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Adaptation to Minority Status and Impact on School Success

The perspective of this article is that of a comparative researcher rather than a practitioner. However, what I have to say has implications for practice. Three factors have shaped my perspective since I began to study minority education more than 2 decades ago. One is my lack of background in the discipline of education; I have never taken an education course. Therefore I have generally approached my anthropological research on education as I do when I study economic transition, kinship, or religion.

Second, my educational research began in a multi-ethnic community, Stockton, California, including African Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, and "White Americans." The minorities lived together in some neighborhoods and attended the same schools. Using the ethnographic method, I studied their educational experiences and perspectives at school as well as in the community (Ogbu, 1974).

My subsequent research was also comparative. One finding in the Stockton study was that in the same classrooms and in the same schools, *some* minorities did well while *other* minorities did not. In the second comparative study, I focused on the less successful minorities, both in the United States and elsewhere in Britain, India, Israel, Japan, and New Zealand (Ogbu, 1978). The third factor is the cross-cultural research of my colleagues and students.

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My own comparative research and that of my students (Kahn, 1992; Suarez-Orozco, 1987, 1989) and colleagues (Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1986) form the basis of the alternative framework presented here for understanding why some minority groups, such as African Americans, have disproportionate and persistent problems in school adjustment and academic performance. I am currently using this framework in a comparative research among African Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area in California (MEP, 1990).

The objective of this article is not to describe *all* the factors underlying the educational problems of African Americans and similar minorities. The article deals primarily with those factors—community forces—that have not usually received systematic treatment. Community forces serve to differentiate minority groups facing similar barriers in society at large and in schools; and the options created by the community forces allow choices of action that result in individual differences in schooling outcome. The article does not prescribe a solution to the problems of minority schooling; rather, it presents a framework that should help practitioners to design and implement more effective remedial and preventive programs.

The Problem

In contemporary, urban societies, education for minority groups continues to be a problem

in terms of the nature and quality of education, progress in school, and performance on achievement tests. Minority groups are often less advanced in terms of years of school completed and performance on tests of academic achievement and cognitive skills. As such, they are faced with the challenge of attaining educational parity with the dominant groups in pluralistic, urban societies. The tendency for minority children in these societies to perform poorly in comparison with the dominant groups is worldwide; it has been documented for minorities in Britain, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, the United States, and West Germany (see Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1978, 1983, 1986, 1987 for summaries).

Many competing explanations have been given for the relatively low school performance of some minority groups. However, most of these explanations focus on factors inside the school, inside the family, or on the biography/biology of the individual child. In addition, most explanations do not account for the differences in the school adjustment and academic performance *among minority groups themselves*—groups that are comparable in terms of their socioeconomic and cultural distance from the White, middle-class mainstream but which have higher or lower school performance (see Gibson, 1988; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Ogbu, 1981, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1990; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Some explanations are based on models of "cultural deprivation" (Ausubel, 1964; Bloom, Davis, & Hess, 1965; Hunt, 1969), faulty familial socialization (Deutsch & Associates, 1967; Hunt, 1964), biogenetic factors (Herrnstein, 1973; Jensen, 1969, 1980), "underclass" status (Lemann, 1991; Wilson, 1980, 1985, 1990), or on class stratification (Bourdieu, 1967, 1973; Weis, 1985; Willis, 1977). Others focus on cultural and language differences (Au, 1981; Byers & Byers, 1972; Dumont, 1972; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Jacob & Jordan, 1987; LaBelle, 1976; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Philips, 1983). However, none explains satisfactorily the reasons for either the persisting disproportionate poor school performance of *some* minority groups or the differences *among* minority groups.

From a comparative or cross-cultural perspective, it appears that the problem is not because some minority children do not receive "stimulation" or early training in the family for "appropriate" academic orientation. Children from other minority groups who do not receive such early school preparation (i.e., the kind of early training received by White middle-class children) do well in school. It is not merely that minority children attend schools that are inferior, although that is important. Research indicates, however, that lower school performance of *some* minority groups occurs in good as well as in bad or inferior schools.

