

An Analysis of Oppositional Culture Theory Applied to One Suburban Midwestern High School

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This study explored whether and to what extent Ogbu and Fordham's Oppositional Culture Theory applied to African American high school students at one Midwestern suburban high school. Based on multiple interviews with six African American students, the study found support for some aspects of the theory but not for others.

Introduction

The gap in achievement between Whites and Blacks in the United States has been a problem for many years. The cause of this gap has been the focus of considerable research but is not yet fully understood. One explanation for the gap was proposed by John Ogbu (1978). He stated that the difference in cultural attitudes toward society and education between African Americans and Whites stemmed from the means of migration for African Americans. Ogbu argued that African Americans were brought to the United States forcibly as slaves, involuntary minorities, and therefore have a more antagonistic view toward the dominant White culture as a whole than other minority groups. Later, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) further developed Ogbu's original premise into what is known today as oppositional culture theory. This theory strives to explain the gap between African American and White students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

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At the high school where the lead author works, there are major differences between the average performance of White and African American students. On the state achievement test in 2011, 55% of White 11th graders met or exceeded state standards in Reading while only 23% of African American students did the same. The corresponding statistics for Math are 55% of White students met or exceeded while only 22% of African Americans did, and numbers for Science are very similar (Illinois Interactive School Report Card). Discrepancies also appear in discipline: according to the district's data management system, in the 2011-2012 school year, African American students received 23% of all discipline referrals though their representation in the school population was only 11%.

As will be clear from the literature review below, research on oppositional culture theory is mixed. As a White female assistant principal who was struggling to understand and remedy the achievement gap in her school, the lead author wondered to what extent the theory applied in her setting. Hence the purpose of the study was to explore whether and to what extent the tenets of oppositional culture theory apply to African American high school students at one Midwestern suburban high school. By qualitatively examining the cultural and academic perceptions and experiences of African American high school students at the research site, we can better understand the factors influencing the academic achievement of those students. With this understanding, the lead author and other administrators at the school can design interventions to specifically address the needs of African American students, their families, and the community as a whole with the goal of working toward narrowing the achievement gap.

Review of the Literature

Oppositional culture theory, first proposed by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu in 1986, grew into the accepted explanation for the achievement gap in the following decade (Tyson, 2002). The theory proposes that opposition to assimilation by African Americans to the perceived White culture is an important part of the educational experience of African American youth. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) described four hypotheses that encompass the definition and reasoning behind oppositional culture theory. Those hypotheses are: 1. Involuntary minority students (African American) perceive fewer returns to education and more limited educational opportunities; 2. African Americans exhibit greater resistance to school than other race groups; 3. High achieving African Americans are looked down upon by their peers; 4. Disenfranchisement with school produces the achievement gap we see today.

Some research, supporting the tenets of oppositional culture theory, indicates that African American cultural attitudes are a result of poverty and the challenges relating to the structural system of both educational and professional success (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990; Whaley & Noel, 2010; Wilson, 1987). Such research has found that African Americans, in contrast to Whites, do not believe a good education will result in good jobs (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 2003). According to Mickelson (1990) "the material realities of the opportunity structure, in the form of lower pay and fewer jobs and promotions for minorities, women, and members of the working class, shape adolescents' perceptions of the value of schooling for their future and how these attitudes, in turn, affect their academic behavior" (p. 45). Racial discrimination and prejudice have limited the opportunity for African Americans to reach levels of professional and financial success that are comparable to Whites (Akom, 2003). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) state "ecological

factors such as the job ceiling tend to give rise to the disillusionment about the real value of schooling, especially among older children, and thereby discourages them from working hard in school” (p. 179).

Beard and Brown (2008) emphasize that all students internalize negative and positive beliefs about their abilities and intelligence. African American students often connect school success with the adaptation of behaviors associated with the dominant White culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003). According to Akom (2003), “African American students often protect their pride as African Americans by adopting anti-school behaviors” (p. 317). Based on these explanations, academic success and high achievement indicate a selling-out or opposition to the African American identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). “Not only does this oppositional culture act as a bulwark between African Americans and White America, it also provokes African Americans to persuade their same-race peers to devalue academic success because of its association with ‘Acting White’” (Palmer & Maramba, 2011, p. 435). Some researchers argue that the motivation and school-related skills of African Americans are poor because of their negative attitude about the dominant White culture (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998) and because of school cultures characterized by low expectations for minority students (Delpit, 1995, 2012; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shaun, 1990).

