The work of John Ogbu on ‘minority education’ has spawned a number of interesting and useful debates in the USA. Having been both an early admirer and critic of Ogbu’s work, I reviewed his work in an earlier Anthropology and Education Quarterly article. Before discussing his new Shaker Heights study, I recapitulate the main points of the 1991 article, then offer some reasons why Ogbu is often misread as a deficit theorist. Finally, the paper closes with an assessment of how Ogbu’s theory and ethnographic practice has evolved in his recent Shaker Heights study.

**Recapping an earlier critique of Ogbu’s theory**

In his debate with ‘micro-ethnographers’ (sociolinguists and ethnomethodologists), Ogbu claimed that they underestimated the historical racial experiences of ethnic minority groups (Foley, 1991). He (Ogbu & Simons, 1998) eventually labeled his own approach a ‘cultural-ecological theory of academic disengagement’. As we shall see, it was an eclectic blend of history, ecology and psychology. As for the debate with micro-ethnographers, Ogbu won hands down, in part because of his more robust historical, comparative notion of ethnography.

His approach to ethnography notwithstanding, I originally took him to task for building his theory on problematic notions of stratification and ethnicity. What dismayed me about Ogbu’s theory was his complete avoidance of classic stratification theory, either Weberian or Marxist. Being a US-trained anthropologist in the early 1960s, that was not surprising. Few anthropologists were incorporating class theory into their analysis of cultures. Initially, Ogbu (1978) substituted anthropological caste theory, then later his own notion of social structure (‘social forces’) for classic stratification theory. Within the general literature on caste theory, a debate rages...
whether this construct can actually be applied outside the South Asian subcontinent. On one side, Edmund Leach (1969) and Rene Dumont (1970) argue strenuously that caste societies are a cultural system based on religious principles of purity and impurity found only in pan-Indian civilizations. They contend that this ethno-logical concept must not be turned into a sociological construct for studying any form of stratification.

On the other side, one of Ogbu’s UC Berkeley mentors, Gerald Berreman (1966) and Beteille (1975) define caste as a type of social stratification which appears in a variety of cultures. These authors acknowledge that the Indian social system is the classic caste system, but they seek to broaden and extend the caste concept. A classic caste society is defined as a hierarchy of endogenous groups determined by birth. A class society is generally thought of as having a hierarchy that is relatively more open and not based entirely on birth or a religious ideology of purity/impurity. Stratification in class societies is generally thought of as being based on income, educational level and occupation.

Despite important differences between caste and class systems of stratification, scholars like Berreman and Ogbu argue that class societies also contain ‘caste-like’ cultural practices that are rooted in racial origins. A few anthropologists in the 1930s used caste theory to characterize American race relations. Lloyd Warner and his University of Chicago associates and psychologists John Dollard and Allison Davis conducted a series of highly critical studies of the Deep South (Davis et al., 1941; Dollard, 1949). They documented many ‘caste-like’ cultural practices, such as segregated residences, endogenous marriages, restricted social relations and closed labor markets. Class theory in the 1930s had little to say about such racial practices in capitalist America. At least caste theorists like Warner and company were reintroducing the importance of race into discussions of social stratification. Ogbu revives this perspective when he says: ‘Where caste and class systems coexist, as in the United States, the basic principle of social structure is the caste system. Class is secondary to the named black and white castes …’ (Ogbu, 1978, p. 103). Although his later writings tend to substitute the vague notion of ‘social forces’ for caste, he never explores recent developments in class theory as an alternative (Hall, 1997; Morley & Chen, 1996).

