ASSESSING THE OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE EXPLANATION FOR RACIAL/ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN SCHOOL PERFORMANCE*

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The oppositional culture explanation for racial disparities in school performance posits that individuals from historically oppressed groups (involuntary minorities) signify their antagonism toward the dominant group by resisting school goals. In contrast, individuals from the dominant group and groups that migrated freely to the host country (immigrant minorities) maintain optimistic views of their chances for educational and occupational success. Because of its historical and cross-cultural appeal, this explanation has been well-received by academics, although key implications of the theory have not been carefully tested. Proponents have failed to systematically compare perceptions of occupational opportunity and resistance to school across involuntary, dominant, and immigrant groups. Using a large sample of African American, Asian American, and non-Hispanic white high school sophomores from the first follow-up of the National Education Longitudinal Study, we provide the first rigorous test of the oppositional culture explanation. Upon close scrutiny, its key predictions fail.

Despite recent improvement on some measures, the gap in educational performance across racial groups persists. Finding explanations for that gap continues to frustrate academics. Some scholars point to characteristics of the minority family itself (Moynihan 1965), while others see differences in educational performance as primarily a function of social structural conditions (Bourdieu 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976), such as the types of neighborhoods students live in (Massey and Denton 1993) and consequently the kinds of schools they attend. The oppositional culture explanation draws from both of these traditions, recognizing that social structural conditions shape opportunities but arguing that these conditions form students' motivation for schooling. However, we challenge the main tenets of the oppositional culture explanation.

THE OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE EXPLANATION

Ogbu's (1978, 1991a) explanation for racial differences in school performance, referred to here as the oppositional culture explanation (or the resistance model), has gained considerable acceptance among scholars. A key component in the explanation is the distinction between *immigrant minorities*—groups who migrated to the host country of their own free will—and *involuntary minorities*—groups historically enslaved, colonized, or conquered. Immigrant minorities tend to compare their condition to that of relatives in their homelands, and because this comparison is usually favorable, they develop optimistic attitudes regarding both their chances for success in the new country and the payoff for efforts aimed at promoting achievement. In comparison, involuntary minorities are in a psychologically vulnerable position; their members did not migrate with an expectation to improve their condition, but were incorporated into society against their will. Lacking an identifiable

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foreign reference group, involuntary minorities contrast their condition with that of the dominant group. This comparison tends to produce resentment because they conclude that they fare poorly solely because they belong to a disfavored group. Involuntary minorities learn from those around them that they have limited job opportunities, and so they put forth little effort toward success in school because, as proponents of this explanation contend, there is a reciprocal relationship between the opportunities available to a minority group and the "pattern of linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and other school-related skills they develop" (Ogbu 1978:5; also see Ogbu 1991a for a more elaborate description of the oppositional culture explanation).

Sociologists find attractive several components of Ogbu's (1978; 1991a) explanation for racial disparities in school performance. The central thesis, that perceptions of occupational opportunity shape students' personal characteristics, such as their motivational levels and value for schooling, provides a compelling link between societal conditions and actors' daily actions. Of course, a similar argument has been made by others to explain the attitudes and behaviors of working-class students. For example, the lads in Willis's (1976) *Learning to Labor* rejected schoolwork because it was perceived as having little consequence for their future lives. Similarly, Kohn (1977) notes that working-class parents emphasize characteristics in their children that will serve them well in the roles they expect their children to fill as adults—largely working-class positions. Both Willis and Kohn stress that the very characteristics working-class students develop also prevent them from excelling in school and moving into middle-class occupations. Ogbu applies this same logic to involuntary minorities, contending that perceptions of poor occupational opportunities encourage resistance to school goals.

Perhaps because of its sociological appeal, the resistance model has been applauded by a wide range of scholars (Erickson 1987; Fischer et al. 1996; Foley 1991; Jaynes and Williams 1989), even though the model's key claims have not received empirical verification. Specifically, proponents have failed to systematically compare perceptions of occupational opportunity and resistance to school across involuntary, dominant, and immigrant groups. To address this problem, we assess whether four of the model's key claims, derived primarily from ethnographic studies, are consistent with data from a national survey.