Although many studies support Ogbu’s position, some research fails to support it. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) tested the four hypotheses associated with oppositional culture theory and did not yield findings consistent with those of Ogbu for any of them. They found that African American students liked school and believed it would help them acquire better jobs in the future. Other studies have also found that African American students’ attitudes towards school are generally good (Carter, 2008; Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007; O’Connor, 1999; Tyson, 2002). Further, several studies raise questions about the African American peer teasing aspect of Ogbu and Fordham’s theory (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Diamond et al, 2007; Harper, 2006; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Tyson, 2002). For example, Tyson (2002) observed behaviors of African American students at two elementary schools. His research indicated positive attitudes toward school as well as a positive educational support system among peers at the research sites. Further contradictions to oppositional culture theory are found in a variety of research studies conducted to determine African American students’ attitudes toward education and how that relates to their academic achievement. Akom (2003), for example, points out that many of the previous studies regarding social conflict fail to consider the ways in which many African Americans navigate and collectively excel in the White dominated school settings while maintaining strong connections to their cultural roots. Relatedly, Harris (2006) concluded that the resistance model does not take into account variance within minority populations.

In order to explore the relevance of oppositional culture theory to African American students at Croft High (pseudonym), the study addressed the following questions:

1. Does oppositional culture theory apply to the educational experiences of a small number of African American students at Croft High School?
 - a. What are the perceptions of a small number of African American students in terms of returns for education and educational opportunities?
 - b. To what extent do African American student participants experience resistance to schooling?

- c. How are high-achieving African Americans viewed by their peers?
- d. How do African American students perceive that their attitudes and perceptions toward school effect their academic achievement?

Methods

Participants

Croft High School is located in the central part of Illinois, 20 miles from a major city. Of the approximately 2,036 students in 2010-11, 73% were White, 11% African American, 12% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 0.1% American Indian, and 3% multi-racial. The school's population consists of 44% low-income students, 2% Limited English Proficient students, 14% students with Individualized Education Plans. The school did not make adequate yearly progress according to the state expectations and in 2011 was on academic watch status for the sixth year (Illinois Department of Education, 2013). The community has historically been very blue collar although it currently has no factories or industry within its school district boundaries. Surrounding cities have provided industrial-related employment for many of the local residents in addition to the local businesses and major city located nearby.

Study participants comprised six African American students enrolled at Croft High School: three female and three male students between the ages of 15 and 18 years old. They were selected via purposive sampling, and included two students with low achievement (below a 2.0 cumulative GPA on a 4.0 scale) (Alise and Connor), two students with moderate achievement (GPA of 2.0 to 3.0) (Nicole and Donte), and two students with high achievement (3.0 to 4.0 GPA) (Valarie and Anthony), in order to include a range of academic performance. The lead author had had previous interactions with three of the students, and chose them partly on that basis, while three were selected randomly from lists of African American students fitting the needed GPA criteria.

Design and Data Sources

The study used a qualitative interview approach designed to find out the essence of participants' beliefs and attitudes about school with a focus on elements of oppositional culture theory. The primary data source was interviews, and the lead author conducted approximately 12 hours of individual audiotaped interviews over a three-month period. Specifically, each of the six students was interviewed four times using a semi structured format. Each of the four interviews with each student focused on a different one of the four tenets associated with oppositional culture theory. Interview one focused on perceptions and opportunities associated with benefits and returns to education, with questions about such issues as: educational background, plans after high school, the importance of grades, effort in school, getting a good job, and family background. Interview two focused on engagement and resistance to school including questions about issues such as: feelings, likes, and dislikes regarding school, perceptions of teachers and principals, discipline, differences in study habits and behaviors of African American and White students. Interview three focused on relationships with peers regarding educational achievement covering the topics of: factors influencing high and low achievers, peer support and harassment, and "Acting White." Finally, interview four focused on attitudes toward school and the achievement gap with a

focus on: effort, success in school and work, attitude and achievement, and work and educational opportunities for African Americans. Some background data was also collected on each student, including course enrollments, GPA, standardized test scores, schools attended, discipline statistics and parental guardianship, in order to provide additional context for student responses. The lead author obtained informed consent from all the interviewees, as per Institutional Review Board requirements.

