECONSTRUCTING THE ACTING WHITE THESIS: AN AFRICENTRIC CRITIQUE*

Perhaps no other scholar has been as influential and controversial on matters of African American educational underachievement as the late educational anthropologist John Ogbu. After all, it was Ogbu, along with his colleague and former student 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) describe 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. No other idea about Black student achievement has been as codified in the collective public consciousness as the idea of Black students not doing well in school because of the fear of acting White.

What makes Ogbu's work so compelling that it has been 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 laypeople are often easily seduced by overly simplistic

*Portions of this section were previously published in the online journal *Texas Education Review*. Cokley, K. (2013). Deconstructing Ogbu's acting White thesis: An Africentric critique. *Texas Education Review*, 1, 154-163.

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. 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 was invariably much more complicated and nuanced than simply an indictment of their academic performance. In fact, as I will argue, this acting White phenomenon often has very little to do with attitudes toward academic performance proper.

In spite of his earnest attempt to challenge blaming the victim and culture of poverty deficit theorists, some would argue that nonetheless, Ogbu's analysis is rooted in a blaming the victim and deficit model of African American culture. To be fair to Ogbu, his work has not always been fairly critiqued. Foley (2004) points out that Ogbu's work has often been used and abused by conservative and liberal ideologues to promote their own sociopolitical agendas. For example, Foley argues that it is not accurate to characterize 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 should be noted and is admirable. However, in this instance I think Foley is being overly generous toward Ogbu, and is being surprisingly naïve as an educational anthropologist himself. 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 to racial oppression or inherent cultural traits. Whether mutable or immutable, the fundamental belief is still that there is a deficiency in African American culture. Lundy (2003) argues 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, as we have seen, Black public intellectuals like John McWhorter have cited Ogbu when making broad sweeping indictments of African American culture as having an ethos of anti-intellectualism (McWhorter, 2000). Lundy characterizes Ogbu as using a "sleight of hand" by being careful not to blame Black children for having

deficient cognitive abilities. Instead, Ogbu simply makes a cultural analysis by stating that Black children have deficient values and motivations which prevent them from excelling academically.

While it may be believed that Ogbu minimizes or downplays the role of racial discrimination in African American student outcomes, Foster (2004) states that Ogbu acknowledges the roles of both community and system forces in understanding the African American responses to schooling. Ogbu, according to Foster, takes the existence of racial discrimination as a given, but consciously chooses to focus his attention on the role of African Americans "in their own academic failure" (p. 372). Ogbu purports 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 does not appear to understand what African American agency really means, and makes no coherent theoretical argument about African American student agency.

Interestingly, and perhaps understandably, over the years Ogbu became more 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) claims that his critics have misinterpreted the problem by constructing a different problem than the one he and Fordham originally discussed in their 1986 article. Ironically, Ogbu claims 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 make a similar statement about Ogbu, and argue that he underestimates 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.

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 had legitimate concerns about the mischaracterization and misinterpretation of his work, it is also clear that, as two reviewers noted, 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 does not think that any culture or language is superior to any other culture or language. Therefore, the language that is spoken in the homes of many Black students, Ebonics, 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 to and participants in their academic shortcomings.

In making this argument, in some ways Ogbu sounds like several prominent Black academics and cultural critics. John McWhorter, who I will discuss at length later, made some similar comments in his book *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, where he argues that Black students that he has taught have not had the right attitudes and have not engaged in the 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 has created a social psychology among Blacks that de-emphasizes individual responsibility and emphasizes entitlements based on internalized beliefs of Black inferiority. Even Bill Cosby (who, as previously mentioned, cannot be characterized as politically conservative), has joined the growing chorus of critical Black voices 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.

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. Although 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.

Mwalimu Shujaa has observed that the community of African-descended people in the United States makes a distinction between education and

schooling (Shujaa, 2003). Shujaa notes 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 defines 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." Shujaa goes 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).

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 appeared to lack 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 with which to begin to understand the nature of the attitudes and behaviors of African American students as responses to a personally and culturally irrelevant education.

