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Lessons from the Interpretation/ Misinterpretation of John Ogbu's Scholarship

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In November 2003, the Council on Anthropology and Education honored John Ogbu with the George and Louise Spindler Award, for exemplary and long-term contributions to educational anthropology. But in March 2003, a noted economist condemned Ogbu's work as serving an "oppressive function." In this paper, such contradictory instances are cited as the author recounts his encounters with Ogbu's scholarship. Disparate assessments of Ogbu's ideas and legacy raise important questions. What responsibility do educational anthropologists have for how their research is understood? Which aspects of Ogbu's legacy should we hold onto as his work is interpreted in politicized and polarized ways?

Introduction

Since the American Anthropological Association's 2002 annual meetings call for papers on imagining the future of anthropology, I have devoted explicit attention to the actual and potential roles and audiences of educational anthropology, my subdiscipline (see, for example, Hamann, 2003). Informing this consideration has been my position, since 1999, working for a federally funded regional educational laboratory (REL) affiliated with Brown University. In that position, where there is a formal charge to help schools, school districts and state departments of education turn low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities, I have frequently been the only anthropologist in interdisciplinary conversations and strategy sessions concerning school reform, educational equity and the conversion of ostensibly equity-oriented policies—such as the US Federal Government's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001—into effective practice. As the only anthropologist, I have endeavored to share what I think are the valuable in-

sights of our discipline's perspectives regarding methodology, human organization and applied work. I have also had to negotiate my colleagues' and constituents' understandings of what educational anthropology is and can be. Frequently, that understanding is informed by what they know, have heard or have read by one of the subdiscipline's most prominent and controversial figures, the late Dr John Ogbu.

What follows is an autobiographic retelling of my encounters (in person and in text) with John Ogbu, of my attempts to use or critique Ogbu's theories, and of my surprise at how he is regarded, simplified and/or dismissed outside the boundaries of educational anthropology. Ultimately, these experiences leave me wondering about how educational anthropology should view the work and legacy of Dr Ogbu. What lessons should we derive from how his ideas have been used and changed beyond the boundaries of our subdiscipline? Further, how might such lessons inform how educational anthropologists participate in interdisciplinary debates, and in the development of governmental policies related to educational equity and school responsiveness to minorities?

Learning that Ogbu matters

As a relatively new anthropologist of education (gaining my Ph.D. in 1999) who trained on the East Coast and in the Midwestern US, I had only two in-person encounters with John Ogbu. Neither of those encounters nor my more extensive engagement with his texts has made me an Ogbu disciple. Nor, however, did they leave me convinced that Ogbu was an enemy to be intellectually or, if necessary, politically countered, an attitude that I have run into with increasing frequency.

For both of those in-person encounters, I was an audience member at an event where Dr Ogbu spoke. At the first, an all-day professional development institute for educators in 1993 in Kansas City, I remember thinking that his extensive sharing of a number of research articles (e.g. Beals, 1967; Gibson, 1993; Taylor, 1988) was well intentioned yet naive. When and with what mediation, support or coordination were these teachers and administrators expected to read the 200-plus pages of journal articles that he had had photocopied and distributed? How was their review of these materials to change their practices? Still, the turn-out of more than a hundred for his workshop was a reminder of how large an audience of non-anthropologists he was reaching.

My second in-person encounter was in Philadelphia, when Dr Ogbu was a finalist for an open position at the University of Pennsylvania and I was a doctoral student there. For that presentation too, the room was full, though this time with education researchers with training in various disciplines. In this setting, Dr Ogbu faced more questions that were pointed and skeptical. Both of these experiences pre-dated my efforts to look closely at his work, but reiterated to me that if I intended to look at issues of race/ethnicity and educational attainment in the US, then I needed to consider the works of Dr Ogbu.

Like most of my generation of educational anthropologists, I suspect, the bulk of my engagement with John Ogbu was through his articles and through my attempt to

cite his work in support of my own analyses. For me, the most important of Ogbu's works was his 1987 *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (*AEQ*) article, "Variability in minority school performance: a problem in search of an explanation." That 23-page piece summarized his most important theory—the cultural ecological explanation of school failure—including his firm identification of the theory as post-cultural deficit hypothesis and his careful distinction between voluntary and involuntary minorities.