The other major limitation in Ogbu’s theory was how he conceptualized ethnicity or ethnic culture. I originally argued that Ogbu also avoided the lively theoretical debate in anthropology regarding the valorizing character of ethnic political identity struggles. As far back as the 1960s, ethnic theorists (Barth, 1969; Keyes, 1976; Roosens, 1989; Royce, 1982) were emphasizing the subjective, socially constructed nature of ethnic identities and boundaries. They argued that ethnic/racial identity constructions and everyday ethnic/racial practices are never fixed and inherited. This represents a major shift in the social sciences from an inherited biological notion of race to a culturally constructed notion of race/ethnicity (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Ogbu’s reliance on caste theory does not lead him back to a fixed biological perspective, but it does lead him to a rather fixed notion of race/ethnicity as an inherited historical tradition. He argues that the racial legacy of involuntary minorities has
left them with a ‘negative model of folk success’, and a pessimistic view of the labor market as having a racially stratified ‘job ceiling’. Moreover, these negative, defeatist attitudes are passed on to their youth who develop an ‘oppositional culture’ of what he calls ‘secondary cultural practices’. These new secondary cultural practices are often rooted in urban ‘street’ and ‘hip hop culture’. According to Ogbu, that is the problem. He sees street and hip hop culture as an unproductive, negative model of achievement for African-American youth. Too many African-American youth who romanticize street culture adopt a zero sum logic of success. Achieving school success is equated with ‘acting white’, thus selling out one’s racial/cultural heritage.

This sort of adaptation to racism valorizes what Ogbu called the invented, ‘secondary’ cultural practices of African-American street culture over the lost, inherited ‘primary’ cultural practices of African origins. Ogbu is never very explicit about the loss of specific African cultural practices, but one hears the lament of an African immigrant in his formulation. He is clearly distressed by some aspects of hybrid African-American culture. Unlike various folklorists and anthropologists who have written positive accounts of African-American cultural hybridity (Kochman, 1981), Ogbu engages in the same kind of moral uplift narrative that African-American cultural nationalists Jessie Jackson and Cornell West do. These African-American leaders entreat their youth to eschew the materialistic excesses of street culture and be morally responsible. The difference, however, is that, as Foster (2004) points out, Ogbu speaks from the position of an ‘outsider’, an immigrant rather than an ‘insider’, a native born American of African origins. The tone of Ogbu’s writing, therefore, is a curious mix of scientism and moral exhortation, which, as we shall see, leads to some unfortunate misunderstandings and misappropriations.

Ogbu sought to create a grand scientific explanation that both explains and entreats ‘involuntary minorities’ (racially oppressed African-Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans) to be more like ‘voluntary minorities’ (immigrants who choose to come to the US). For the optimistic voluntary immigrant, America is a land of opportunity compared with the harsh economic realities of their homeland. Given their ‘dual frame of reference’, they do not develop a pessimistic oppositional youth culture that equates school achievement with cultural assimilation and loss. Consequently, voluntary immigrants adapt to society and its schools better; even if they experience racism and inequality, they persevere and value upward mobility. To use Margaret Gibson’s (1988) apt phrase, they ‘accommodate without assimilating’, which is obviously what Ogbu the Nigerian immigrant has done.

On the surface, Ogbu’s complex blend of caste and cultural ecology seems to be an innovative way of studying race in modern capitalist societies. In fact, he saddles himself with a monolithic, non-dynamic model of modern capitalist societies. That leaves Ogbu with a number of blind spots which other scholars interrogate more fully. In recent years, Omi & Winant (1994) and Stuart Hall (Morley & Chen, 1996) have shown us how to interrogate the interplay or ‘mediations’ between race, class and gender practices without privileging one system over the other. A number of empirical studies using a multiple dominance perspective illustrate nicely what Ogbu overlooks. For example, Gibson’s (1997) AEQ special issue on Ogbu calls into question the rigid
racial stratification postulated between involuntary and voluntary minorities. A number of authors demonstrate considerable variance within these ideal types which can be attributed to the interplay between class and gender differences.