The lead author transcribed the interviews and analyzed them along with observational data using open coding and axial coding to organize the data into meaningful concepts and then themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings

Several themes emerged from the data. First and foremost is that the *participants' families value education* and push their students to work hard in school. Student responses indicate that this value is translated to high expectations for their students regarding grades and hard work. In addition, *peer influence is both positive and negative*. Students reported that peer influence can be positive in the form of friendly support when studying or in the form of recognition for advanced placement enrollment, for example. Negative peer influences occurred through friends detracting from students' attempts to study, behavioral distractions in the classroom, and accusations of Acting White. The third theme is that *students generally like their teachers*, and feel these teachers are influential. Fourth, *students believe they need better study habits*, citing such problems as lack of motivation and boredom, for example, as reasons for their low effort. And the final theme is that *student perceptions of themselves as victims of racism coexist with internalized oppression*. The students recognized that they were victims of racism, but their responses indicated that they themselves hold many negative beliefs about African Americans.

Participants' Families Value Education

All of the participants indicated that their families stress the importance of education and want them to get good grades. For example, Alise, one of the low achieving participants, indicated "my mom is just like whatever, just as long as you graduate and get good grades." She went on to state: "They don't like seeing C's and stuff like that. My dad and my mom like seeing C's and above. Like if I'm failing and stuff, I get stuff taken away...My mom took away my X-Box because I had a D on my report card." The other low achieving participant is Connor, who indicated that his grades are disappointing to his family:

My mom and dad are always on me about homework... They want to see all B's or all A's. I am really a D+ or a C student, so they are always disappointed in me. I'm trying. Hopefully this year it will be all A's and B's but right now I am averaging C's. My dad said no more D's and I am like ok. He just starts taking away everything, and I was like ok. No more D's.

Nicole, a moderate achieving student, reported very high expectations from her parents. From her statements it appears her mother is the monitor of grades within her household:

My mom does not take a C in the house... You better have a B or an A. She would prefer an A so if I got a C on my report card I'm pretty much like keys taken away, phone taken away. She checks my grades on the computer all the time. I like tried to change my password because I got a C on a paper. She's like, what is the password? I can see you changed it... I've got to be in some extracurricular activity also. My mom, she wants me to go to college and get that extra education. But like, if I have to wait and to go to work first [that is ok]... Now like my dad, he wants me to go straight into college and not have a job.

Nicole maintains a 2.94 GPA on a 4.0 scale. Due to enrollment in Advanced Placement classes, her weighted GPA is a 3.25. The interview excerpts above indicate that both parents of Nicole place emphasis on academic achievement as well as value continuing education.

Donte, who lives with his brother, responded, "My brother hates to see bad grades. If he sees one he always says you can do better than this. What happened? Etc. He wants me to do well." Donte's GPA is a 2.82 on a 4.0 scale. Donte performed well on the ACT in the areas of Math and English but struggled more in Reading and Science.

Anthony, one of the high achieving students, indicated both of his parents have high expectations. His father's expectations focus around a model of achievement where college and employment take center stage in regards to importance. His mother, however, encourages him to work hard but to also explore all that life has to offer:

My dad is like I went to U of I [University of Illinois], you should go to U of I. I feel like my mom is so proud of me, anything I do is right. But my dad is like, he just found out Saturday I got a 28 [on the ACT]. He thought I got a 30 and was like, oh I didn't know you got a 28. Like that was bad. My mom was like, a 28 that's awesome! It's like my older siblings made good grades so if I didn't make good grades I wouldn't be as good as them. Everything is a competition to me. It's like I have to make a better grade, I have to do better on this than my brother did. It's like I got a 28 on the ACT so my sister is not going to be happy unless she gets a 30 while my older brother got a 25. I feel like that's how it is at my house. I expect her to do better.