Our data come from the first follow-up of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), a national sample of almost 17,000 high school sophomores collected in 1990 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). We focus on the 2,197 African American, 653 Asian American, and 13,942 non-Hispanic white students in our sample because these groups are the best representatives of involuntary, immigrant, and dominant groups in the United States.[1] Although our examination of four hypotheses derived from the oppositional culture model is short of an exhaustive test, lack of support for any of these claims is cause for skepticism.

THE OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE MODEL: FOUR HYPOTHESES AND RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: Involuntary minority (African American) students perceive fewer returns to education and more limited occupational opportunities than do dominant (white) students or immigrant minority (Asian American) students.

Ogbu (1978) writes, "An important determinant of school performance is what children and their parents or community expect to gain from their education in adult life" (p. 54). He cites his own work and that of other ethnographers as evidence that African Americans *perceive* limited occupational op-

[1] The Asian American group includes Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Korean students. We originally kept these Asian subgroups separate, but because they behaved similarly in our models we combined them. We excluded Southeast Asians because their status as an immigrant minority is less clear. A small number of immigrant blacks was excluded.

In practice, distinguishing between involuntary and immigrant minorities is not as straightforward as oppositional culture proponents would like (e.g., see Tuan 1995), but because our goal is to assess oppositional culture claims, we employ the proponents' categorizations.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Descriptions for Dependent Variables Used in the Analysis: High School Sophomores from National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

Variable name	Description	Metric	Mean	S.D.	Alpha
Educational Outcome					
Student grades	Self-reported grades in math, English, history, and science classes.	0 = Mostly below D in all academic subjects taken; 7 = Mostly A's in all academic subjects taken.	4.63	1.49	.77
Perceptions of Future Opportunity					
Education is important to getting a job later on	Do you agree with the following statement about why you go to school? Education is important for getting a job later on.	0 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Strongly agree.	2.57	.61	—
Occupational expectations	Occupation that you expect to have at age 30.	0 = Not planning to work, don't know; 4 = Professional/clergy.	2.43	1.29	—
Skills, Habits, and Styles					
Effort	Standardized scale of teachers' responses to: Does this student usually work hard for good grades? (Yes/No); How often does this student complete homework assignments? (Never–all of the time); How often is this student attentive in class? (Never–all of the time).	−8.63 = Lowest standardized score; 3.47 = Highest standardized score.	−.13	2.29	.88
Disruptive	Teachers' responses to: How often is this student disruptive in class?	0 = Never; 4 = All of the time.	.67	.76	—
In trouble	How many times did the following things happen to you in the first half of the current school year? (a) I got in trouble for not following school rules; (b) I was put on an in-school suspension; (c) I was suspended or put on probation from school; (d) I was transferred to another school for disciplinary reasons; (e) I was arrested.	0 = Never to all five questions; 50 = Ten times or more to all five questions.	1.75	3.07	.64
Homework	Overall about how much time do you spend on homework each week out of school?	0 = None; 16 = Over 15 hours.	4.25	4.14	—
Concrete Attitudes					
Treatment by teachers	Do you agree that: (a) When you work hard on schoolwork, your teachers praise your efforts; (b) In class you often feel "put down" by your teachers; (c) Most of your teachers really listen to what you have to say.	0 = Disagree strongly with a and c, and agree strongly with b; 9 = Agree strongly with a and c, and disagree strongly with b.	5.38	1.52	.64
Attitude toward teachers	Do you agree that: (a) The teaching is good at your school; (b) Teachers are interested in students.	0 = Disagree strongly with both statements; 6 = Agree strongly with both statements.	3.75	1.08	.54[a]

(Table 1 continued on next page)

(Table 1 continued from previous page)

