Minority status and schooling—John U. Ogbu’s theory and the schooling of ethnic minorities in Europe

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This paper discusses the relevance of John U. Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory regarding the variability in educational performance of different ethnic minority groups against the background of comparative data on the schooling of ethnic minorities in Europe. Aside from cultural differences and institutional barriers, it addresses the impact of minority group status and community forces on educational achievement. The author calls for more comparative ethnographic research in European countries in order to generate a better understanding of the similarities and differences in educational experiences between various ethnic groups.

Introduction

Most of John U. Ogbu’s academic work focused on the schooling of ethnic minorities within the American context. However, owing to his interest in global comparative research, on various occasions he expressed a strong desire to further expand his research to the schooling of minorities in Europe. Ogbu was disappointed by the fact that, in his view, many European researchers attribute low educational attainment of different ethnic groups predominantly to social class factors and underestimate the relevance of minority status.

This paper concentrates on the question of how Ogbu’s theory can be applied within the European context. His typology of autonomous, immigrant, and caste-like minorities, his concepts of primary and secondary cultural differences, as well as his views regarding the importance of a group’s cultural frame of reference and community forces for educational outcomes will be examined in light of existing data on the schooling of ethnic minority groups in the EU Member States. Furthermore, the paper highlights the need for comparative ethnographic research in European countries to
generate an in-depth understanding of the similarities and differences regarding the educational experiences of different ethnic groups.

**Ogbu’s theory on the variability in educational attainment**

In his research, Ogbu devoted much of his time towards understanding the variability in educational performance among different ethnic minority groups. The fact that some minority groups achieve less academically led him to distinguish between different types of minority groups. Thus, one of his major contributions to the field has been his typology of *autonomous, immigrant and caste-like* minorities. In the US, *autonomous minorities* (e.g. Amish, Jews or Mormons) possess a specific ethnic, linguistic, religious or cultural identity. They are minorities primarily in a numerical sense. While they might be victims of prejudice, they are, in Ogbu’s view, not ‘subordinated’ in the social, economic or political system (cf. Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986, p. 87). *Immigrant minorities*, mostly from European and Asian countries, have more or less voluntarily become part of US society. They acculturate in an additive process (accommodation without assimilation) by overcoming language differences and differences between their cultural systems and that of the dominant host society. Over time, these primary cultural differences and even experiences of discrimination do not prevent their efforts to integrate into mainstream society. Cast-like minorities (e.g. African Americans, Native Americans or early Mexican-Americans in the southwest), however, were brought into the US society involuntarily, for instance through slavery or colonization. Suffering from prolonged discrimination by the dominant society, these groups have developed secondary cultural differences and an oppositional cultural frame of reference. Cultural and language differences between minority group members and the dominant society arose after groups became an involuntary minority. For many group members, these differences are regarded as markers of identity to be maintained. (cf. Gibson & Ogbu, 1991, p. 26). Certain forms of behavior, symbols and meanings that are characteristic of the dominant group are seen as being inappropriate or undesirable. This tendency, which Ogbu calls cultural inversion, compels minority members to choose between conforming to their own group’s model of behavior or the model of the dominant group (cf. Ogbu, 1986, p.44).

While autonomous minorities and voluntary minorities (after a period of transition in which they have to overcome language and cultural barriers) for the most part achieve similar or even better academic results compared with the majority, involuntary minorities, in general, have little academic success. Ogbu’s differentiation of types of minorities allows for a better understanding of how historical, structural and cultural factors influence a minority’s perceptions of the dominant society and of institutionalized education, but also how they affect the ability to cross cultural boundaries. While immigrants cross cultural boundaries more easily, involuntary minorities with an oppositional cultural frame of reference, in general, experience great difficulties in crossing boundaries, which has a negative impact on their schooling (cf. Ogbu, 1995, pp. 197–200).
At first glance, Ogbu’s broad generalizations do not take full account of within-group differences. However, one should not allege that Ogbu was not aware of these differences and the complexity of the situation. Instead, with these generalizations he attempted to get his point across that variability in educational performance between different types of minority groups can only be explained if one recognizes the relevance of various factors: the prevailing circumstances, how groups come into contact with the majority culture, how minority groups are treated by the majority, and how this influences the cultural frame of reference that guides the behavior of minority group members.

Other types of minorities, such as refugees, migrant laborers or so-called ‘guest’ workers are, in Ogbu’s view, not typical immigrant or voluntary minorities. In discussions with the author, Ogbu argued that refugees do not choose freely to come to their new host country, but still often adopt attitudes and behaviors similar to those of immigrant minorities, which eventually foster the attainment of educational success. Migrant laborers might only adopt as much of their host countries’ language and culture as necessary to achieve temporary goals. This, however, may change if they settle more permanently in the country and thus become immigrants.