Let me also cite a few of the studies we reviewed elsewhere (Foley et al., 2001; Villenas & Foley, 2002). My colleague Angela Valenzuela (1999) takes on Ogbu’s involuntary/voluntary ideal typology of racial minorities directly. She contrasts involuntary (native born) and voluntary (immigrant) youth and finds that immigrant youth are generally more positive and overachieving than native-born Chicanos. Nevertheless, she also finds much in-group variation and many high-achieving native-born Chicana/os. Several other ethnographers (Bettie, 2003; Fordham, 1996) take the study of race/class/gender mediations or interactions much further. Fordham explores important gender differences between African-Americans and between African-Americans and whites. Bettie demonstrates that ethnic identity constructions are the product of the interplay between class, race and gender discourses. Finally, our study of South Texas (Foley, 1989, 1990) explores race/class mediations extensively. We demonstrate that class differences and levels of ethnic political mobilization are important factors in school success and mobility. The North Town Chicano/a civil rights movement mobilized many Chicano/a youth, and they made greater academic strides than their parents. In Ogbu’s terminology, this is a ‘collectivist’ adaptation that is rooted in the legacy of both racial and class factors.

Enter the culture wars: the use and abuse of Ogbu’s theory

Ogbu’s emphasis on the dysfuctionality of African-American culture led me to note a strong family resemblance to deficit/culture of poverty thinkers. I tried, however, to underscore that Ogbu was much more dedicated than deficit thinkers were to documenting the destructive legacy of race (Foley, 1991, 1997). Ogbu makes a crucial distinction that separates him from deficit thinkers. In his perspective, the dysfunctional aspects of African-American culture are adaptations, NOT inherent cultural traits. In the face of a hostile racial or cultural ecological niche, they lower their aspirations to achieve in school and to be socially mobile. Consequently, many African-American youth simultaneously valorize the ‘hip’ non-conforming lifestyle of the street over the ‘straight’ and ‘white’ lifestyle of conformity, hard work and success.

As a social theorist, Ogbu is clearly analogizing from Paul Willis’ (1981) study of British working-class youth culture. Willis demonstrates that white working-class lads also get trapped in their own zero sum logic of school success. They go to school and feel put down for being rough, rude working-class lads. In response, the lads reject school work and success as ‘effeminate’ and ‘unmanly’. Conforming to school rules and doing mental work is equated with selling out their working-class way of life. In effect, working-class British youth, like African-American youth, are resisting the mainstream view that they have a culture or lifestyle that is inferior and deficient. In one case, school success is too ‘unmanly’, in the other it is too ‘white’. One oppositional youth culture is rooted in class and the other in race. Despite these differences,
both Willis and Ogbu explain resistance and academic disengagement as a reaction or adaptation to an oppressive, stigmatizing sociocultural system.

The important difference between Willis and Ogbu, is, however, the way they characterize oppositional or resistance behavior. Willis, the leftist working-class academic, portrays his lads as heroic working-class rebels who preserve the honor of their class. In the end he claims that they proudly accept working-class jobs. In contrast, Ogbu, the Nigerian immigrant, portrays African-American youth as avoiding school achievement to embrace hybrid African-American cultural practices. They glorify careers based on shady deals and questionable morality and end up in dead-end service sector jobs. In Ogbu’s story, the non-conforming African-American youth are essentially losers. Ogbu exhorts his youth and their parents to be more serious, disciplined and hard working, so that they can achieve upward social and economic mobility. In Willis’s story, the non-conforming working-class lads are essentially winners. He does not exhort his lads to work harder and conform to the rules so that they can be upwardly mobile. He is content with glorifying working-class culture and its youth as being full of humor, humanity and dignity.