According to Ogbu, students from involuntary minority groups fared worse at school than those from voluntary minority groups because involuntary minorities had a necessarily oppositional stance in relation to the dominant culture within a society that oppressed them. Following this logic, involuntary minorities viewed school as a creation of the dominant society and, thus, as warranting oppositional skepticism. Involuntary minorities differed from voluntary minorities in that their racial/ethnic group had involuntarily come to reside within the dominant society. Thus African-Americans (descended from slaves) and Chicanos/as (descended from Latino settlers of northern Mexico who had found themselves in the US because of the border change occasioned by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) are examples of involuntary minorities. Their presence within the host society was not by their own choice nor that of their ancestors. In that article and much of his other writing, both earlier and later (e.g. Ogbu, 1974, 1978, 1983, 1992, 1994a, 2003; Ogbu & Simons, 1998), Ogbu repeated this thesis in various versions.

In that same special 1987 issue of *AEQ*, there was also an article by Dr Frederick Erickson entitled "Transformation and school success: the politics and culture of educational achievement." For me, Erickson's piece was seminal; indeed it was a major reason that I chose to pursue my doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania and to have Dr Erickson as my dissertation chair. For purposes of this paper, however, what was most important about Erickson's article was the way it reconciled Ogbu's ideas with other contemporary explanations for the disproportionate failure of students from certain backgrounds, notably the interpretations of those who emphasized that cultural and communicative differences between educators and students was the source of many students' struggles. If my two brief in-person encounters with Dr Ogbu had reiterated to me that I needed to account for his work if I wanted to examine links between race/ethnicity and educational attainment, then Erickson's 1987 essay assured me that it was possible to consider Ogbu in a nuanced rather than a "yes/no" way. This was also the message I drew from another issue of *AEQ* (Vol. 28 No. 3, 1997) which was guest edited by Margaret Gibson and that was devoted to considering the applicability and limitations of Ogbu's theories and research findings.

Thus, when it came time for me to write my dissertation (Hamann, 1999), which was an ethnographic depiction and analysis of a Georgia school district's struggles to meet the needs of a rapidly growing Mexican newcomer population, it followed that in my literature review I would consider available data and theories explaining Latino students' aggregate relative struggles in US schools (as compared with other groups). It also followed that I would follow the lead of my dissertation chair by looking at Og-

bu's work and trying to reconcile it with other extant explanations for Latino student achievement outcomes. I did that over the course of 20 pages of my dissertation's literature review, with additional references to Ogbu in my analysis.

Ogbu as a partial explanation—a precís of claims and qualifiers from Hamann (1999)

In my dissertation, I noted that Ogbu's work was part of a larger effort to explain certain groups' aggregate lower academic achievement, and that it offered a direct challenge to articulators of the communication mismatch hypothesis. Even when the notion of language mismatch is expanded to include culturally dependent ways of speaking (Gumperz, 1982a, b; Heath, 1983; Hymes, 1962), both Garcia (1996) and Erickson (1987) point out that it is still misleading singularly to blame communication gaps based on language difference or culturally distinctive ways of speaking for limited achievement by certain groups of students—essentializing this form of diversity at the expense of not recognizing any others. Singh *et al*. (1988) further problematize the identification of communication mismatches as explanations for student failure because such explanations ignore the substantial power differences that frequently undergird and maintain communication gaps and mismatches. One can adapt the original point, however, and say that communication mismatches, exacerbated and perhaps maintained by power differentials, are part of the explanation for some groups of students' poor performance at school.