My biggest problem with Ogbu was his myopic construction of the problem. 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. In the 1998 PBS documentary *The Two Nations of Black America*, prominent African American scholar Henry Louis Gates states that he shares more in common with his fellow White Harvard colleagues than with the average Black person on the streets. Africentric and other progressive African American scholars and academics see these types of sentiments as polarizing and distancing middle- and upper-class Blacks from working-class Blacks. These sentiments might also be seen as examples of the tensions between schooling and education. If the process of schooling results in Blacks becoming more socially and culturally distant from the Black community, it is no wonder that there would be mixed or negative attitudes about school. This is why Shujaa makes the distinction between schooling and education.

In my *Politics of Black Identity* class, I show the *Two Nations of Black America* documentary. Narrated by Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, the documentary explores the chasm between the upper and lower classes of Black America and offers commentary

about why the chasm exists. Toward the end of the documentary, Gates makes the comment about sharing more in common with his fellow White colleagues than the average Black person on the street. At one point during the documentary, a Black male gangbanger is being interviewed. Gates comments that this man seemed like a Martian to him. Such was the degree to which Gates could not relate to him. During the class discussion following the video, the majority of students thought that Gates came across as bourgeois and condescending. In an interesting discussion with my teaching assistant (a Nigerian American woman) after class, she astutely hypothesized that part of the reason that people had such negative reactions to Gates was because essentially he was articulating sentiments that many educated, middle-class Blacks privately share about their social and cultural distance from lower- and working-class Blacks.

The issue among African Americans is not primarily a lack of encouragement for academic achievement, although this certainly may exist amongst some African Americans. The issue is also not primarily 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 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. Another interpretation, one that requires a deeper and more informed connection to African American culture, argues that there are social and psychological mechanisms in place in the culture that 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, attempt to 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 that results from schooling. An understudied 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.

ACTING WHITE: BEYOND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

While the fear of acting White has become the de facto explanation given to explain Black student underachievement, several studies have been conducted that present a more complicated picture. In one study, Bergin and Cooks (2002) cited several studies (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998) that contradicted several aspects of the acting White thesis

(e.g., levels of school effort, value of education, academic alienation). Bergin and Cooks noted that the studies on which the acting White thesis became popularized (i.e., Fordham, 1988, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) were based on data from one predominantly Black high school in Washington, D.C. They wanted to expand on the study, so they collected data from several types of schools including private and public, predominantly White, predominantly Black, and racially mixed. They conducted a qualitative study with a sample of 38 high school students. Out of the 38 students, 28 were in a scholarship incentive program that required having a B average, and 10 were in a comparison program. The students included African Americans, Mexican Americans, and mixed-race individuals. The research questions included the following: "Did students report avoiding academic achievement in order to avoid appearing to act white?" and "Did they perceive that they had given up ethnic identity in order to do well in school?"

Bergin and Cooks reported that the students had several descriptions of acting White, which fell along the themes of speech, music, dress, school, and other behaviors. Examples of speech included talking proper, not using slang and not cursing, and using big words. Examples of dress included not wearing tennis shoes, dressing like a preppie, wearing a tie, and buttoning your shirt instead of letting your chest hang out. Examples of school included sucking up to the teachers, working up to your potential, getting good grades, and always doing your work. Examples of other behaviors included dating White girls, having lots of White friends, and acting stuck up.

Based on the responses of the students, Bergin and Cooks concluded that they did not avoid academic achievement to avoid accusations of acting White. This was evident by the students having an overall grade point average of 3.3. Additionally, the authors concluded that the students did not perceive themselves as giving up their ethnic identity. One particularly important finding was that students in predominantly White settings were less likely to be accused of acting White, while students in predominantly Black settings were more likely to be accused of acting White when their behaviors went beyond high achievement. Another important observation was that while doing well in school was often seen as an indicator of acting White, it was almost never a sufficient indicator. The students spent more time discussing other behavioral indicators of acting White than they did on simply getting good grades.

CULTURAL-ECOLOGICAL THEORY AND OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE

Ogbu's most influential scholarly contribution was introducing his cultural-ecological theory. The motivation behind the development of cultural-ecological theory was Ogbu's concern that cross-cultural research was using models based on the experiences of the White middle class as the basis of

comparison of minority groups such as urban Blacks (Ogbu, 1981). Using a universal model based on White middle-class behaviors resulted in, among other things, minority parents' teaching skills being viewed as deficient (Ogbu, 1981). At the core of cultural-ecological theory is the premise that human competencies are situated within culturally defined adult tasks. In other words, all cultures have successfully performed tasks (e.g., child-rearing techniques) in ways that produced competent adults to meet specific environmental demands. While this observation has been readily made when comparing across cultures, according to Ogbu, it had not been sufficiently acknowledged that it applies to populations within the United States. Furthermore, cultural-ecological theory requires that cultures be studied on their own terms, with no evaluations of good or bad, or deficient or not deficient, being made (Ogbu, 1981).