Valarie described her parent's expectations as very high. She indicated they do not enforce that expectation with disciplinary consequences, rather try to motivate and support her in school: "To my parents a C is an F in my house. I can't get a C. My parents are not the strictest.... It was just instilled in my brain that if you want to be successful, you want a good job, and you want a good life then this is what you have to do." Valarie is a high achieving student. She is ranked 152 out of 457 students in her class and maintains a 3.31 GPA.

In summary, all six students, including low, medium, and high achievers, seem to have families who hold high expectations and encourage them to do well in school.

Peer Influence is Both Positive and Negative

Another theme to emerge from the data was that while some students stressed the positive influence of peers, others stressed more negative influences, and some reported experiencing both. Participants indicated a number of positive ways in which their peers influence their

academic achievement. When asked if her friends ever deterred her from doing well in school, Nicole, a moderate achiever, replied: "I don't have any friends like that. All my friends are like me and everything consists of college. When they are going to study we are like, go study. It's not like come out with me. No, you don't have that choice." Valarie expressed similar thoughts when she indicated, "Some will help you because they want to do well in school too." Valarie maintains peer relationships with students who have a similar work ethic and academic achievement as herself.

Some of the lower achieving students, including Connor and Alise, indicated that low achievers do not look negatively on the high achievers. According to Alise: "They don't tease them or like bully them or anything. I guess they kind of like give them respect or something like that I guess ... Yeah and like, even people I don't know get more respect than like the dumb people."

Nicole, a moderate achiever, indicated she believed that many of the high achieving students work harder than fellow students. The tone and context of the interview indicated she respected the students in advanced placement classes because of their effort: "They have more drive and want to do better. That is why they are in that class. In regular classes they are just doing it to graduate. The classes [AP] are harder."

Donte, a moderate achiever, agreed by saying, "I don't look at them differently [negatively]. I just believe they study harder than I do, they do more work than I do, and they catch on a whole lot faster than I do." The statistics from the research site regarding African American enrollment in AP classes for the 2012-13 school year indicated only 14 of the 477 total students enrolled in AP classes are African American. This is approximately a 3% representation as compared to the 11% representation of African Americans in the total student body.

Participants also indicated ways in which their peers negatively influence their academic achievement. Donte indicated that some of his friends discourage him from studying: "It depends on the person and where we are at. Like if we are at school and I am talking about doing some work, they are like are you crazy? You can do that later." He did indicate that one specific person provides support and encourages him to study for math. He stated, "like I got a best friend and she helps me with my calculus and stuff."

Some participants reported being accused of Acting White. Peer teasing and verbal ridicule in respect to Acting White focuses around being perceived as adopting the attitudes and behaviors associated with the White community as opposed to the African American community. Nicole reported experiencing this type of harassment frequently:

Everyone calls me an Oreo. I wrote a whole college essay about that. Most of the African American kids here don't like me. The loud ghetto kids hate me. I am like that one kid that sits on the side and looks at the other African American kids being ghetto. I'm like are you kidding me? You just proved them [White people] right. They [African Americans] are just obnoxious and I am like just stop.

When asked to explain what Acting White means she connected the accusation of Acting White with social group and patterns of speech:

It means you talk with proper English, you hang out with more of a different race. Like, I cannot hang out with too many African American people in town. They make

me so mad because they are obnoxiously annoying, ghetto. I hate it so much. They say I am stuck up.

Alise described similar experiences. She has a twin sister who socializes in a different social group than she does. Alise associates voice volume, clothing, and speech patterns with the term Acting White:

Yeah, I get accused of Acting White in school. They are comparing me to my sister. My sister is like oh yeah, all ghetto and stuff. You would hear her all the way over by the cars and stuff. I'm more mannered or something like that. I wear Abercrombie and stuff like that and she wears all the African American clothes and stuff like that. Apparently I'm the White twin and she's the African American twin. I'm like White on the inside or something. I'm like proper and I don't cuss or anything like that. Apparently that is Acting White for some people.

When asked if White people ever get accused of Acting African American Alise replied, "Yeah there is a lot of them. Mostly it is the boys not the girls. The sagging pants and rapping all the time; that is considered Acting African American." When asked if one was good and one was bad, Alise indicated Acting White was good and Acting African American was bad.