Ogbu (1987), however, identified another reason why the educational relationship between instructor and student may break down. He claimed that some types of minority students internalize a caste-like, limited expectation for themselves, based on their pessimistic acknowledgment that society offers few favorable niches for them. They internalize the often self-fulfilling idea that, because society is discriminatorily structured, school offers little chance for advancement and thus merits little effort. The crux of Ogbu's (1987, p. 322) argument is the distinction between what he calls primary and secondary differences. Primary differences are those that pre-exist the minority groups' contact with the mainstream, e.g. cultural practices from the sending country. In contrast, secondary differences arise after contact in response to the contact situation, especially those contact situations involving the domination of one group by another. Secondary differences are the product of attempting to build a collective identity in the face of domination and discrimination. Secondary differences lead to what Ogbu (1987, p. 323) calls "cultural inversion." This is the tendency for members of a minority group to regard certain meanings, symbols, behaviors and events as belonging to the mainstream and thus inappropriate for members of the minority. Instead, the minority group replaces the mainstream cultural artifacts with ones of its own oppositional creation. When schools become identified as mainstream and part of the mainstream's apparatus to limit the opportunities of minority members (i.e. to discriminate), then it becomes logical for those minority members to oppose or resist school.

Before seeking ways to reconcile the arguments of the communication mismatch the-

orists with the social structure explanations of Ogbu (1987), two additional explanations for minority/newcomer student struggle deserve explication. In a comparative study of Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese immigrant students in the Netherlands, Eldering (1997) found that immigrant students' group orientation to the society as permanent versus temporary predicted school success. Using data he collected in Britain, Gillborn (1997) recorded how teachers' attitudes and expectations for students vary by race/ethnicity, in this case having higher expectations for Asian minority students than West Indian. He also corroborated that, where expectations lead, outcomes seem to follow.

Explanations for why certain groups of students more often struggle in schools are multiple and various then, ranging from structuralist to blame-the-victim, from those that consider only the classroom to those that consider classroom experience essentially inconsequential. Despite the occasional acrimony that separates the proponents of one theory from another, Erickson (1987) is on target with his claim that the balance of these theories have some explanatory merit and that a synthesis of differing explanations is possible and desirable. In this light, Ogbu's (1987) challenge to the communication mismatch theorists is important. By their logic, the greater the extent of the mismatch, the greater the predicted likelihood of school failure, but this is not what happens (at least not so neatly and straightforwardly). Students who, eyeing mainstream racism, are distrustful of the mainstream and who find identity in oppositional cultural formations are not simply misunderstanding the instructor. The quantitative accuracy of Ogbu's analysis should also not be ignored; his theory successfully predicts the observable outcome that members of caste-like minority students are comparatively less likely to do well at school.

But Ogbu is not always accurate. His theory does not explain the unexpected success of many so-called caste-like minority students (Harklau, 1994; Romo and Falbo, 1996). Nor does he look more than in passing at the micro-ethnography of classroom behavior. Despite the broad applicability of his theory, the "hows" of it remain uncomfortably obscured.

Citing the insights of Vygotsky, Erickson (1987) proposes an accord between Ogbu's largely structuralist voluntary versus caste-like minority distinction and the school failure explanations of the communication mismatch theorists. He points out first that intentional learning (i.e. learning that matches what the instructor is trying to teach) requires the trust and complicity of the student. According to Vygotsky, there are three tiers of knowledge in relation to the student: that which the student already knows (or knows how to learn), that which the student can learn with the assistance of another, and that which the student cannot learn yet (not without intermediate steps). The important one of these for instructional purposes is the second tier—learning that requires guidance. At that tier, there is a role for the instructor and a need for the instructor and student to trust each other. Erickson's synthesis turns on the insight that communication mismatch theorists, structuralists, curriculum advocates, Ogbu (1987) and so forth are all on target when they identify factors that dismantle or avert trust at the instructor/student interface.

In short, in my dissertation I asserted that Ogbu's cultural-ecological framework had some explanatory power. However, like my mentor Dr Frederick Erickson, I felt

that a more holistic theory that highlighted the disposition of teacher and learner towards each other was ultimately more satisfying. Ogbu was incomplete, but his attention to how contemporary and historic oppression affected the dispositions, actions, and school outcomes of the oppressed seemed an important area of focus.

