Explaining black underachievement  

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WHY do certain American minorities—in particular, American blacks—for the most part do so poorly in school? John U. Ogbo, a Nigerian-born anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley, has spent more than 30 years addressing this question. He obtains his data through educational ethnography, which is to say that he speaks with students, their parents, and their teachers, and then tries to make sense of what his informants have to say.

Ogbo has explained African Americans’ educational problems in various ways over the course of his career. From the start he has argued that black students do poorly in school in part because they don’t apply themselves. But this lack of effort, he has also maintained, has to be understood as a result of the students’ “adaptation to the limited opportunity to benefit from their education.” In other words, Ogbo held that there was considerable interplay between black students’ lack of motivation, on the one hand, and their lack of opportunity in a white-dominated society, on the other.

This balanced understanding of the problem was on display in his 1986 Urban Review article, which popularized the expression “acting white” as an explanation of the poor performance of blacks in school. Reporting on his discussions with black students in a 99-percent-black high school in a poor neighborhood in Washington, D.C., Ogbo concluded that one reason for blacks’ educational failures was “a kind of cultural orientation which defines academic learning in school as ‘acting white,’ and academic success as the prerogative of white Americans.” This orientation viewed academically successful black students as turncoats of a sort, who mimicked white attitudes and behaviors and rejected authentically black ones. Nevertheless, Ogbo also maintained in this article that black educational
success was contingent upon broader social improvements. And thus at least by implication, the association of academic success with “acting white” would be less of a problem in areas populated by middle-class blacks, who had clearly already benefited from a mitigation, if not an outright elimination, of racial barriers to success.

In a sense, it is this proposition that Ogbu set out to test in his new book, Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement. The book explores black academic performance in the racially integrated, upper-middle-class Cleveland suburb Shaker Heights, which has a population of about 30,000, roughly one-third of which is black. According to the 1990 census, about a third of Shaker Heights’ black households—and about three-fifths of its white households—had incomes of $50,000 or higher. And as Ogbu notes, the Shaker Heights school system is “one of the best in the nation.”

Yet despite the excellence of the schools and the prosperity of many black families, black students in Shaker Heights schools perform notably worse than their white counterparts. One statistic cited by Ogbu points to the glaring disparity: In a recent high school graduating class, 78 percent of white students graduated with honors—that is, with a grade-point average of 3.0 or better—compared with only 2.5 percent of black students. At the request of black families who wanted to understand the reasons for black underperformance in Shaker Heights schools, Ogbu conducted an ethnographic study in 1997, which culminated in the writing of this book.

Conventional wisdom explains black underperformance as a result of what Ogbu terms “societal and school factors” such as black poverty, white racism, and a Eurocentric pedagogy thought to be inappropriate for black students. While not dismissing the importance of these factors, Ogbu believes that researchers should pay more heed to “community factors” such as “the ways minorities interpret and respond to schooling.” And he suggests that the most effective way to improve black performance in schools lies not in the radical transformation of American society but in the black community changing its own approach to education.

Ogbu begins his analysis by pointing to weaknesses in
the explanations that emphasize societal and school factors. Thus poverty cannot explain the black-white disparity (at least in Shaker Heights), since "the academic achievement of Black students from families of higher socioeconomic backgrounds and professional families was lower than that of White students from similar family backgrounds." Nor can the explanation stem from a supposed cultural difference between Afrocentric and Eurocentric learning styles, since "immigrant minority students from Africa ... in Shaker Heights were doing better than Black Americans under the same conventional public school pedagogy."

Nor, finally, is white racism likely to account for the Shaker Heights disparity. Ogbu does not deny that white (and, for that matter, black) teachers may at times expect less of black students, and may be more prone to discipline black rather than white students. But he also notes that black students themselves believe that "the attitudes and behaviors of some Black students [are] partly responsible for the teachers' low expectations" and disciplinary practices. More broadly, "by and large, Black students and their parents did not complain of cultural racism," and "most [black] high school students who were explicitly asked about teachers' grading practices said that Blacks were graded fairly."

On the other hand, Ogbu indicates that black attitudes toward education and the school system have clearly been shaped by white racism in the past. Thus, although black parents "teach their children to uphold mainstream American ideals, ... they also teach them to be cynical, skeptical, and on guard toward White people and White-controlled institutions, including the public schools, as well as toward Black authorities in the system whom they regard as White representatives." That cynicism is evident, for example, in the suspicion—accepted by nearly half of the black high school students interviewed by Ogbu—that "highly educated Blacks and successful Black professionals in White establishments and institutions gave up or abandoned their culture and racial identity."