Contrasting their respective notions of an ‘oppositional youth culture’ helps highlight Levinson’s (1992) earlier assessment of Ogbu’s ideological orientation. He is a liberal social reformer with a strong moral agenda to lift his wayward subjects into a middle-class way of life. And it is precisely his moralizing tone that makes Ogbu susceptible to various misappropriations. Judging from a recent New York Times book review (Lee, 2002) of the new Shaker Heights study, both conservatives and liberals appropriate and misuse his work to justify their ideological positions. On the one hand, neoconservatives like Thernstrom & Thernstrom (2003) tap into the way he chastises African-Americans to be more self-disciplined, ‘straight’ and hard working. They claim him as one of their own. They use his study as ‘scientific evidence’ in their cultural war against multiculturalism (Kelley, 1997). On the other hand, as Edmund Hammond (forthcoming) so ably demonstrates, liberal academics (I would add both white and ethnic) are quick to buy into the neoconservative appropriation of Ogbu. Liberals turn Ogbu into a deficit thinker so they can position themselves as politically correct liberal-minded multiculturalists. In the end, it serves everyone embroiled in the culture war debates to read Ogbu superficially.

In retrospect, liberal academics may even have used my early piece (Foley, 1991) to mislabel Ogbu a deficit thinker. I argued that Ogbu stressed dysfunctionality and failure so much that he sounded like a deficit thinker, but as Hammonds (forthcoming) notes, I cautioned people to read him carefully. After reading the Shaker Heights study, it is now clear that the passionate, rhetorical tone in Ogbu’s perspective comes from his immigrant experience. Ogbu never acknowledges the more subjective, personal elements in his theory, but Foster’s (2004) paper points out that Ogbu adopts an immigrant uplift narrative style. I would add that it is precisely his passionate immigrant voice/narrative that makes him fair game for neoconservatives. He is the classic ‘outsider ethnographer’ who sees African-Americans through African eyes and laments and moralizes about what they have lost and have failed to achieve. This makes him sound like a conservative, assimilationist thinker. Why Ogbu never
distanced himself from such racist appropriations of his work remains a mystery. But in some ways this is not surprising. Few academics are reflexive about the extent that they become victims or accomplices in American’s ideological culture wars (Kelley, 1997).

In the end, Ogbu seems to have suffered the same fate of two other prominent, anti-deficit thinkers: Oscar Lewis and Basil Bernstein. Radical conservatives appropriated these ‘scientific’ views to legitimate their classist, racist and sexist policy agendas (Katz, 1989). Given the direction of his new Shaker Heights study, Ogbu seems as politically naive as Lewis and Bernstein were. He apparently never realized the extent to which he was ensnared in America’s culture wars. If he had, he surely would not have added fuel to the neoconservative fire with his Shaker Heights study. Ogbu writes about middle-class Shaker Heights’ families with scarcely a mention of the contentious historical debates on black families and the black middle class. As we shall see, the new study elaborates further his model of African-American culture as a dysfunctional adaptive mode.

Some old and new wrinkles in the Shaker Heights study

Gibson (forthcoming) makes a strong case that Ogbu still downplays institutional factors. I would agree with Valenzuela’s assessment (1999) that his original theory did not emphasize sufficiently negative institutional or school factors. However, his Shaker Heights study does seem to chronicle more institutional barriers than his earlier studies did. It still lacks fine-grained ‘micro-ethnographic’ portraits of classrooms, counseling sessions and labeling. But the new study does present a good deal of attitudinal data on the teachers and administrators which suggests the continuing importance of racist thinking, even among liberal white educators. In some ways, the final version of his theory seems better balanced between what Ogbu calls ‘community forces’ (which includes negative adaptive modes) and institutional/schooling factors. Nevertheless, portraying the way schools institutionalize racial attitudes and practices is not the principal focus of his Shaker Heights study.