Ogbu is dangerous and you are suspect for citing him

Although the claims just reviewed were all drawn from my dissertation, I repeated them in a new draft document that I wrote in 2001 as part of an aborted paper on student mobility that was to be part of larger research synthesis on student diversity. In turn, that student diversity work was to be a key component of a so-called Task 3 project. Task 3 refers to the promise made by each of the ten federally funded regional educational laboratories (RELs) in the US to collaborate to generate research syntheses and research-derived professional development tools, web materials and the like. At the behest of a multi-REL Task 3 coordinating group, all of the Task 3 efforts engaged by the RELs were to respond to the question of how to turn low-performing schools into high-performing learning communities.

As part of the Task 3 coordination, my supervisor appointed me to take the lead in generating text in the diversity domain, and coordinators from two other RELs appointed members of their staffs to also contribute. Knowing that some of the subdomain themes (such as best practices for English language learners) were likely to be more controversial than others and knowing that I had been given this assignment on a very tight and last-minute timetable, I opted to start my work in the summer of 2001 writing draft versions of two documents—a brief orientation to the whole domain and then a more detailed text which looked at student mobility as it related to diversity and students' school performances. Although conflating mobility and cultural identity was clearly a force fit, setting up the punch-line with Erickson's understanding of the pertinence of Vygotsky to understanding student skepticism, disengagement and failure was not. I wanted my REL colleagues to see the importance of trust for guided, zone of proximal development learning. Including my analyses of Ogbu seemed an apt way to argue my point. Naively, I thought mobility would not be controversial. Equally naively, I thought that mentioning Ogbu with the caveats noted in the previous section would not be considered problematic.

I was wrong on both counts, the latter of which matters for this paper. At a national Task 3 meeting at the end of August in 2001 at which I was not present, the draft student mobility paper was harshly criticized for reflecting a cultural deficit point of view, with the citation of Ogbu as the proof of that allegation. In the piece I used most heavily in my dissertation and the draft paper (Ogbu, 1987) and in his final book (Ogbu, 2003), Ogbu explicitly claims not to be operating from that framework. Nonetheless, it was my citing of his work that had led to that charge.

I agree with his claim. I am convinced that Ogbu's viewpoint challenges the classic cultural deficit theories articulated in the mid-1960s (e.g. Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Deutsch *et al.*, 1967; Hess & Shipman, 1965) and that have recently again be-

come vogue—e.g. Thernstrom & Thernstrom (2003)—despite the well-documented research that illustrates how this perspective is wanting (e.g. Carter, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Philips, 1982; Valentine, 1968). Similarly, I remain convinced that had I been present at the meeting where the paper was sharply criticized, I could have articulated a viable scholarly rationale for why Ogbu's work pertained and for why the viewpoint I was articulating was not an embrace of him, but also not a rejection. The important point, however, is that as I emerged from the smaller world of educational anthropology (which has spirited debates to be sure) into the world of multiple, grant dependent, educational intermediary organizations, I had my first warning that Ogbu was not just controversial; he was taboo. My supervisor, the one who was blasted at the national meeting, knew little of Ogbu's work or the scholarly critiques and reconciliations of his work, so she offered little defense of my draft, concurred with the critics, and came back from the meeting feeling as though I had set her up to be humiliated. Not long after, she pulled me off the Task 3 work.

My next disconcerting encounter with an assault on Ogbu was equally surprising, but fortunately was less personally consequential. In March 2003, I was attending an interdisciplinary conference at my home institution (Brown University) which was entitled "Race, Globalization, and the New Ethnic Studies." The conference had been convened by Dr Evelyn Hu-DeHart, who was then in her first year as Director of Brown's Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America. It was intended to jump start/revitalize a program which had operated for more than a year with an interim part-time director. The main feature of the three-day conference was a series of panel presentations, each usually including one student and two or three alumni/ae. The alumni/ae were usually academics from very different disciplinary backgrounds, albeit ones from which they had made forays into ethnic studies. The panel that included the Ogbu surprise was entitled "New Directions in Latina/o Studies." In addition to an undergraduate majoring in Modern Culture and Media, this panel included an economist and a literary scholar/cultural critic.

The African-American economist William Darity Jr. spoke first.[1] I enjoyed his presentation as he described his research looking at self-reports of race and ancestry in the 1980 and 1990 US censuses, in which a number of Hispanic respondents ignored the US cultural precedent of using the "one drop rule" (meaning if one has one drop of African ancestry then one is racially classified as Black) and instead disproportionately reported themselves as "White" or "other." The other two presentations engaged me less but I stayed on to see the question and answer segment. That is when I was surprised.