The trend of teasing African American peers tends to characterize certain social groups, with some ridiculing their peers more than others. Additional factors that contribute to Acting White include how you talk, what you wear, how you act (being preppie or nerdy, for example), study habits, financial status, the neighborhood you live in, speech patterns, and use of profanity. While students indicated that intelligence does factor into the term, they said Acting White is more about the broader picture. The fact that Alise reported that she gets accused of Acting White supports the idea that Acting White goes beyond doing well in school, since she is one of the lower achieving students in the study.

Students Generally Like Their Teachers

Although students mentioned and discussed teachers they disliked, most of the participants had positive relationships with most of their teachers. Alise, a low achiever, described the majority of her teachers as caring. She said they want their students to learn and to be successful:

I pretty much like all of them. I feel like if you have a really good teacher you are going to do better. I feel like if the teacher is not really enthusiastic and just doing it for the money, I don't really participate in that class. But when I have an enthusiastic teacher like Ms. [Science] I am going to do good in her class. She really loves her job and I'm going to do good to make her feel good. Most of my teachers I really get along with. Like Mr. [Social Studies], Ms. [Child Care], Ms. [English], Mr. [Social Studies 2], and Ms. [English 2]. What teachers do I not like? I don't think I have a teacher that I don't like. My teachers, my counselor, and my parents all help me do well. Like Ms. [English], she tutors me every day. Any subject she can help me with she does.

Anthony, one of the high achievers, indicated that his relationship with each teacher is very important. He needs to feel connected to them as a person as well as a teacher:

I think teachers are like programmed a certain way. I have never had a class where I just like hated the teacher and wanted to get out of the class. I think it affects me in a positive way most of the time. For the most part my teachers are like really interesting, even though I've had like teachers who just weren't good teachers. I've had really interesting teachers I can have a conversation about even something that is not related to school.

The importance of individual teachers and staff was also highlighted by Nicole, who indicated her counselor as well as one of her teachers had been instrumental in helping her through the college application process. We have included excerpts here from all three levels of achievement, illustrating that liking teachers was not limited to the higher achievers.

Students Believe They Need Better Study Habits

All of the students reported that they should work harder in school, though some of them also reported studying pretty hard some of the time. Alise, a low achiever, recognized that she does not study very much. When asked about homework, Alise indicated she only completes half of her homework and pays attention most of the time. While she connects it to an excessively busy schedule, she later indicated her motivation often wavers: "Um, well I don't really study that much cause I have color guard practice all the time. But when I do have time to do my homework, I make sure that I really understand it or I don't go on and stuff like that."

Connor, another low achiever, stated he studies between 30 and 60 minutes a week and described himself as lazy when it comes to school work: "I have assignments and homework; sometimes I do them sometimes I don't. I try to get by sometimes. I'm a good test taker I would say. I pay attention in class. It's just I do not like to do homework." Looking at Connor's semester grades it appears he has not made many gains academically. At the end of the first semester, which is half way through the school year, he earned one B, one C, and three D's.

When asked to describe herself as a student, Nicole indicated she did not have very good study habits. She was not intrinsically motivated to study: "Hmm, I'm not going to say I have very good study habits, because I don't at all. I can't sit and stare at something for too long. I get very easily distracted." However, she also said she pays attention, takes notes, participates in class discussions, and completes all of her homework: "Honor roll, I always want to get that and I really want to be in NHS [National Honor Society]. So like and at graduation you get all those tassels. I'm like I want that so I want to get really good grades and to be considered one of the good kids."

Although he earned a GPA of 2.71 Donte indicated he doesn't study much because it bores him. Yet he also stated: "I'm a good student. I do ok. I work hard and school is important. I like math. Math is cool and I'm good at it. I do my work. I study for tests, that kind of stuff." Anthony, who is one of the high achievers, indicated he works hard in some subjects but not in others: "I am in all AP classes. My weakest subject is math. I'm not really good at math. My best subject is English, like I can write but yeah math, I'm not really good in math. On stuff like tests, I will study all night and not sleep if I have to." When asked what

hurdles kept them from studying more, students indicated that time management, distractions such as Twitter and Facebook, motivation, and a lack of comprehension were all factors.

Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Victims of Racism Coexist with Internalized Oppression

Students recognized racism in society around them. For example, when discussing getting a job, all three male students felt their opportunities might be limited compared to Whites. Donte reported: "I can't figure out why I can't get a job right now. I am not going to say it's because I am African American but that is what I put in my mind. I think that if another White person was interviewing then I would assume the White person would get the job." Anthony reported dealing with the problem by working harder to overcome the limitations: "Like being African American I feel like some African American people have the mindset that they will never be better than a White person. For me, I just feel like I want to work harder to be better and stuff like that."

In a similar vein, when asked about Croft High School student and staff perceptions of African Americans, all of the students indicated that racial segregation and stereotyping of African Americans was a problem. Donte commented: "Sometimes in the morning I see kids together. I see certain colors. I'm not going to say African American and White cause there is Mexican too but you know, some stand here, some stand there, some talk to you, some don't." Donte was referring to the physical segregation of students by race prior to school. At the research site, high performing, wealthy, White students often stand in groups by the parking lot where their cars are; whereas, many of the minority and low achieving students stand by the cafeteria where they receive breakfast.

Valarie stated, "The street has a lot to do with it, like being in gangs. I mean they just put a stamp on African American kids like cause it's a stereotype." It should be noted that while all the students indicated that racism was a problem, Anthony perceived that being African American would be helpful in getting into college:

I feel like my chance [of getting into a good college] is actually better. Some colleges will accept African American students that don't meet all of the qualifications that a White student would have to meet. Like a White student with my ACT score might not get in, but as an African American student, I have a really good chance of getting in.

At the same time that students perceived themselves to be victims of racism, participant responses indicated that they themselves held many negative stereotypes about African Americans, indicating the presence of internalized racism. For example, Nicole indicated that African American families are weak-willed and value education less than White families, giving African American students a disadvantage when it comes to college:

I feel like if African American kids try really hard like the really smart White kids we have the same chance, but I feel like how we grow up and all, more White kids have a chance because their parents have more money and a stronger will to get their kids in that situation. But there are some African American parents who want their kids to go to school and actually get it, but not very many.

Additional examples of internalized racism were evident when students were asked what they felt would help reduce the achievement gap at the research site. Anthony stated: “I don’t know that it can be reduced. I think it is the mindset of people. Most African American parents don’t get involved in the academic stuff. If most African American parents got more involved and gave rewards and stuff it might increase their scores.” These statements indicate a negative stereotype regarding the involvement of African American parents in their child’s education.

Valarie also made statements revealing negative beliefs about African Americans in regards to behavior. As can be seen in the quote below, she believes that there is a double standard for African American and White behavior, but believes African American students should behave differently in order to change the negative beliefs of White society:

I mean, I know I see it every day. I feel like White kids are just at school but African American people want to make a scene. They want to be known. They are like, I’m just going to make a scene because I can. I’m like NO. They do that all the time. I see it everywhere I go, not just at school. A lot of White kids, when they do it, it’s like oh that’s just their personality, but when we do it, oh they are ghetto. So that also has something to do with it too. I feel like us [African Americans] as a whole, if people just tried more then they wouldn’t just see African Americans as just drug addicts and gang bangers and all that.

These stereotypes form and stem from perceptions of what it is to be African American versus what it is to be White. Many of the other students reported experiences similar to Valarie’s. All of the participants in the study stated they try to distance themselves from large loud groups of African Americans at school. Further, when asked about the difference between study habits of Whites versus African Americans, most students felt there was a difference. The students who were enrolled in more honors classes had very few African American peers to compare themselves to. As indicated earlier, African American enrollment in Advanced Placement classes at Croft is very low. Anthony indicated he felt White students study more than African American students. Alise and Valarie agreed. Here’s Alise: “To be honest there are more African American people here that don’t really care than White people who don’t really care. There are a lot of really smart White people here. There are some African American people that try but also a lot that don’t care at all...A lot of them are bullies.” Valarie said: “I feel like White people care more about education.”