The reason is not that minority children start school lacking the "cultural capital" of the White middle class, as some claim. There are academically successful minorities that are neither White nor middle class. It is not because there is no desire to succeed. Among African Americans, for instance, students and parents of all socioeconomic statuses express a strong wish to succeed academically; yet African-American children do poorly in school when compared with their White peers at *every* class level (see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Haskins, 1980; Haycock & Navarro, 1988; Jencks, 1972; Jensen, 1969; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985; Polite, 1991; Weis, 1985). Finally, it is not merely because of cultural or language differences. Some minority groups cross cultural and language boundaries, adjust well in school, and succeed academically; others do not.

I do not reject these explanations out of hand. What I am suggesting is that most of them are limited in their focus, concentrating on either the school, the family, or the individual, and that most cannot explain the differences among minority groups themselves. There are several reasons for their limitation: (a) they often take an ahistorical perspective on minority school learning problems; (b) they tend to analyze the problem of minority schooling out of context; (c) they ignore the minorities' cultural models and the effects of these models on the group's interpretations of and responses to schooling; (d) they ignore that group's cultural frame of reference and identity; and (e) they are generally non-comparative in their approaches. In order to avoid these difficulties, this article takes both a historical and a comparative perspective.

An Alternative Framework

The complex and interlocking forces that affect the social adjustment and academic performances of minority children are not limited to those of the wider society, the school, and the classroom; they also include those from the

minority communities themselves. These "community forces" are different for different minorities and they interact differently with the societal and school factors, producing different educational results. In other words, there are two sides to the problem: the *societal/school* side and the *community* side. I have dealt with the societal and school side of the problem elsewhere (Ogbu, 1974, 1978, 1989). In the present article, I focus only on the community side or "community forces" because I want to explain why some minority groups are relatively more successful in school than others even when they face similar barriers in society and school.

Community Forces

From my comparative research both in the United States and internationally, I suggest that an essential key to understanding the differences in the school adjustment and academic performance of minority groups is understanding of (a) the *cultural models* a minority group has with regard to the U.S. society and schooling, (b) the *cultural and language frame of reference* of a minority group, (c) the *degree of trust or acquiescence* the minorities have for White Americans and the societal institutions they control, and (d) the *educational strategies* that result from the above elements. These four factors are dependent in part on the group's history, its present situation, and its future expectations. They are combined in the term *community forces*.

Cultural model is used to mean peoples' understandings of their world, which guide their interpretations of events in that world and their own actions in it. (Folk theory or folk model is a comparable term.) (See Ogbu, 1974; also, Bohannan, 1957; Holland & Quinn, 1987; Holy & Stuchlik, 1981.)

Cultural/language frames of reference are either ambivalent/oppositional or non-oppositional. Non-oppositional cultural/language frames of reference are due to *primary* cultural/language differences. These are differences that existed *before* a group became a minority, such as before immigrants from China, India, or Latin American arrived in the United States.

For example, before Punjabi Indians in Valleyside, California, arrived in the United States, they spoke Punjabi, practiced Sikh, Hindu, or Moslem religion, had arranged marriages, and the males wore turbans. The Punjabis also brought to America their own way of raising chil-

dren. For example, they differ from White Americans in training children to make decisions and manage money (Gibson, 1988). The Punjabis continue to some extent these beliefs and practices in America.

Primary cultural differences result in a cultural frame of reference that is merely different, not oppositional. This frame of reference leads the bearers of primary cultural/language differences to interpret the cultural/language differences they encounter in school and workplace as *barriers to overcome* in order to achieve their goals.

Oppositional or ambivalent cultural frames of reference are due to *secondary* cultural/language differences. The latter are differences that arose *after* a group has become a minority, such as after Blacks were brought to America as slaves, or after an American Indian tribe was conquered, moved, and placed on a "reservation."

This type of cultural difference is thus the product of reactions to a contact situation, especially one that involves the subordination of one group by another. At the beginning of the contact, both the dominant group and the minority group are characterized by primary cultural differences. But subsequently, the minorities develop new cultural features and reinterpret old ones in order to cope with their subordination or oppression.