Variable name	Description	Metric	Mean	S.D.	Alpha
Concrete Attitudes (Continued)					
Discipline is fair	How much do you agree with the following statement about your current school and teachers? Discipline is fair.	0 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Strongly agree.	1.68	.69	—
OK to break rules	How often do you think it is OK to: (a) cut a couple of classes; (b) skip school for a whole day; (c) talk back to teachers; (d) disobey school rules?	0 = Never to all four questions; 12 = Often to all four questions.	2.41	2.26	.78
Doing what I am supposed to do in class	Do you agree with the following statements about why you go to school? I get a feeling of satisfaction from doing what I'm supposed to do in class.	0 = Strongly disagree; 3 = Strongly agree.	1.83	.65	—
OK to cheat	How often do you think it is OK to: (a) cheat on tests; (b) copy someone else's homework?	0 = Never to both questions; 6 = Often to both questions.	1.48	1.42	.63[a]
Good student	Do you think that other students see you as a good student?	0 = Not at all; 2 = Very much.	1.18	.60	—
Troublemaker	Do you think that other students see you as a troublemaker?	0 = Not at all; 2 = Very much.	.33	.55	—
Tries hard in class	How often do you try as hard as you can in math, English, history, and science?	0 = Never in all academic subjects taken; 4 = Almost every day in all academic subjects taken.	3.15	.94	.75
Popularity among Peers					
Popularity	Do you think that other students see you (a) as popular; (b) as socially active; (c) as part of the leading crowd?	0 = Not at all to all three questions; 6 = Very much to all three questions.	2.88	1.36	.74

Note: Valid cases range from 11,937 to 16,972.

[a] Bivariate correlation.

portunities (Dollard 1957; Ogbu 1974:97; Powdermaker 1968). We question these studies, however, because they lack a direct comparison with white students and because some surveys indicate more favorable occupational expectations among African Americans (Porter 1974; Portes and Wilson 1976). In addition, the extensive literature documenting African Americans' optimistic educational expectations (Solorzano 1991) raises the possibility that African Americans may be similarly optimistic regarding their occupational chances.

To test this issue more explicitly, we measure whether youths report that *education is important for getting a job later on,* and we gauge perceptions of occupational opportunity by asking about the type of *occupation the youth expects to have at age 30.* We regress these two dependent variables on race in unadjusted models (Model 1), and then in models controlling for background (Model 2) and socioeconomic characteristics (Model 3). Table 1 presents detailed information on all dependent variables.

Because we are interested in racial/ethnic differences in performance that are independent of socioeconomic factors, we include in our models factors other than immigrant/involuntary minority status that may affect

Table 2. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression of Perceptions of Future Opportunity on Race and Selected Independent Variables: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

	Education Is Important for Getting a Job Later On			Occupational Expectations		
Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	.042*** (.012)	.025* (.013)	.042*** (.013)	.049* (.024)	.081** (.026)	.150*** (.026)
Asian American	.104*** (.030)	.093** (.030)	.086** (.030)	.343*** (.063)	.274*** (.063)	.250*** (.062)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	.004*** (.001)	—	—	.023*** (.003)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.028*** (.006)	—	—	.065*** (.013)
Parental education	—	—	.028*** (.004)	—	—	.117*** (.009)
R^2	.001	.015	.025	.002	.026	.057

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. White is the omitted category for race. Models 2 and 3 also include the following control variables: sex, region, number of siblings, parents' age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

educational performance. We control for parents' highest level of education (0 = no high school to 6 = advanced degree), parents' occupational prestige (0 = low occupational status to 4 = high occupational status),[2] and family income (in tens of thousands of dollars). In addition, we include controls for sex, region, number of siblings, parental age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school because these variables may be associated with race and may predict educational performance. In each analysis, white students are the omitted category, and for missing data we substituted the mean.[3] We also weighted the data to account for the NELS sampling design.[4]

Our results for Hypothesis 1, presented in Table 2, contradict the oppositional culture model's claim: In the adjusted models (Model 3), African American students are significantly more likely than white students to report that education is important to getting a job later on (b = .042) and to have more optimistic occupational expectations (b = .150) than white students. Therefore, a key assumption of the oppositional culture model—that involuntary minorities perceive lower returns to education and more limited occupational opportunities than do students from the dominant group—is not supported.

Hypothesis 2: Involuntary minority (African American) students exhibit greater resistance to school than do dominant (white) students or immigrant minority (Asian American) students.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, many ethnographers have described conflict between

[2] For parents' education, occupation, and age, we used information from both parents whenever both were available. The coded data for the variables measuring parents' education and parents' occupational prestige reflect the highest levels of education and prestige achieved by both parents. "Parents' age" is coded as the average age of the two parents.

[3] Binary variables indicating missing-variable status (Cohen and Cohen 1983) were not statistically significant. We also estimated our models using listwise deletion of missing data and found similar patterns.