Educational achievement of migrants and ethnic minority groups in Europe

Two recent reports on the educational situation of migrants and ethnic minority groups in the EU Member States and Candidate Countries (Luciak, 2003; Luciak & Binder, 2004) show a lack of qualitative research in this area. Even a quantitative comparative analysis on the educational achievement of minorities is rather difficult to conduct, given the varying availability of official data on this topic in European countries. Some countries collect data on the completion of different school types or have test procedures as a direct measure of achievement. In many countries, these data are lacking, and an assessment of the educational attainment of ethnic minority groups can only be inferred indirectly, for example by looking at enrolment data in different types of schools. In addition, the countries use different terms and categories for collecting data on migrants and ethnic minorities in the area of education. Many countries collect data based on students’ citizenship or nationality and thus only distinguish between the majority and immigrant minorities. Some countries collect data on students’ native language or foreign background independent of citizenship and therefore also take account of minority groups that have lived in the country for longer periods of time. Data on the educational performance of minority groups, by which groups are being distinguished according to ethnicity, are the exception. Collecting data according to restricted categories has the result that, depending on the categorization, various groups ‘disappear’ from the statistics (i.e. naturalized citizens or specific ethnic groups).

There are different types of ethnic minority groups in the European countries:

- indigenous groups (e.g. the Sámi in Finland and Sweden or the Travellers in Ireland);
national, autochthonous or linguistic minorities who have lived in the respective countries or specific territories for centuries (e.g. Roma, who live in many countries, the Muslim minority in Greece, the Swedish minority in Finland, the Finnish minority in Sweden);

● ethnic minorities from former colonies (e.g. minority groups from North African countries in France or from Asian countries in the UK and the Netherlands);

● labor migrants and their descendants (the majority migrated within Europe in the second half of last century);

● refugees and asylum-seekers (from various countries depending on regional conflicts and political turmoil);

● repatriated groups or returned migrants (in countries of former emigration, e.g. Greece or Portugal);

● ‘new’ minorities (Russians in the Baltic States, once part of the former Soviet Union).

Depending on differential historical and sociopolitical circumstances, the same ethnic group might have a varying legal status and privileges in different countries. To name a few examples, Roma are a recognized national minority in some countries (e.g. Austria, Sweden) but regarded as an ethnic minority with varying status in others. Jews are a national minority in Sweden but seen as a religious or language minority without official recognition in other countries. Basques have special language, cultural and educational rights in Spain but less so in France. In addition, within the same ethnic group, there are at times subgroups with different status. For instance, in Austria, Roma might be members of the recognized national minority group or belong to recent migrants from bordering countries.

Despite the lack of sufficient and differentiated data regarding the educational success and failure of ethnic minorities in many European countries, it still can be assessed that not all minority groups achieve similar results. Various minority groups tend to attain low educational credentials, finish schooling earlier and have high dropout rates compared with the majority. For example, in many countries, Roma minority members achieve low educational results. The same is true for Travellers in Ireland, the Muslim minority in Greece, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, students with African and West Indian ethnic backgrounds and those with Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds in England, as well as diverse groups of labour migrants and their descendants in many Western European countries. However, some minority groups obtain above-average results or even outperform majority students at certain educational levels. This applies, for example, to students with Indian and Chinese backgrounds in the UK or to the Hungarian minority in Romania.

The relevance of Ogbu’s theory for understanding the educational situation of ethnic minority groups in European countries

Given the complexities and dynamics of the diverse historical and sociocultural developments, as well as the large differences regarding the ethnic composition of various
countries, it is a rather difficult task to adapt Ogbu’s theory to the European context. Most countries have ‘situated’ ethnic and language minorities of different group sizes who have lived there for a long period of time. However, some countries’ ethnic diversity is mostly due to immigrants from former colonies or the recruitment of so-called ‘guest-workers’ in the second half of the last century, while others have experienced more recent immigration. For the most part, European countries have not considered themselves to be ‘settler societies’ like the US, Canada and Australia, a fact that influences the dominant groups’ perception and acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity. Immigrants are often regarded as ‘foreigners’ who do not become fully accepted members of society as easily. This is a key issue.