Discussion and Implications

The primary research question of this study was whether oppositional culture theory applies to Croft High. We respond to this question by specifically analyzing the findings in terms of the four tenets of Ogbu and Fordham’s (1986) theory.

The first tenet of oppositional culture theory states that African Americans’ perceptions of fewer returns for education and educational opportunities impacts students’ academic achievement (Ainsworth-Downey, & Darnell, 1998). Our findings show some support for this tenet. For example the three male participants reported a perception that it would be harder for them to find employment than for Whites, and these concerns directly reflect reality. In December of 2012, the unemployment rate of African Americans was 14%

as compared to 6.2% for Whites. In the same time period, African Americans between the ages of 16-19 had an unemployment rate of 41% while the rate for their White peers was 22% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Also, all of the students reported that stereotyping of African American students at school is a problem. Students also believe they do not exert enough effort, and that White students work harder than African American students. The data do not tell us whether that perception is accurate, or, if it is, whether the low effort is due to perceptions of fewer returns from education. On the other hand, the study also found that, in contrast to a prevailing belief in the US (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2007), parents and families value education and have high expectations for their children in terms of academic performance and college attendance.

The second tenet states that African American students experience resistance to schooling (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Active resistance to school was not generally supported by the study. Findings indicate that most of the research participants had positive feelings about their teachers and work hard for teachers who have high expectations and care about them. Although students perceived that they had poor study habits, there is little evidence of negative feelings toward school on the part of the participants.

Tenet three states that high achieving African American students are perceived negatively by their peers in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Study findings were mixed in regards to this facet of the theory. Most study participants indicated they have positive perceptions of high achieving students in general, regardless of race. While students acknowledged that peer teasing does occur, half of the participants indicated students are teased for being stupid far more than for being smart. The moderate and low achieving students stated they respected and looked up to their peers who were enrolled in honors or AP classes because they work harder, study more, and catch on faster. These findings are consistent with a study conducted by Tyson (2002), who found that African American students surrounded themselves with peers who supported and valued academic success if they themselves valued academic success.

On the other hand, some students indicated that they had peers who distracted them from academic endeavor. Further, all participants were familiar with the term “Acting White,” and some reported having experienced being accused of it. According to oppositional culture theory, African Americans experience negative feedback from their peers for high academic achievement. By working hard in school and achieving, students are perceived to be buying into and conforming to the dominant culture and “Acting White.” Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that the African American students in their study tailored their behaviors to the environment in which they were in. When surrounded by African American peers who were not high achievers, they downplayed their own achievement but when surrounded by African American peers who were high achievers, they took pride in their achievements. The participants in the current study who indicated they were accused of Acting White claimed they did not bow to this peer pressure and alter their behaviors as a result. However, it would be surprising if such pressure had no influence on the behavior of African American students, though they may not even be aware of it. As has been noted earlier, very few African American students take AP classes at Croft, possibly partially resulting from negative social ramifications for African American students who choose to take those classes.

The fourth tenet states that African American students’ attitudes and perceptions toward school affect their academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This tenet presumes that the confluence of perceptions associated with the first three tenets results in

poor academic achievement of the African Americans who maintain those beliefs. As with the previous tenets, the findings of the study are not conclusive as they pertain to this final tenet. On the one hand, the African American students in the study indicated that they have parents with high expectations regarding academic achievement, generally positive feelings about teachers, and positive perceptions about high achieving peers. Yet some of the experiences Fordham and Ogbu (1986) propose in their theory of social conflict are evident, such as accusations of Acting White by their peers, being stereotyped by others, and the perception that they do not have the same employment opportunities as their White counterparts. African American students at the school receive a highly disproportionate amount of disciplinary action by school staff, and interviewees hold negative perceptions of African Americans as a group. So even though the students interviewed reported holding high hopes for continuing their education and did not report negative feelings about the school, a link between the negative features of the African American students' school experience that the study did find and the lower performance of African American students is certainly plausible.