African Americans, for instance, spoke numerous African languages and practiced a variety of primary African cultural patterns at the time of their arrival in America as chattels of the dominant Whites. However, due to the subordination and oppressive conditions of the slavery period, the indigenous languages and cultural patterns eventually were mostly lost, reinterpreted, or replaced by new cultural and language forms.

These new cultural and language forms, behaviors, and meanings became the minorities' cultural frame of reference or ideal ways guiding behaviors. They became oppositional partly because the minorities were not rewarded for behaving like White Americans, were not permitted to behave like Whites, were punished for behaving like Whites, or, because under such circumstances the ideal way of behaving or cultural frame of reference symbolized their shared or collective sense of identity and self-worth.

Minorities with oppositional cultural/language frames of reference do not define cultural

or language differences they encounter in society and school as barriers to overcome, but as markers of *identity to be maintained*. For these minorities, there is "a White way" and "a minority way" of talking and behaving. These minorities feel strongly that their way of talking, walking, etc., is an expression of their group identity; and that the "White way" is an expression of White identity (Ogbu, 1991a).

Degree of trust or acquiescence in a relationship with White Americans and their institutions is important. Some minorities have experienced many episodes in their relationship with Whites that have led them to believe that Whites and the institutions they control cannot be trusted; their comparative frame of reference is the education in White suburbs and they usually conclude that they are given different and inferior education.

Educational strategies encompass the attitudes, plans, and actions minorities use or do not use in their pursuit of formal education. Educational strategies are very much influenced by the minorities' cultural models, degree of trust or acquiescence, and cultural/language frames of reference.

An essential point of these community forces—i.e., cultural models, degree of trust or acquiescence, cultural/language frames of reference, and educational strategies—is that they are group or collective phenomena. Although they may be manifested at an individual level, they are characteristic of the group *qua* group. In other words, to understand minority students' (as well as minority parents') behaviors, decisions, or attitudes toward schooling, we need to understand the cultural models, degree of trust, cultural frames of reference, and educational strategies of the minority group from which they come.

Group Differences

All minority groups face certain similar barriers in school, including inferior curriculum, denigrating treatment, and cultural and language barriers, as well as social and economic barriers in the wider society. Yet some minorities are more able than others to adjust socially and do well academically in school.

As discussed above, factors that contribute to the differences in social adjustment and academic performance are the groups' differing cultural models, degree of trust, cultural frames of

reference, and educational strategies, i.e., differing community forces. (See, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gibson, 1986, 1988; Gibson & Bhachu, 1991; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Lee, 1984; Schofield, 1982; Suarez-Orozco, 1987; Weis, 1985.) A major factor in these community forces appears to be the groups' histories and self-perceptions *vis-à-vis* the dominant group. To understand how history and self-perception shape these community forces, minority groups can be classified into the following: (a) autonomous; (b) immigrant or voluntary; and (c) non-immigrant or involuntary.

Autonomous minorities are minority groups that may be culturally or linguistically distinct but are not politically, socially, or economically subordinated to major degrees. These groups have relatively high rates of school success. White examples in the United States include Jews and Mormons; there are no non-White examples in the United States. Autonomous minorities are not discussed further in this article.

Immigrant or voluntary minorities are people who have moved more or less voluntarily to the United States because they believe that this would result in more economic well-being, better overall opportunities, and/or greater political freedom. Even though they experience subordination once here, the positive expectations they bring with them influence their perceptions of the U.S. society and schools controlled by Whites. Their children do not usually experience disproportionate and persistent problems in social adjustment and academic achievement. Examples in California are Chinese and Punjabi immigrants.

Refugees are not immigrant or voluntary minorities and are not the subject of this article. Yet I must note that there is a good deal of misunderstanding about refugees in the United States, especially Southeast Asian refugees, some of whom are doing well in school; others poorly. I have tried to explain elsewhere the distinction between refugees and immigrant minorities (Ogbu, 1991b). The point to stress here is that refugees are not synonymous with immigrants.