By focusing on the African-American middle class, Ogbu is clearly responding to critics who favor class explanations of low academic achievement. His new study emphatically restates that race, NOT social class, explains the academic disengagement of African-American students. The Shaker Heights study shouts out that his original theory of ‘involuntary minorities’ even holds true for the African-American middle class. His portrait of them looks very much like earlier studies of the involvement of working-class parents in schools (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Lareau, 1989). These parents really care about their children’s educational achievement, but they fail to supervise their homework, lobby their youth’s teachers, understand the tracking system and gatekeeping counselors, or the perils of hip hop/street culture. In the end, Ogbu chastises the middle-class African-American parents that hired him. They are not providing their youth with the seriousness and self-discipline needed to resist peer pressures and the lure of pop and street culture.
Judging from Lee’s (2002) *New York Times* book review, the new Shaker Heights study has made Ogbu a hot political commodity well beyond the tiny field of educational anthropology. The review claims that Ogbu has revised his original theory and now places much greater emphasis on the failure of the African-American middle class and community. The review makes Ogbu sound like a black neoconservative of McWhorter or Sowell’s ilk. Be that as it may, I should like to conclude my commentary on the Shaker Heights study by focusing on two aspects of the study: Ogbu’s conceptualization of the African-American middle class and his policy recommendations for improving the American public schools.

Were Ogbu with us today, I suspect he would anticipate much of what I am about to say. I gave it my best shot in 1991 to get him to dump caste theory for modern class theory, but Ogbu consistently rejected class theory as having retrograde notions of race. That would be true of conventional Marxists, but certainly not of the new generation of cultural Marxists or cultural production/practice theorists (Lave *et al.*, 1992; Levinson & Holland, 1996). This new brand of class theory is based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the Birmingham school of cultural studies, and it conceptualizes social classes as distinct ‘class cultures’ (Foley & Moss, 2000). Other ‘new class theorists’ (Hall, 1997; Wright, 1985) have also reconceptualized the middle class as a contradictory class location. Educational ethnographers such as Julie Bettie (2003) and Kathleen Hall (2002) have begun to explore how racial/cultural identities are articulated through gender and class discourses. The long, contentious debate over the dysfunctionality of African-American families has often included the relative importance of class differences (Foley, 1997; Willie, 1979). Put very simply, there is much new and interesting in modern class theory and in the black family literature that would lead one to do more nuanced empirical studies of the African-American ‘middle class’.

Ogbu’s (2003) new study of the black middle class is in desperate need of such theorization. His notion of ‘the middle class’ leads him to present a very undifferentiated, ‘thin’ portrait of their everyday cultural attitudes and practices. Like UCLA sociologist Walter Allen (Lee, 2002), I cannot tell what kind of middle-class Shaker Height’s African-Americans are. Allen and I both suspect that they are a very fragile, marginalized ‘class culture’. They have neither the economic nor cultural capital to compete with their white counter-parts who run the Shaker Heights schools. Ogbu seems so intent on proving that upward social class mobility does not diminish the racial legacy that he relies on a rather vague, undifferentiated sample of middle-class blacks. Shaker Heights middle-class African-American families may not be sufficiently removed from their working-class origins to be a real test of Ogbu’s argument. Moreover, his overly negative portrait of the African-American middle-class family allows both liberals and neoconservatives to read his study as a further indictment of African-American culture.

A more complex rendering of the black middle class would contain a host of success stories as well. Their stories will have much in common with the Latino households studied by Stanton-Salazar (1997), Tapia (1998) and Trueba (1999). Family and household studies may be the key to understanding why some students of color
D. Foley

disengage academically and others do not. I admire the fact that Ogbu had the courage
to study middle-class African-American families in the post-Monyihan era of
neoconservatism. He has thrown political correctness to the wind and dared to lay
some responsibility for ‘academic disengagement’ on African-American communities
and families. Few liberal scholars, white and non-white, have been willing to do that.
But I would add a word of caution here. The discourse wars surrounding black
middle-class families are very intense. Any scholar entering this contested terrain
would be wise to highlight both the strengths and the weaknesses of African-
American culture and families. Unfortunately, the Shaker Heights study still chroni-
cles more of what middle-class African-American families do wrong than what they
do right.