[4] Most statistical packages compute standard errors that are technically too small when analyzing data based on a clustered sampling design such as that used for the NELS (NCES 1995). We present standard errors unadjusted for research design, which provide the most favorable test of the oppositional culture hypotheses. The overall patterns are identical, however, whether or not we corrected the standard errors.

involuntary minority students and teachers and administrators (Gilmore 1985; Solomon 1992; Weis 1985). While these ethnographies offer rich descriptions of the behaviors of some groups of students, critics of the oppositional culture model may remain unconvinced because these studies lack a careful *comparison* of African American students and white students' resistance toward school. It is possible that many high school students—not just African Americans—share substantial anti-academic values, as Coleman reported (1961).

Measuring resistance to school poses a special challenge. Ogbu (1991b) contends that attitudinal indicators of resistance to school may not be adequate:

> [O]ne learns what blacks believe about how they get ahead in America not necessarily by asking them direct questions about getting ahead; direct questions will generally elicit responses similar to those given by white Americans. A more useful approach is to observe what they do in order to get ahead. (P. 444)

Others agree that observing what students do—their "skills, habits, and styles"—is key to understanding school success (Swidler 1986), but students' attitudes and preferences are not inconsequential because they signal "competence" and count for "good citizenship" (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Mickelson (1990) notes that measures of students' attitudes regarding specific, everyday events—what she calls *concrete attitudes*—can predict educational performance. To gauge resistance to school, we consider students' skills, habits, and styles and their concrete attitudes.

We measure skills, habits, and styles with indicators similar to those used by others (Farkas 1996). Two teachers assessed each student's classroom *effort* and whether the student was *disruptive* in the classroom. We also use two student-reported measures: (1) *In trouble* is a composite variable constructed from several questions about events that happened to the youth during the first half of the 1989–1990 school year (e.g., got in trouble for not following school rules; was suspended); and (2) *homework* represents the number of hours the student spent on schoolwork per week.

We measure students' concrete attitudes on a broad range of specific issues regarding school. Our attitudinal variables cover students' perceptions of how teachers treat them (*treatment by teachers*) and their more general *attitude toward teachers*. We also tap into potential frustrations with being mistreated by asking students whether they think *discipline is fair* at their school. And because involuntary minorities are expected to be especially resistant to school rules, we created three variables: *OK to break rules*, whether the student reports a feeling of satisfaction from *doing what I am supposed to do in class*, and *OK to cheat* on tests and copy homework. We also use the items "Do you think that other students see you as a good student?" (*good student*), and alternatively, "Do you think that other students see you as a troublemaker?" (*troublemaker*). Finally, *tries hard in class* gauges students' self-reported effort. To determine whether African American students resist school goals more than do white students and Asian American students, we regress our indicators of skills, habits, and styles and concrete attitudes on race in unadjusted models (Model 1) and in models controlling for background (Model 2) and socioeconomic variables (Model 3).

We find mixed results when testing Hypothesis 2. When we focus on students' skills, habits, and styles, our results are consistent with the oppositional culture model: From Model 3 in Table 3a, African American students are evaluated by their teachers as putting forth significantly less effort (b = −.332) and as more frequently being disruptive (b = .129) than white students. And students' self-reports agree—African Americans report doing less homework (b = −.274) than do white students. African American students also report being in trouble more often in the unadjusted model (b = .185), but this pattern is accounted for by the background variables included in Model 2.

For our measures of concrete attitudes, however, the results are strikingly different. Overall, African American students report more positive attitudes toward school than do white students (Table 3b). For example, focusing on the adjusted model (Model 3), African American students are significantly more likely than their white counterparts to report good treatment by teachers (b =

Table 3a. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression of Skills, Habits, and Styles on Race and Selected Independent Variables: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

	Effort			Disruptive		
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	−.563*** (.048)	−.444*** (.052)	−.332*** (.051)	.154*** (.013)	.140*** (.014)	.129*** (.015)
Asian American	.393** (.124)	.293* (.124)	.235 (.122)	−.115*** (.035)	−.110** (.035)	−.101** (.035)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	.018*** (.005)	—	—	.001 (.002)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.086*** (.025)	—	—	.011 (.007)
Parental education	—	—	.270*** (.018)	—	—	−.048*** (.005)
R^2	.009	.059	.085	.009	.056	.062