In response to a question posed by an undergraduate asking why scholars did not seem to be taking more overt activist stands "in the streets" on various troubling issues, Dr Darity first clarified that he was going to respond a little differently than he thought the questioner was expecting. He then said:

> My sense is that there's a tremendous importance to the role that we [activist scholars] play conducting what I would like to literally call "warfare in the academy." What I mean by that is that there are a wide range of theories, hypotheses, beliefs, and attitudes that are propagated by academics that serve what I would clearly see as an op-

> pressive function. [There's] a wide range of examples of this. One is this very popular hypothesis that has been advanced by John Ogbu at California Berkeley that purports to explain the racial achievement gap on the basis of the claim that black youths are fearful of peer pressure that they will be accused of acting white if they do well academically. Now this is the kind of decontextualized hypothesis that suggests that this is a universal sentiment that arises among all black youths and is traceable to an oppositional culture among African-Americans. This is a very popular hypothesis. It draws a lot of attention and it has had a significant amount of influence on public policy in education. I could go on and on with a list of these. There needs to be a presence of serious researchers who are in position to confront this.

Had I caught that right? Ogbu was the role model of a scholar playing an "oppressive function" and needed to be "confront[ed]"? If that was the case, then were scholars like me also oppressive because we attempted to engage Ogbu's ideas and to find some explanatory merit to them as well as some flaws? Drawing lessons from Darity's argument and the Task 3 incident, did I need to learn that, if I wanted to be considered beyond the arena of educational anthropology, I cited Ogbu at my peril, risking that at least some of my potential audience would then almost automatically challenge or reject what I had to say? Did it matter whether Darity's characterization of Ogbu's thesis was accurate?

Shortly after the session ended I had a chance to talk with Dr Darity as we both walked over to a reception that was part of the conference. I recount portions of that conversation in the final segment of this paper.

Well after the session ended, I got to thinking of Dr Darity's claim that Ogbu had had significant influence on public policy. I am not convinced yet of that point, but noting that the final chapter of Ogbu's final book (2003) bore the simple title "Policy Implications," I concede that at least at the end of his career this was an area of interest for Ogbu. It is also true that Ogbu was well known across academia (i.e. beyond educational anthropology). Two examples of that are his inclusion (Ogbu, 1994b, 1997) as the educational anthropologist perspective in *Children and Youth: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Walberg *et al.* (1997), and *Access to Knowledge: The Continuing Agenda for Our Nation's Schools*, edited by Goodlad & Keating (1994[1990]). So his ideas were clearly part of the larger, interdisciplinary, educational research discourse.

I had a third disconcerting encounter with Ogbu's ideas/legacy in the fall of 2003, shortly before the American Anthropological Association annual meetings at which the Council on Anthropology and Education posthumously awarded Dr Ogbu the George and Louise Spindler Award for Career Achievement. I was idly reading an article in *Education Week* (Reid, 2003) about Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom's new book *No Excuses* and was becoming increasingly agitated. I read:

> African-American and Hispanic students' cultures impede their ability to catch up academically with their Asian-American and white classmates, the authors of a new book contend. But Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom stress in *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* [2003] that those groups' cultural differences—in values, skills, and attitudes can be reshaped …With family income levels, parents' education, and children's place of residence accounting for only a third of the achievement gap, the Thernstroms argue that the influence of students' cultural attitudes is a factor that merits more spe-

> cific attention. Their book is the second this year to explore the influence of attitudes on achievement. In a study of black underachievement in Shaker Heights, Ohio, that was published in January, the late anthropologist John U. Ogbu found that black students avoided the behaviors conducive to getting good grades. (Reid, 2003, p. 5)

There was Ogbu's name again, this time being conflated with real latter-day cultural deprivation theorists, the Thernstrom's, whom the article acknowledges are both senior fellows at the conservative Manhattan Institute. Moreover, she is also on the Massachusetts state board of education and on the US Commission on Civil Rights, while he is a tenured professor of history at Harvard. While this paper is only about the Thernstrom's to the extent that mentioning them helps explain contemporary ways that Ogbu is being understood, those looking for a good critique of the cultural deficit ideology should see the citations offered earlier. As a more general critique of the Thernstrom's book, Timothy Hacsi (2004), author of *Children as Pawns: The Politics of Educational Reform* wrote in a review in the *New York Times*: "Like many who write on education, instead of letting the best research drive their argument, [the Thernstroms] cite the research that supports it."