Looking at Ogbu’s typology, one might regard Jews in European countries, independent of their legal status, as ‘autonomous minorities’. This is due to the fact that today most of them are largely assimilated but still possess a specific cultural identity. There are few official data on their educational attainment. However, the lack of reports on school failure among Jews indicates that they generally fare well in the educational system. Various immigrant groups in European countries do fit into Ogbu’s category of voluntary minorities. However, significant differences exist regarding their educational attainment. For example, research data from England shows that students with Indian or Chinese backgrounds perform much better than Bangladeshi, Pakistani or black Caribbean pupils (cf. Department for Education and Skills). As discussed above, migrant laborers are not typical immigrant minorities, but still many of them settled permanently in European countries in recent decades. Research studies show that descendants of migrant laborers who stayed in the reception countries frequently do less well in school compared with the majority society (cf. Herzog-Punzenberger, 2003, p. 24f.). It remains to be seen whether these groups will bridge the gap over time and whether they will become fully accepted members of society. Asylum-seekers and refugees are also not typical immigrants. In general, very few data exist regarding their educational performance, but differences between groups of refugees with varying background can be alleged.2

While various minority groups have suffered discrimination across Europe for long periods of time or have been hindered in developing cultural autonomy, none of them adequately fits Ogbu’s category of cast-like minorities. Still, there are similarities between Ogbu’s description of the educational situation of cast-like minorities and that of some ethnic minority groups in Europe. This is particularly true for the Roma, who constitute the largest minority group in Europe. While the Roma have not been colonized or brought as slaves to the European countries, they were enslaved in Romania for centuries (cf. Hancock, 1987), suffered from persecution in many countries and were victims of the Holocaust. Roma often face discrimination, including segregation in schooling which, in some countries, continues until today. Their lack of educational achievement can only be understood by looking at historical developments and their relationship with majority societies.

Research studies and academic literature on the schooling of ethnic minorities in Europe often focus on minority groups’ low academic achievements rather than on the variability in educational performance among different groups. As Ogbu has
argued, research that is not comparative and disregards minorities who are successful in education is more likely to lead to misleading conclusions. Educational failure is more easily attributed to cultural differences or cultural incompatibility, despite the fact that some minority groups whose culture and language greatly differ from the majority achieve good educational results. (cf. Ogbu, 1995, p. 190).

A variety of factors have been identified that hinder the academic achievement of certain minority groups in European countries. In the ‘old’ Member States, most of the discussion focuses on the schooling of immigrants and migrant laborers. Frequently, primary language and cultural differences, as well as social class background (i.e. low socioeconomic status, inferior employment and living circumstances, parents’ lower educational level and distinct social class cultural values) are regarded as the most decisive factors in explaining why these groups often attain lower educational levels compared with the majority. Institutional factors, which influence the schooling of migrants, have also been considered. Thus, it has been argued that educational institutions do not always react adequately to the increasing diversity of its student body by offering good-quality supplementary school programs (reception programs, native language and second language programs) or integrative measures.

The educational situation of other minority groups, such as national minorities and indigenous groups in European countries has received attention from policymakers but has not been well researched. While these groups have lived in their reception countries for centuries and frequently benefit from different types of minority schooling and special language rights, some of them still do not achieve good educational results. The low academic performance of groups such as the Roma, the Irish Travellers, or the Muslim minority in Greece is often explained by referring to a culture that is not conducive to education, i.e. the groups’ inability or unwillingness to adapt to the demands of the educational system, or a culture of poverty due to their marginalized position in society.

The situation in the ‘new’ Member States differs. The population of more recent immigrants in most of these countries is rather small, but there are a variety of different ethnic minority groups, the Roma being the largest. The underachievement of the Roma minority in educational institutions is also often attributed to their socially precarious situation, which is seen as an impediment for learning in schools as well as family values often said to disregard the importance of schooling. However, factors such as discrimination by teachers and peers, as well as institutional discrimination such as segregation in schooling are also considered to influence their educational success negatively.

Ogbu challenges common interpretations that attribute ethnic minority educational failure of all types to primary cultural and language differences, social class factors (i.e. a culture of poverty) or institutional barriers (e.g. inadequate curricula and lack of support programs). He stresses the point that minority group status and community forces may have a great impact on the schooling of minority members. The motivation to achieve in schools is affected by cultural perceptions of what it takes to make it in society and by beliefs relating to whether acting like the majority
Minority status and schooling

Another important consideration is whether integration into the majority culture is believed to actually lead to advancement rather than to barriers, such as unequal chances in employment (i.e. a job ceiling). If during prolonged contact with a dominant culture inequalities continue to persist, secondary cultural differences, a culture of resistance and a groups’ collective understanding that education is not the decisive factor to make it in society may emerge (cf. Gibson & Ogbu, 1991, pp. 3–33).

Thus, we learn from Ogbu that different types of minority groups face their own set of difficulties. Therefore, aggregate statistical data on the school performance of minority groups which point to a correlation between attainment, on the one hand, and language and cultural competence or class indicators, on the other, only partially explain why some minority groups achieve low results. For immigrant groups, language and cultural barriers might indeed be the largest obstacle to overcome in order to be successful in schools. But the variability in educational performance between different immigrant groups can be due to many factors, such as time of stay in the country, reasons for coming to the country, socioeconomic differences, but also the groups’ societal status in the receiving country and its treatment by members of the dominant group. In addition, the situation of migrant workers or asylum-seekers might be complicated by the uncertainties of whether they have the right or the intention to stay in the country. Supportive educational measures can foster the integration process of immigrants and strengthen their belief that education offers a way to get ahead in society. However, if schools do not provide them with adequate learning opportunities, or if they experience unequal treatment on the job market as well, or if they experience discrimination for longer periods of time, their investment in education might decrease.