Ogbu’s policy recommendations: the Shaker Heights study

Ogbu’s policy recommendations have a very familiar, sensible ring, and thus can be
covered rather quickly. For example, he likes and advocates programs such as Shaker
Height’s Minority Achievement Committee (MAC). The MAC program includes
special education, English as a second language, basic essentials, and special math
and science projects. Bud Mehan’s AVID program at University of California at San
Diego seems to have much in common with the MAC program (Hubbard, forthcoming;
Mehan et al., 1996). Like the AVID program, Ogbu also advocates more
academic counseling, teaching the youth good study habits, and successful black role
models. Anyone who cares about so-called ‘minority education’ has advocated these
practices. Ogbu also advocates a series of in-service workshops to raise teacher expec-
tations for African-American students and to create greater trust and community/
parental involvement. Here again, excellent ideas, but how do we create in-service
workshops for teachers and parents that really transform racial attitudes and prac-
tices? The work of a host of new ethnic scholars reviewed elsewhere provides some
answers (Foley et al., 2001; Villenas and Foley, 2002).

Like all strong anti-racist multiculturalists, Ogbu also wants to get Shaker Heights’
African-American youth talking about the institutional and cultural pressures on
them, e.g. tracking, peer pressures and racist beliefs about African-American intelli-
gence. I really like these suggestions and can imagine teacher-led Frierian cultural
circles. I can even visualize such dialogues raising the consciousness, self-esteem, and
hope of African-American students. But alas, I cannot imagine this happening in
many American public schools without some very strong school leadership. These are
great policy recommendations, but given the fear most educators have about openly
talking about racism, classism and sexism, this is much easier said than done.

Finally, Ogbu’s policy recommendation on culture, language and the curriculum
left me wondering. He uses Valenzuela’s important distinction between the affective
and instrumental meaning of the curriculum, but he comes to the opposite conclusion
that she draws. Valenzuela argues that schools and the teachers who implement
curriculum must become more caring. Ogbu agrees up to a point, but ends up stress-
ing that black students must be more pragmatic and less concerned about whether
teachers and the system ‘care for’ them. Again, he sounds like an immigrant who had to ‘tough it out’ to succeed in racist American. This emphasis on ‘toughness’ is, in fact, probably the way many parents of color socialize their children. Ogbu may have a point, but he comes across as though he is moralizing to native born African-Americans. Perhaps some kind of teacher–parent alliance to promote both caring and toughness in minority youth is what is needed.

To sum up, Ogbu’s policy recommendations seem very in-line with what most American multicultural educators advocate. I would agree with most of what he advocates, but am left wondering how ethnographers with an activist bent can spark some of these changes. Having worked now for several years with my colleague Angela Valenzuela, I am beginning to see what it takes to change educational policy. She spends a great deal more time than I do being a lobbyist, expert witness and consciousness-raiser among the Texas state legislators (Foley and Valenzuela, forthcoming). She is quite dedicated to changing our state’s accountability policy, which involves much more than writing a good critical ethnography. Although Ogbu’s policy recommendations are interesting and worthy, they have the familiar ring of detached academic commentary. Like most academic social scientists, Ogbu has probably never been very involved with educational policy-makers.

Some final reflections on Ogbu as a theorist and an ethnographer

As for Ogbu the theorist, we know a good deal about him through his books and articles. He advocated a methodological approach that he labeled multilevel ecological ethnography. Although Ogbu developed his own original theory, something that few academics actually do, it relies more on concepts he coined than on the metatheoretical discourses of his times. He never addresses whether Weber, Marx, Bourdieu or Barth had already said it better than he does. Nor did he ever explicitly acknowledge learning much from the debates surrounding his work. Nor does he confront the possibility that the constructs he coined may have serious blind spots or ambiguities. Thus, Ogbu wrote many articles that continued to defend and elaborate his original perspective but, for whatever reason, he never explicates how his thinking evolved from the work of others or from his immigrant experience. So we know Ogbu’s theoretical argument well, but we do not know how and why he developed it. Ogbu the theoretician was never particularly reflective about his own theorizing.