Unlike Ogbu, whose power to shape policy was purely intellectual (i.e. depending on the dissemination and persuasiveness of his ideas), the Thernstroms have direct policy-making power. If Ogbu was like the Thernstroms, if he was a cultural deficit theorist shaping policy, then I would want to confront his ideas and not just with scholarly contestations, but also with op-ed pieces, popular book reviews for Amazon.com, and the like. But somehow, the Ogbu as cultural deprivation theorist and/or Ogbu as the enemy characterizations just do not seem to fit right. Doug Foley's (1991, p. 77) more than decade old injunction that "we must be careful not to misread [Ogbu]" seems almost wistful now.

Ogbu as starting point, provocateur or foil?

So what to make of Dr Ogbu's legacy? Was my graduate student impression correct that he is too important to ignore, or should my more recent experience suggest that it is wiser to shy away from him? Clearly, his findings and ideas remain controversial, which in and of itself makes it problematic. If citing Ogbu's ideas is a route to a knee-jerk and jarring dismissal (and that has been my experience directly and indirectly), then I and my colleagues might want to avoid citing Ogbu so that at least our ideas are considered by those who we hope will read us. But such a stance is ultimately defeatist and anti-intellectual. It is also not pragmatic. Ogbu's body of work and name are out there. Even posthumously, Ogbu's work looms large in how those beyond our subdiscipline understand educational anthropology.

But there are three more crucial reasons for wanting to hold on to Ogbu than this: his insistence (1) that disadvantaged students (as judged by outcome) nonetheless have agency, (2) that their exercise of that agency can be a scathing critique of racist and otherwise unequal society (which relocates the genesis of the problem), and (3) that righting what currently is not working is a multi-party effort and includes considering how

those for whom the system currently is not working can change their practices. It was with the first point that I began my follow-up conversation with Dr Darity. Raising a theme from Ogbu's final book—academic disengagement— though not mentioning the book directly, I asked, in a society that appears to favor certain groups and discriminate against others, why would not those from the discriminated against group be disproportionately skeptical of what is on offer and thus more difficult for teachers to win over? Why would not these individuals exhibit their skepticism or detachment through actions and inactions? I added that this does not mean all will be skeptical, nor that none will be won over to trust in and engage in the system, but that the percentages would be different for those in one category versus another.

As we walked, I mentioned Patrick McQuillan's (1998) brilliant if ultimately sad depiction in *Educational Opportunity* of high school students cutting class, seeking to distract the instructor from the intended lesson, and successfully petitioning for the reduction of homework assignments. Each of these is an example of students exercising agency in ways that are ultimately deleterious to their formal education. Other ethnographies, such as Doug Foley's *Learning Capitalist Culture* (1990) and Paul Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labor*, similarly display students acting in ways that work against the likelihood of their school success. These authors, too, identify the correlations between those who misbehave and the group memberships they are part of, including memberships identified according to race and class. None of these three books says that kids from certain backgrounds are the problem, nor that they "get what they deserve." But it does seem reasonable to acknowledge that if these students acted differently, their school experience might turn out differently. So one key issue is to figure out why this way of acting is more compelling to these students than other possible ways of acting. Ogbu goes there. He also investigates what away from school factors, what elements from the rest of these students' lives, might affect why they act as they do.

I then shared my second point with Dr Darity. I remembered a line from Frederick Erickson's seminal reconciliation: "Students in school, like other humans, learn constantly. When we say they are 'not learning' what we mean is they are not learning what school authorities, teachers, and administrators intend them to learn … Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance" (1987, pp. 343–344). Through this lens, the disproportionate school "failure" of students from certain backgrounds instead becomes a potent, activist critique of that system as not credible. That is a message that should be neither ignored, nor diluted (although the Thernstroms ignore precisely this point). However, as Willis (1977) vividly illustrates, it is also worth remembering the messengers, i.e. the students not as engaged by the academic program, are those most affected by their act of perhaps inchoate critique.