The educational situation of non-immigrant minority groups greatly depends on their historic inter-relationship with the dominant group. While some non-immigrant groups in the diverse European contexts do quite well in education, others experience great difficulties. In particular, groups that have experienced a history of social exclusion, discrimination and forceful assimilation are more likely to distrust the educational system. They are also more likely to have low expectations regarding the benefits of educational attainment. Members of subordinated groups are also more prone to resist schooling. Frequently, their underachievement is explained by referring to cultural values that are not conducive to learning in school, while resistance to schooling is often seen as a reaction by group members to their inferior position in society, similar to a phenomenon that has been observed in connection with the schooling of students from the white working class. However, perceptions of schooling among white working-class and non-immigrant minority students vary in response to different structural constraints, cultural characteristics and constructions of ‘reality’, which may result in oppositional as well as conformist reactions. (cf. Luciak, 1999) As Ogbu has shown repeatedly, social class factors cannot explain sufficiently why an ethnic group underachieves in education. For example, in his last book (Ogbu, 2003), he presented evidence that African-American students perform less well in schools than white students at every social class level. Also, other studies
have shown that the impact of class indicators differs for different ethnic groups. For example, in the UK the correlation between class indicators and attainment is not as strong for black Caribbean and black African students as for white ethnic groups (cf. Gillborn and Mirza, 2000).

Conclusions

Ogbu’s theory on the variability in educational performance among different ethnic minority groups provides helpful explanations to be applied to the European context of minority schooling. Not all minority members who achieve low educational results in European countries are failing in school because of primary cultural and language differences, social class factors or institutional barriers in educational settings. The study of community forces shows that a group’s instrumental, relational and symbolic beliefs about the benefit, value and meaning of schooling influences the educational strategies of its members. The origin of these community forces cannot simply be attributed to minority group culture per se. It is in many ways determined by the historical relationship between the minority and the dominant group in society, by structural barriers faced by minorities and by culturally based expectations and attitudes held by the majority via minority members. A group’s minority status influences the school achievement of its members. Members of ‘situated’ minority groups that have in the past experienced subordination in their respective societies and developed an oppositional cultural frame of reference have greater difficulties crossing cultural and language boundaries, which normally would foster their schooling. Members of migrant groups that have faced discriminatory treatment in society, inequities in the labor market and other structural barriers might develop a belief system that rejects schooling as a way to get ahead in society.

There is a need to examine in greater depth to what degree these collective ways of thinking and identity formation exist among minority groups in European countries and thus influence the schooling of minority members. Ogbu’s pledge for comparative ethnographic research should be taken seriously by European researchers and policy-makers who aim to understand better and to prevent the educational underachievement of minority groups. Comparative studies not only show that some minority groups do quite well in education, even though their language and culture differs greatly from the majority group culture, but also—if conducted across countries—that the same ethnic minority group can achieve different educational results, depending on the treatment by the dominant group in the society in which they live.

Studies with an ethnographic approach that explore community forces among specific minority groups could make a positive contribution towards change, since they might offer minority and majority members a better understanding of collective views and dynamics that are an impediment to success in education. In order to counteract educational underachievement of minority group members, necessary steps have to be taken which go beyond the mere introduction of language programs, remedial programs or multicultural curricula. Schools cannot solve these problems alone.
There also needs to be a strong commitment to fight all forms of discrimination, inequities and institutional barriers in society in order to bridge the gap between all ethnic groups. Minority members not only have to believe that their efforts to attain education will actually pay off, but they also must experience that the pledge for equal treatment becomes a reality in all areas of society.

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Notes

1. Today, the term Roma (or Rroma) has become the generic term referring to a diverse group of Romani speaking people that in the past were more commonly called ‘Gypsies’. The term encompasses groups with different names, histories, dialects, and living circumstances such as Roma, Sinti, Gitanos, Jenische, Travellers, etc.
2. For example, in Austria, refugees from Iran who arrived during the Iranian revolution tend to perform well in the educational realm, while other groups do not.
3. The 15 EU Member States prior to 1 May 2004
4. The 10 EU Member States which joined after 1 May 2004
5. See, for example, OECD (2001).
6. Not all minority groups that historically suffered from discrimination and persecution in society demonstrate educational underachievement. A variety of factors, such as whether they belong to a ‘visible minority’ (i.e. skin color), the existence of alternative ways of schooling (minority schools) and experiences with formal educational prior to suffering subordination might be explanatory factors, but in general, this topic is not very well researched.

References