In sum, according to Ogbu many middle-class black students in Shaker Heights, like lower-class black students in Washington, D.C., are ambivalent about academic success. Black students in Shaker Heights reported that a dominant attitude among their peers was that "it was not cool to be successful."
According to Ogbu, the tendency to eschew academic success is exacerbated by a common failure to understand the relation between academic success and future job opportunities. “Students at all levels did not make adequate connection between their academic performance and their adult futures in the labor market.” They did not understand that “a student desiring to become an engineer would start taking certain math courses at a precollege level of schooling.” Furthermore, many children of affluent and professional families believed that they would inherit their parents’ success more or less automatically.

Ogbu focuses particularly on parent-child interactions in attempting to explain the disappointing performance of black students in Shaker Heights. He reports that “some students chose rappers from Cleveland ghettos as their role models over their professional parents,” and that black professionals were admired not for “their academic and professional success” but for standing up against white oppression. On the other side of the ledger, Ogbu contends that black parents—of the middle class as well as the working class—were not involved nearly enough in their children’s education.

Ogbu repeatedly characterizes as “dismal” the level of black parental involvement in the education of their children. Economic pressures—the need for some black parents to work long hours to earn an adequate income—account for some of the problem, but in Ogbu’s view not all of it. He reports a belief of black parents that they fulfilled their educational obligation simply by living in Shaker Heights and paying hefty school taxes. Once they had done so, “it was up to the school to teach and make sure that their children learned, and it was up to their children to study and do well in school.” If Ogbu’s analysis is correct, too many black parents fail to realize that success requires not only that students show up at school, but also that parents monitor their children’s school work attentively.

Ogbu’s proposed solution to the problem of black underperformance follows logically from his analysis: The black community must take greater responsibility for the education of its children. For example, he recommends that the black community follow the lead of a number of immigrant communities by establishing after-school and weekend supplementary education programs for students, as well as programs that teach parents “how to promote
their children's education at home." Such programs, he suggests, might encourage black parents "to teach their children to believe that academic success is based on effort and personal responsibility."

Both methodologically and substantively, *Black American Students* is sure to be controversial—and has indeed already proven to be so. Ethnography is necessarily highly subjective, as anthropologists today freely admit. Ogbu obviously had to choose which responses to highlight and which to downplay or ignore. But too often the reader must accept Ogbu's word that a particular opinion or belief is common in the community. The reader is almost never told how widespread an opinion or behavior is, even though the difference between, say, 60 percent and 90 percent is surely significant.

In short, Ogbu's presentation of his research is almost completely unquantitative. We are told that a total of 28 students were interviewed, but not how many parents and teachers he spoke with. Ogbu's conclusions might carry more weight if he had supplemented his interviews with survey data. Quantitative support for his findings would be particularly welcome, since Ogbu himself reports that the Shaker Heights black community denies the validity of his construction of its views—although he disappointingly does not describe the contrasting self-understanding of the black community.

If Ogbu's methodology raises questions, his substantive findings are sure to raise hackles. Those on the left will reject his findings, seeing in them yet another instance of blaming the victim. And they will reject his solutions as amounting to no more than "self-help," a view that is anathema to those who believe that white racism and other social barriers render blacks incapable of achieving much on their own. But to some extent, Ogbu's book will also be unwelcome on the right, because he is openly skeptical of the utility of an educational solution favored by many conservatives: school choice. Ogbu is dubious about school choice because he believes that its proponents magnify the importance of societal and institutional factors while downplaying the importance of community factors. Many advocates of choice maintain that minority parents want their children to succeed in school, but that unresponsive and monopolistic public school systems stand in their way.
But if Ogbu is correct about the failings of black parents, this argument is undermined.

So Ogbu's book can be expected to draw fire from both the Left and the Right. Unfortunately, the impressionistic nature of the evidence that Ogbu presents may make it too easy for the book's critics to dismiss its substantive conclusions. *Black American Students* is certainly an important book; if it told us more about the proportions of black students and parents who manifest the attitudes and behaviors that Ogbu attributes to them, it would also be a more convincing book.