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## Why Are Black Students Lagging?

By FELICIA R. LEE

**T**he persistent academic gap between white and black students has touched off difficult and often ugly debates over the question why. Are racist stereotypes to blame? Substandard schools? Cultural attitudes?

This long-running argument may bubble up again next year with the arrival of a book that argues minority communities themselves contribute to student failure.

The book, "Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement" (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), is by John U. Ogbu, an anthropology professor at the University of California at Berkeley and a well-known figure in the field of student achievement for more than three decades. Indeed, it was Mr. Ogbu's research that popularized the phrase "acting white" in the mid-1980's to help explain why black students might disdain behaviors associated with high achievement, like speaking standard grammatical English.

Now Mr. Ogbu is back, arguing with renewed fervor that his most recent research shows that African-Americans' own cultural attitudes are a serious problem that is too often neglected.

"No matter how you reform schools, it's not going to solve the problem," he said in an interview. "There are two parts of the problem, society and schools on one hand and the black community on the other hand."

Professor Ogbu's latest conclusions are highlighted in a study of blacks in Shaker Heights, Ohio, an affluent Cleveland suburb whose school district is equally divided between blacks and whites. As in many racially integrated school districts, the black students have lagged behind whites in grade-point averages, test scores and placement in high-level classes. Professor Ogbu was invited by black parents in 1997 to examine the district's 5,000 students to figure out why.

"What amazed me is that these kids who come from homes of doctors and lawyers are not thinking like their parents; they don't know how their parents made it," Professor Ogbu said in an interview. "They are looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models, they are looking at entertainers. The parents work two jobs, three jobs, to give their children everything, but they are not guiding their children."

For example, he said that middle-class black parents in general spent no more time on homework or tracking their children's schooling than poor white parents. And he said that while black students talked in detail about what efforts were needed to get an A and about their desire to achieve, too many nonetheless failed to put forth that effort.

Those kinds of attitudes reflect a long history of adapting to oppression and stymied opportunities, said

Professor Ogbu, a Nigerian immigrant who has written that involuntary black immigrants behave like low-status minorities in other societies.

Not surprisingly, he said, the parents were disappointed when he turned the spotlight on them as well as the schools. Peggy Caldwell, a spokeswoman for the Shaker Heights City School District, said that minority families cared deeply about their children's academic achievement and the district was working with education experts to reduce the racial achievement gap. She noted that while Professor Ogbu called most of the black families in the district middle class, 10 to 12 percent live in poverty.

Also not surprisingly, many researchers take issue with some of Professor Ogbu's latest findings.

"When we asked if friends made fun of kids who do well in school, we don't find any racial difference in that," said Ronald F. Ferguson, a senior research associate at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard who analyzed a new study of 40,000 middle and high school students in 15 middle class school districts, including Shaker Heights.

Indeed, the study, which was administered by the Minority Student Achievement Network, an organization that explores ways to close the racial achievement gap, found that African-American and Latino students work as hard and care as much about school as white and Asian students do.

Mr. Ferguson said that while minorities lag behind whites in things like homework completion, it is wrong to infer that they aren't interested in school. "High achievers are more often accused of acting white than low achievers, but it's because the low achievers suspect the high achievers believe they are superior."

"It's things like talking too properly when you're in informal social settings," he continued. "It's hanging around white friends and acting like you don't want to be with your black friends. It's really about behavior patterns and not achievement."

Mr. Ferguson speculated that what Professor Ogbu saw was a clumsy attempt by black students to search for a comfortable racial identity. "What does it mean to be black?" he said. "What does it mean to be white? The community needs to help kids make sense of their own identity."

"I would agree with Ogbu that there are youth cultural patterns and behaviors that are counterproductive for academic success," he went on, mentioning socializing in class and spending too much time watching television. "But when they engage in those behaviors, they are not purposely avoiding academic success."

Other researchers have zeroed in on other culprits, whether inferior schools, lower teacher expectations, impoverished family backgrounds or some combination.

Theories of black intellectual inferiority, too, have popped up from the 1781 publication of Thomas Jefferson's "Notes on the State of Virginia" to "The Bell Curve" in 1994 and beyond. Given that sensitivity and the implications for policies like school desegregation and affirmative action, virtually every aspect of the academic gap has been examined.

Where Professor Ogbu found that some middle class blacks were clueless about their children's academic life, for example, Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina, instead concluded that such parents were often excluded from the informal networks that

white parents use for information about courses, gifted programs and testing. "I believe, based on my own research, that the center of gravity lies with the school system," she said.

Claude Steele, a Stanford University psychologist, meanwhile, has hypothesized that black students are responding to the fear of confirming lowered expectations.

And Walter R. Allen, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles, said that even when racial minorities and whites attended the same schools, they could have radically different experiences because of tracking and teacher expectations.

Professor Allen is conducting a long-term project on college access for African-American and Latino high school students in California. In his view, black students sometimes underperform because of subtle exchanges with teachers who convey the message that they find the students inferior or frightening. And, he said, minority schools still overwhelmingly lack good teachers and adequate teaching tools.

He also pointed out that comparing the income level of black and white families, as Professor Ogbu did with his Midwestern subjects, can be misleading. Black incomes might be derived from two-career families juggling several jobs compared with a single breadwinner in white households.

Professor Ogbu is no stranger to controversy. His theory of "acting white" has been the subject of intense study since he first wrote about it in the mid-80's with Signithia Fordham, then a graduate student and now a professor of anthropology at the University of Rochester. They studied an inner-city Washington high school where students listed doing well in school among the "white" behaviors they rejected, like visiting the Smithsonian and dancing to lyrics rather than a beat.

The two anthropologists theorized that a long history of discrimination helped foster what is known in sociological lingo as an oppositional peer culture. Not only were students resisting the notion that white behavior was superior to their own, but they also saw no connection between good grades and finding a job.

Many scholars who have disputed those findings rely on a continuing survey of about 17,000 nationally representative students, which is conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, an arm of the federal government. This self-reported survey shows that black students actually have more favorable attitudes than whites toward education, hard work and effort.

But that has by no means settled the debate. In the February issue of the *American Sociological Review*, for example, scholars who tackled the subject came to opposite conclusions. One article (by three scholars) said that the government data were not reliable because there was often a gap between what students say and what they do; another article by two others said they found that high-achieving black students were especially popular among their peers.

"It's difficult to determine what's going on," said Vincent J. Roscigno, a professor of sociology at Ohio State University who has studied racial differences in achievement. "I'm sort of split on Ogbu. It's hard to compare a case analysis to a nationally representative statistical analysis. I do have a hunch that rural white poor kids are doing the same thing as poor black kids. I'm tentative about saying it's race-based."

Indeed, Professor Mickelson of the University of North Carolina found that working class whites as well as middle-class blacks were more apt to believe that doing well in school compromised their

identity.

All these years later, Professor Fordham said, she fears that the acting-white idea has been distorted into blaming the victim. She said she wanted to advance the debate by looking at how race itself was a social fiction, rooted not just in skin color but also in behaviors and social status.

"Black kids don't get validation and are seen as trespassing when they exceed academic expectations," Professor Fordham said, echoing her initial research. "The kids turn on it, they sacrifice their spots in gifted and talented classes to belong to a group where they feel good."

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