Ogbu the ethnographer is also a bit of a mystery. He has written a good methodological article on his general view of ethnography (Ogbu, 1981) and an interesting
reflection on his original, Stockton study (Ogbu, 1986), but not much beyond that. He seems to have done very little extended ethnographic fieldwork after his excellent doctoral dissertation (Ogbu, 1974). As he got older, he apparently suffered from a deteriorating back condition. Consequently, he did most of his subsequent fieldwork via committee through cadres of graduate students. Group fieldwork projects have their virtues because they can generate a number of comparable in-depth cases studies. This was the intent of his long-awaited but still unpublished study of 12 Bay Area schools. But group projects can also develop a problematic division of labor between the grand theoretician and his flock of data-gathering fieldworkers. Any ethnographer worth her salt knows that relying on the field notes of others ruptures the organic connection between the interpreter/writer and the field experience. This can lead to all sorts of methodological problems, because field notes invariably record no more than a small part of the total field experience. Using the fragments of others’ experience leaves the grand interpreter even more susceptible to the cardinal sin of imposing her a priori explanations onto the ‘data’.

The latest study of Shaker Heights is an excellent case in point. Despite numerous student interviewers, the fieldwork is ‘thin’ and based far too much on what seem like prestructured interviews. One is left suspecting that the researchers were quite dedicated to finding evidence that confirmed their theory. Given recent trends in ethnography towards greater reflexivity (Foley, 2002), one longs for the story behind the story that Ogbu presents about African-American middle-class families. They hired him to do this study, a rarity in the social sciences, but what happened after that? Unfortunately, he writes in a very conventional narrative style that highlights his theory but not the way the ethnography was produced. One can only hope that some of the surviving graduate research assistants will fill in the blanks.

In concluding, I must add that, despite all my critical comments and questions, the work of Ogbu is important and useful. His explanation of the ‘academic disengagement’ and low achievement of ‘involuntary minorities’ has more than a grain of truth to it. It has also stimulated many new and better empirical studies. So we must give Ogbu his due. But as previously mentioned, Ogbu, although not a deficit thinker, was a prisoner of the deficit discourse. His earlier writings suggest that he was fully aware of positive, functional African-American adaptive modes such as clientilism and collectivism. But like the deficit thinkers that he was critiquing, he focused almost exclusively on the negative, dysfunctional aspects of African-American culture and family. Perhaps he confronted deficit thinking with such a vengeance that he was unable to pursue positive adaptations in the manner that subsequent scholars of color have (Foley et al., 2001).

The new wave of American ethnic scholars has generally abandoned Ogbu’s search for a grand theory of ‘academic disengagement’. Most contemporary scholars of color are more interested in finding the ‘best practices’ that lead to academic success. They are more directly involved in educational reform and the education of multicultural teachers than Ogbu was. And they are writing more powerful, uplifting narratives about their children and communities than he did (Foley et al., 2001; Villenas and Foley, 2002). At the risk of sounding anti-theoretical, I would applaud the new
generation of scholars of color. They are more political and more policy-oriented that Ogbu was, and they have not set for themselves an impossible task.

After years of debates, the search for a silver bullet explanation of school failure/success has the shine of fools’ gold. Why minority youth fail or disengage in mainstream schools, or for that matter why they succeed, is hard to explain with a single theory. Perhaps we must be content for a time with many conflicting, complimentary and partial explanations of the achievement gap between some peoples of color and the dominant white majority. Ogbu surely bit off more than he or any of us could chew. Still, you have to admire his audacity and passion. Even though he overstates the virtues of his theory, he doggedly pursued an elusive prey for thirty years. None of us, including me, has produced a better grand theory of school disengagement. Ogbu has at the very least partially explained what he set out to do, and he has stimulated a good deal of creative thinking. We should all have such an enviable scholarly legacy.

Douglas Foley has written and edited six books and over sixty articles and chapters.

His most recent ethnographies are Learning Capitalist Culture and The Heartland Chronicles.

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