Applying cultural-ecological theory to Black American culture (what Ogbu refers to as the "ghetto case"), Ogbu reviewed ethnographic studies and other literature to identify six reoccurring identity themes. The themes included: (1) oppositional collective identity, (2) oppositional cultural frame of reference, and (3) strategies for coping with the burden of acting White (Ogbu & Simons, 1988). Ogbu cited several examples as evidence of oppositional culture identity throughout the history of Black Americans, including (1) the frequency with which Black authors cite Du Bois's double consciousness, (2) shifts in identity labels (Negro to Colored to Black), (3) the use of linguistic labels such as "soul," "brother," or "sister" while using negative labels to describe White men, (4) the use of other cultural and dialect frames of reference to highlight differences between Blacks and Whites (e.g., styles of walking, gesturing, and the use of Black vernacular English), and (5) the expression of disdain at emulating the White man. Ogbu along with Signithia Fordham theorized that oppositional cultural identity contributed to the lower academic achievement of Black students through the fear of being perceived as "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

The oppositional culture thesis, along with the notion of acting White, has become the *de facto* reasons used by teachers, scholars, politicians, and educational pundits to explain the causes of Black underachievement. As the beginning of the chapter illustrates, even the president of the United States perpetuates the narrative that goes along with an uncritical acceptance of these explanations. However, mounting social science research challenges the empirical support of these explanations.

DEVALUING SCHOOL OR LACK OF SKILLS?

In a comprehensive quantitative empirical study examining the oppositional culture thesis, Harris (2011) found that Black students actually value school more than White students although they do not perform as well academically. Using a series of statistical analyses, Harris did not find support for the

oppositional culture hypothesis. He argues that the reason Black kids underperform academically is not because they do not value school, but rather because they do not have the skills to be successful (Harris & Robinson, 2007). By emphasizing skills, he is not arguing that Black students do not possess the innate intelligence to be academically successful; instead, he is arguing that they have not mastered some of the basic skills in their early education that they would need in order to be successful in the classroom. His overall message is simple yet powerful: Black kids do not want to fail in school. What is particularly compelling about Harris's work and analysis is that he is not a scholar who could easily be classified as an activist, or a scholar with an obvious ideological agenda. He is a scholar who draws conclusions based on sound empirical data. And based on his careful empirical study of what is supposed to be a phenomenon of oppositional culture, he finds that the data do not support the presumed widespread prevalence of an oppositional culture.

TYPES OF OPPOSITIONALITY TO HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

In one of the most rigorous and thoughtful qualitative examinations of the acting White thesis, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) interviewed 40 Black students and 36 White students across eight middle and high schools. Students were chosen who were in rigorous courses and programs. In all but one of the schools, Black students were underrepresented in these courses and programs. Contrary to the assumptions of oppositional culture, the authors found that Black students expressed a desire to do well in school. They wanted to do well when they were in advanced classes, and they also wanted to do well in regular classes. In fact, in instances when Black students avoided the advanced classes, it was because they were concerned about their grades being lowered. The authors argued that this went against oppositional culture, because the students were so concerned about their grades that they took less challenging classes. If oppositional culture were really in effect, the students would not be taking regular classes to get As because they would not care about getting As at all. Tyson et al. (2005) found that none of the Black students interviewed at the schools exhibited an ambivalence about achievements. They also did not find widespread pressure to underachieve among Black students because of a fear of acting White. In fact, only one of the eight schools had evidence of a burden of acting White.

While Tyson et al. found very little data to support the acting White and oppositional culture hypotheses, they are careful to not categorically dismiss the existence of these attitudes. Regarding oppositional culture, they identify three distinct types of oppositionality to high achievement. First, there is a *general oppositional culture* where high-achieving students are referred to as nerds, dorks, brainiacs, and other similar terms. Second, there is a *racialized oppositional culture* that occurs among some Black students where high-achieving students are