The study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was small, and the findings may not be generalizable to other African American students at the school. Another important limitation is related to the lead author's position at the school, which may have influenced the way in which the students responded to the questions. Third, the study gathered little information beyond student perceptions. This last limitation may be important, as many aspects of oppositional culture theory may operate without student awareness. For example, the findings related to internalized oppression support the possibility that school culture negatively affects students' self-perception and hence behavior. Palmer and Maramba (2011) discuss the hidden curriculum within society, supported by educational institutions as well as the media, that portrays African Americans as criminals and thugs. These messages promote negative stereotypes associated with African Americans such as increased violence, drug abuse, degradation of women, and obsession with sex. Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2005) emphasize that "the messages sent to young people of color by the dominant media can foster feelings of alienation and inferiority while also justifying individual and institutional racism" (p. 11). The study findings of internalized oppression on the part of interviewees support the notion that the students were likely not entirely aware of the negative effects of institutional culture on their school behavior.

One important implication of the study is that further data collection is warranted to better understand the complex interactions between school, race, and achievement at Croft High. A school improvement model that relies on complex data collection such as Bernhardt's Continuous Improvement Model (2004) could inform improvement at Croft High. Bernhardt's model (2004) is grounded in building a portfolio that is a collection of multiple data sources, including data on: student demographics; student learning; student, parent, teacher, and community perceptions; and school processes (classroom practices, school programs, and assessment practices) (Bernhardt, 2003, p. 2). Figuring out how to improve school performance of African American students at Croft would then require intersecting data categories such as demographics, student learning, and perceptions to find out the parent, teacher, and student perceptions linked to low performing African American students. Another data intersection would involve school processes (description of school programs and procedures), student learning, and demographics to determine the relative effectiveness of school programs associated with low-performing African American students (Bernhardt,

2003, p. 4). Study data indicate that parents have high expectations for their students, though these expectations are not always translated into high school performance on the part of the students. Parent perceptions could be reviewed by demographic of the parent and students to see if there are any differences between subgroups of parents that could inform school efforts to work with parents. The school should also examine processes utilized to communicate and educate parents, making sure administrators are treating all parents as resources for educating students and equipping parents with the knowledge and understanding of the system to best guide their students in academic pursuits. The current study findings provide interesting information about perceptions and experiences of a small number of African American students. One thing these findings indicate is that systematic collection and analysis of a wider range of strategically selected data from a larger number of individuals is likely to be very useful in figuring out how to enhance achievement of all students.

Another important implication of the study pertains to the finding that study participants do not feel they put enough effort toward school. Motivation of students is related to the extent to which teaching is linked to their cultural background (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995), and implementing culturally responsive teaching has been found effective for increasing achievement of all students (Sleeter, 2012). Culturally responsive teaching means having high expectations for students, supporting students in appropriate ways, and making school culturally relevant by: building on students' existing knowledge, revising curricula, developing relationships with students and their families, and developing student awareness of power relations (Sleeter, 2012). Wlodowski and Ginsberg (1995) provide a framework of four conditions necessary for culturally responsive teaching, as follows: 1. Establish inclusion via a learning environment in which students and teacher feel respected, valued, and connected; 2. Provide choice and connect learning to students' personal lives; 3. Make learning challenging and meaningful for students by including students' perspectives and values; 4. Develop competence in students (p. 20). Such actions enhance intrinsic motivation, engagement, and thus performance, especially for students of color.

One additional specific action the school could take that links to culturally relevant pedagogy is the need to provide more representation of African Americans in the school staff. Currently only three of 135 teachers are African American, as is one out of five guidance counselors, and two out seven administrators. Croft High School needs to focus on recruiting and promoting more African American teachers and administrators to serve as examples of highly educated successful role models.

Conclusion

Recent legislation has increased the focus on accountability for achievement for all students but has yet to create conditions that consistently close achievement gaps between various subgroups of students; indeed, the gap between African American and White student achievement persists (Sleeter, 2012). Ogbu and Fordham's oppositional culture theory posits that the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites has roots in African American reaction to oppression. The current study found modest support for application of some of the tenets of the theory to the high school studied. Although the results are not conclusive, they point to the need to work harder to understand the complex dynamics behind the performance of students of color, and in this case African American students in particular, in Croft High School and in US schools in general. The findings also point to additional kinds

of data that schools should be collecting in systematic ways, as well as the need to implement culturally relevant pedagogy.

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