

Black American Students in an affluent suburb
John Ogbu

An extremely accessible piece of social science scholarship

This book manages to be comprehensible to a general reader while adhering to the rigorous demands of social science, that is to say, the formal structure of presenting and defending hypotheses and footnoting them endlessly. The book could have been better edited; too many errors of grammar, usage and even spelling slipped through.

I tend to trust Black commentators on American race issues. John Ogbu, like Bill Cosby, Larry Elder and Thomas Sowell, has an intellectual stature that demands he be taken seriously and an immunity to charges of racism. Another author would not have gotten away with the phrase "academic disengagement." Yet at the end of the book one realizes how appropriate that two-word appraisal is.

It is refreshing as well to read an author with an anthropologist's orientation. Ogbu's exhaustive study gave him an opportunity to repeat and reinforce earlier findings in Stockton and Oakland, California, and elsewhere and tailor findings to the Shaker Heights situation.

Blacks are, like American Indians, non-voluntary minorities. To say the least, most of their ancestors did not exactly enlist for service in the United States. The fewer and more recent voluntary black immigrants such as Colin Powell are interesting in two respects. First, their children do better in school than native born blacks. Secondly, however, subsequent generations born in the United States tend to adopt the (dysfunctional) attitudes of the native-born.

Ogbu's contention is that Blacks' profound distrust of the establishment and their conviction that they will not get a fair shake predisposes them not to give their full effort to schoolwork. Their defeatist attitudes start to emerge in the later primary years and are highly apparent by high school. Among the contributing factors are inappropriate role models -- sports and entertainment figures and various types of outlaws -- and a lack of parental involvement in the children's schooling. He describes a black expectation of a "beer mug" approach to teaching. The teacher pours knowledge into the passive student. In this model the parents' job is to get the child to school, and the blame is on the teachers if he doesn't learn. He says also that parents are more attuned to whether teachers "care" than whether they are effective teachers.

He surveys a range of attempts to find solutions in changes to the school model: vouchers, charters, merit pay and so on. None have been, by his assessment, markedly successful. His recommendation is to change the culture of the learners themselves. Reinforce positive study habits, recognize achievement, and arm the students against the inevitable attempts of their peers to drag them into mediocrity.

I amend this review to refer the reader to "Crash Course" by Chris Whittle (and my review of the same). Whittle manages charter schools for underprivileged children in Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia and elsewhere, and has quite a bit of success. He employs some of the ideas Ogbu advocates.

Ogbu did a workmanlike job of taking into consideration such factors as parental education, income and peer group values in comparing black and white students. He did so by drawing on his wealth of experience with Black students throughout America. Since his distinction between voluntary and involuntary immigrant status is central to his argument, it would have been useful to attempt to sort out those aspects of the Black educational experience that are unique within the American environment from those that characterize Black students in other national settings. The Nigerian-born Mr. Ogbu would have been uniquely well positioned to do so.