The third type is *non-immigrant or involuntary minorities*. Involuntary minorities are those groups that are a part of the United States society because of slavery, conquest, or colonization, rather than by choice because of expectations of a better future. They usually have no

other "homeland" to which to return if their experiences in the United States become unbearable. It is these involuntary minorities that have the most difficulties with school adjustment and academic achievement. Examples of involuntary minorities include African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiians. (For the Mexican Americans, I consider those of Southwest origins, rather than immigrants from Mexico, see Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986.)[1]

Comparative research suggests that voluntary minorities, such as Chinese, Punjabi, and South American immigrants, have cultural models, degree of trust, cultural/language frames of reference, and educational strategies that differ from those of involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Native Hawaiians.

Voluntary minorities have cultural models that lead them to accept uncritically mainstream folk theory and strategies of getting ahead in the United States and to interpret their economic hardships as temporary problems they can and will overcome through education and hard work. Additionally they tend to acquiesce in their relationship with school personnel and White authorities controlling other societal institutions. Their cultural/language frames of reference enable them to interpret cultural and language barriers in school as barriers to be overcome in order to achieve their immigration goals. Finally, these voluntary minorities do make concerted efforts to overcome the cultural and language barriers they experience in school and mainstream society.

Under these circumstances, one finds in voluntary minority communities an educational climate or orientation that strongly endorses academic success as a means of getting ahead in the United States. Equally important, one also finds culturally sanctioned high and persistence academic efforts. In these communities, social, peer, and psychological pressures not only encourage students to perform like Whites but also to surpass Whites in academic achievement.

In contrast, one finds in the communities of involuntary minorities cultural models that make them skeptical that they can get ahead merely through mainstream beliefs and strategies, even though they verbally endorse education as a means of getting ahead. Their cultural models lead them to attribute their economic and other difficulties to *institutionalized discrimination*, which, in their opinion, will not necessarily be eliminated by hard work and education alone.

Involuntary minorities tend to distrust school personnel and White people (or their minority representatives) who control other societal institutions. Their cultural/language frames of reference lead them to interpret the cultural and language differences they encounter in school as symbols of their group identity to be maintained, and to consciously and/or unconsciously avoid crossing cultural and language boundaries (see Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1982, 1985, 1991a; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Unlike voluntary minorities, involuntary minorities are the groups likely to demand or need culturally compatible curriculum, teaching and learning styles, communication style, and interactional style, rather than accept the school counterparts or, as Gibson puts it, "play by the rules" (Au, 1981; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Gibson, 1988; Philips, 1983).

Under these circumstances, one may find an educational climate or orientation in involuntary minority communities that produces a strong verbal endorsement of schooling as a means of getting ahead, yet very weak culturally sanctioned attitudes, efforts, and persistence supporting individual pursuit of school success. Indeed, the social and psychological pressures, especially among student peer groups, appear to be in large part anti-academic success oriented.

In various studies that focus on the minority groups themselves, including my current project, we have learned that it is not sufficient to take parents' and children's verbal responses to questions about educational aspirations, attitudes, and behaviors at face value. Long-term and repeated observations in the community, at home, and at school reveal wide discrepancies between verbal expressions and actual behaviors. Furthermore, what many advocates for these minorities say about their educational behaviors are often not based on actual observations and may not reflect the actual educational behaviors of the people; nor should one accept what a few successful individuals say about their own educational experiences as representative of the community pattern or norm.

Impact on School Outcomes
These differing elements of the community forces of the minority groups work in combination

with societal factors to ultimately produce educational strategies that either enhance or discourage school success. This process occurs in a step-wise fashion as follows: Initially, a minority group's understanding of its place in United States society is partially determined by its initial terms of incorporation (voluntary or involuntary) and subsequent subordination; these understandings, in turn, determine the group's cultural model of schooling. Its cultural model also determines the group members' coping responses to the U.S. society as a whole, as well as in a given locality. These coping responses, expressed in the forms of folk theories about making it, and alternative or survival strategies, tend to require and promote adaptational attitudes, skills, and role models that may or may not be compatible with the pursuit of academic success. The initial terms of incorporation and subsequent treatment also determine the degree of trust the minorities have for the schools and Whites (or their minority representatives) who control the schools.