It is from this point that a pragmatic, important, if difficult line of argument emerges. How can the system be criticized for producing inequality, those dissenting from this unfairness celebrated for their skepticism, and yet their very tangible present and future circumstances not jeopardized? In other words, how can those students who fare poorly be assisted in performing better while their larger social critique and

the similar critique by those who research them is preserved? It is neither fair nor appropriate that certain types of students face longer odds, and there is more than a little that is uncomfortable about recommendations that appear to say "well they need to simply work hard anyway." But is it not the case that, if such students do not buckle down, the academic achievement gap will persist with them as the disproportionate losers? In that light, are not any recommendations with the prospect of improving the status quo welcome?

Perhaps the most important lines in Ogbu's final book come from the preface:

> There is no assumption that community forces are the only cause of, or play the most important role in, the achievement gap. However, community forces can and should be studied in their own right just as societal and school factors are studied in their own right. Furthermore, examining the contribution of community forces to the academic gap does not mean exonerating the system and blaming minorities. (2003, p. viii)

As I further develop below, I think this part of Ogbu's perspective is too often ignored or overlooked by his critics, critics who instead pay attention to Ogbu's occasional sweeping bluntness (in which Ogbu himself appears to ignore his own caveats).

> In his final chapter of policy recommendations, Ogbu (2003) is overt in naming what African-American students and parents can do differently, but he is equally overt in naming what the surrounding white community needs to do differently, how the curriculum should be adjusted, what the media needs to do differently, what teachers need to do differently, and so on. Here again, he reminds me of McQuillan (1998), although McQuillan pursues a more linear change of scale from micro to macro than does Ogbu. Ogbu and McQuillan leave intact the premise that, in their various niches within the larger educational system, students, teachers, administrators, parents and members of the larger public act, not with equal liberty, nor with matching cosmologies or understandings, but act nonetheless. If we are to understand school failure or success, and if we are to intervene in attempts to change current educational outcomes, we need to remain conscious of this human capacity to act, and of the fact that students are humans.

To rescue or safeguard the value of Ogbu's ideas, we need to acknowledge the number of ways Ogbu was too blunt and sweeping or too obtuse in some of his writing. Consider the following passage from *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*:

> One remarkable feature of all three of the approaches to bridging the academic achievement gap just reviewed [i.e. marketing approaches, cooperative learning, and culturally responsive education] is that they are not based on knowledge derived from actual study of Black Americans as a functioning component of US society. Rather, they are based on what the proponents know about the public schools and their treatment of Black students. Proponents of these approaches seem to be prescribing solutions for the low Black academic achievement almost as if they assume that Black Americans are passive victims who play no part in their poor school performance. (Ogbu, 2003, p. 273)

This quote, in a nutshell, seems to embed simultaneously what is so important and so frustrating about Ogbu's work. Just a sentence or two after sweepingly dismissing

whole domains of scholarship (and scholars) for not including empirical perspectives of black Americans (a point he certainly could be challenged on), he raises the crucial cautionary point about how it is morally and empirically wrong to overlook black students' and community members' agency, their capacity to make sense of the world and act deliberately.

Comments like this do not make Ogbu a comfortable read. Nor do they mean that on a point-by-point basis he cannot be appropriately challenged (as the long range of scholars who have viably challenged him illustrates). But as a new dawn of cultural deprivation explanations seems to be emerging, embodied by the Thernstroms (2003), I would prefer to use Ogbu to contest their ideas that some cultures have deficient orientations towards schools rather than to see his ideas as the Thernstrom's confirmation.

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Notes

1. I mention Dr Darity's race here because of a conversation I had with the guest editor of this volume, Kevin Foster, well after this incident occurred. Kevin suggested that Ogbu's characterizations are often heard with more skepticism and sensitivity by African-Americans, because African-Americans are one of the groups centrally implicated in Ogbu's theories.

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