

To Be Young, Gifted, Black, and Somewhat Foreign: The Role of Ethnicity in Black Student Achievement

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In this study, Butterfield critically examines Ogbu's cultural ecological theory (CET) on different achievement levels between voluntary and involuntary minorities by detailing the experiences of second-generation immigrant West Indians. While Ogbu has theorized that involuntary minorities have created a cultural ideology of underachievement to combat racism, Butterfield points out that West Indian immigrants, who are exposed to American opportunity ideologies but also confront similar discrimination, may navigate between their perceptions of opportunity differently. The findings from in-depth interviews with 85 2nd generation West Indian immigrants suggest that not only does social context define educational aspirations, but extensive social networks allowed immigrants to mitigate some of the negative consequences of prejudice. More specifically, in predominantly white schools, West Indians aligned with other black students to help rise above teacher tracking and stereotypes about underachievement. In predominantly black schools, however, West Indians tended to compete with other black students and were labeled "nerds," a delineation more based on motivation to achieve academically than by race necessarily. The support networks available in immigrant communities also defines what opportunities become available to the 2nd generation children and act as a coping strategy for the systematic discrimination that would otherwise be harmful. Butterfield thus shows that 2nd generation immigrants do not specifically acquiesce to racial prejudice as CET predicts, but that the contextual nature of social relations (i.e. peer groups, student/teacher interactions) affects their achievement motivations. This, in turn, suggests that attitudes towards achievement are not necessarily cultural, but are sculpted by the prevailing contextual ideologies that make achievement seem attainable in that certain social environment.

Butterfield's analysis stretches CET's applicability to show that thinking about achievement among different minority groups is anything but clearcut. Ogbu tended to attribute certain attitudes of underperformance in black students as a fault of their own--that because they are a stigmatized group, not "acting white" protected them from prejudice but also was a form of self-imposed subordination. Yet Butterfield's work is important because it shows that even though West Indians are stigmatized in the same way, their connections to the black community and perceptions of what the group as a whole can achieve changes as a function with the "whiteness" and "blackness" of the school. Blacks in a "white" context, while thoroughly aware of the stereotypes against them, could unite together and had the same goals for each other to succeed. While it's hard to make conclusions based on selected anecdotes from interviews, the perception seemed to be that these students perceived their success as their responsibility to challenge the status quo for its obvious unfairness. However, in a "black" context, the various ethnic differences seemed to arise and followed more congruently with Ogbu's theory. However, differences in achievement were not perceived as a race issue, but as a social construction of being a nerd or not--the students were not accused of acting more white or personally felt that they were being more white for focusing on academic achievement. These differentiations have

serious implications for how we understand why and when students believe their performance will be important to them or not.

Addressing the ethnic social networks that also play a part in opening up opportunities for immigrant minorities is an important addition as well because it challenges the notion that voluntary immigrants can just work hard and expect to succeed. In fact, various ethnic groups have several strategies dealing with overall prejudice, whether because of their foreign status or not, that make having a group to turn to incredibly important. Speaking to CET, it makes sense then that the commitment of the group to each other's achievement, essentially the message that is being sent about capability of overcoming oppression, is crucial to forming this ideology in the first place:

When considering how to improve achievement levels of disadvantaged minorities, the group dynamics within a classroom and school have to be specifically understood. While the stereotypes exist and are all too often acted upon, the actual belief in one's success seems hinged on having peer support and, I would think, teacher leadership to guide how children see their achievements being valued. CET is confined to addressing differences between minorities, but Butterfield's research suggests that similarities in experiences, regardless of ethnicity per se, also shapes what students believe they can achieve and how much support there is in their environment to attain those goals.