Additionally a minority group's cultural frame of reference and collective identity may lead its members to interpret the cultural and language differences they encounter as barriers to be overcome or as markers of group identity to be maintained. Those who interpret the cultural and language differences as barriers to be overcome will usually make concerted efforts and, with appropriate assistance from the schools, acquire the standard language and behavioral norms of the school. Those who interpret these differences as identity symbols and boundary-maintaining may consciously or unconsciously perceive learning the standard English language and cultural behaviors of the school as detrimental to their language and cultural identity and make little or no effort to cross cultural and language boundaries.

Thus, these community forces (the group's cultural models and the coping responses the models generate, the degree of the group's trust in the White-controlled school systems, and its culturally sanctioned beliefs about cultural and language differences) ultimately influence how the minority students perceive and respond to schooling. The perceptions and responses affect the outcomes of their schooling.

Some minority groups succeed better than others who face similar difficulties in school and some individual members of involuntary minorities do well in school because of community forces. How do these happen? In both types of minority groups there are usually culturally patterned educational strategies from which individuals may choose. Some strategies enhance school success; some do not. One between-group difference is the percentage of strategies any given minority group has that enhance school success. Those groups with a high percentage of success-enhancing strategies have more choices that lead to success. Those groups with a lower percentage have fewer choices that lead to success.

Voluntary minorities generally have a higher proportion of strategies that enhance school success and involuntary minorities generally have a lower percentage of such strategies; however, both types of minorities do have success-enhancing strategies. Within each minority group, individuals who follow or choose success-enhancing strategies succeed, while those who follow strategies that do not enhance school success do not succeed. This begins to explain why some individuals among involuntary minorities do succeed and some do not. I have elaborated on the explanation of these within-group differences elsewhere (Ogbu, 1989).

Conclusion

Many who study literacy problems among African-American children and similar minorities focus on what goes on within the school, classroom, or family. This is probably due to the American cultural orientation of explaining educational behavior in terms of what takes place in these settings. It is also because of emphasis on remediation or improvement research, rather than research to understand the nature and scope of the problem, especially in comparative perspective. The assumption of this article is that in order to understand the disproportion and persistence of the literacy problems of African Americans and similar minorities, we must go beyond the events and situations in the school, classroom, and home. We must examine the historical and structural contexts of these events and situations in a comparative framework.

Voluntary and involuntary minorities differ not only in initial terms of incorporation into American society but also in their cultural models of what it means to be a minority, how to get ahead, and the role of education in getting ahead in the United States. They differ in the degree

to which they trust White Americans and the institutions, such as schools, that are controlled by Whites; and they differ in collective identity and cultural frame of reference for judging appropriate behavior and affirmation of group membership and solidarity.

These distinguishing beliefs and practices affect the cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that minority parents employ in preparing their children for school and minority children bring to school. The latter interact with school factors and together they influence the children's social adjustment and academic performance.

Notes

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1. We classify Mexican Americans as an involuntary minority group because they were initially incorporated by conquest: The "Anglos" conquered and annexed the Mexican territory where Chicanos were living in the southwest, acts that were completed by the Treaty of Quadalupe Hildago in 1948 (see Acuna, 1981; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Mexicans coming to the United States from Mexico are immigrants and may be properly designated as *Mexicanos* until they assume the identity or sense of peoplehood of the conquered group.

We also classify Puerto Ricans on the mainland United States as an involuntary minority group because they are more or less a "colonized group." The United States conquered or colonized Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in 1898. Both Cuba and the Philippines later gained independence; for this reason Cubans and Filipinos coming to the United States come more or less as immigrants or refugees. The status of Puerto Rico is ambiguous: It is neither a state within the U.S. policy nor an independent nation in the real sense. Many Puerto Ricans feel that their "country" is still a colony of the United States (see Ogbu, 1978, 1990).

In summary, we classify a minority group as "voluntary" if its members have chosen to come to the United States and have not been forced by White Americans to become a part of the country through conquest, slavery, or colonization. That people are "forced" to flee their country by war, famine, political upheaval, etc., is not relevant to our classification. What matters is that members of the minority group do not interpret their presence in the United States as forced on them by White Americans. The distinction between the groups usually shows up in ethnographic studies focusing on the minority groups themselves.

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