	In Trouble			Homework		
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	.185** (.065)	.050 (.070)	−.016 (.070)	−.526*** (.081)	−.465*** (.088)	−.274** (.087)
Asian American	−.755*** (.167)	−.536** (.167)	−.499** (.167)	1.345*** (.210)	.716*** (.210)	.632** (.207)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	−.008 (.007)	—	—	.047*** (.009)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	−.024 (.035)	—	—	.205*** (.043)
Parental education	—	—	−.184*** (.025)	—	—	.370*** (.031)
R^2	.002	.041	.046	.005	.043	.066

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. White is the omitted category for race. Models 2 and 3 also include the following control variables: sex, region, number of siblings, parents' age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

.289), less likely to agree that it is OK to break rules (b = −.450), and more likely to report a feeling of satisfaction from doing what they are supposed to do in class (b = .129). Similarly, African Americans are significantly less likely than whites to agree that it is OK to cheat (b = −.236) and more likely to report that others view them as a good student (b = .125) but not a troublemaker (b = −.070). Finally, African American students are significantly more likely than their white counterparts to report that they try hard in class (b = .120). Overall, African American students and Asian American students consistently report more pro-school attitudes than do white students. Results for "discipline is fair" provide the only exception.[5]

Hypothesis 3: High-achieving involuntary minority (African American) students are negatively sanctioned by their peers for their achievement.

Oppositional culture proponents recognize that not all involuntary minority students do poorly in school. Proponents claim,

[5] A reviewer suggested that resistance to school may be distributed more unevenly among African Americans than for whites, with high resistance among the most disadvantaged and strong school support among the middle and upper so-

Table 3b. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression of Concrete Attitudes on Race and Selected Independent Variables: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

	Treatment by Teachers			Attitude toward teachers			Discipline Is Fair		
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	.327***	.264***	.289***	.061**	.018	.044	−.060***	−.075***	−.062***
	(.032)	(.035)	(.035)	(.023)	(.025)	(.025)	(.013)	(.015)	(.015)
Asian American	.194*	.108	.106	.116*	.058	.054	.100**	.066	.061
	(.083)	(.084)	(.084)	(.059)	(.060)	(.060)	(.035)	(.035)	(.035)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	.016***	—	—	.014***	—	—	.004**
			(.004)			(.003)			(.002)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.026	—	—	.037**	—	—	−.003
			(.018)			(.012)			(.007)
Parental education	—	—	.016	—	—	.018*	—	—	.030***
			(.012)			(.009)			(.005)
R^2	.006	.014	.016	.001	.007	.012	.002	.007	.011

	OK to Break Rules			Doing What I Am Supposed to Do In Class			OK to Cheat		
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African Americans	−.502***	−.428***	−.450***	.135***	.119***	.129***	−.302***	−.237***	−.236***
	(.048)	(.052)	(.052)	(.012)	(.014)	(.014)	(.030)	(.033)	(.033)
Asian American	−.169	−.209	−.195	.110***	.087**	.087**	−.079	−.068	−.066
	(.123)	(.124)	(.124)	(.032)	(.032)	(.032)	(.077)	(.078)	(.078)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	−.001	—	—	.006***	—	—	.005
			(.006)			(.001)			(.003)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	−.040	—	—	.014*	—	—	−.047**
			(.026)			(.007)			(.016)
Parental education	—	—	−.050**	—	—	.004	—	—	.015
			(.018)			(.005)			(.012)
R^2	.007	.035	.037	.007	.013	.015	.006	.020	.020

	Good Student			Troublemaker			Tries Hard in Class		
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	.092***	.105***	.125***	−.084***	−.067***	−.070***	.145***	.123***	.120***
	(.011)	(.012)	(.012)	(.010)	(.011)	(.011)	(.018)	(.020)	(.020)
Asian American	.194***	.159***	.150***	−.071**	−.065*	−.061*	.018	−.000	.002
	(.029)	(.030)	(.029)	(.027)	(.027)	(.027)	(.047)	(.047)	(.047)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	.004**	—	—	.002	—	—	−.000
			(.001)			(.001)			(.002)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.027***	—	—	−.001	—	—	.011
			(.006)			(.006)			(.010)
Parental education	—	—	.039***	—	–	−.020***	—	—	−.014*
			(.004)			(.004)			(.007)
R^2	.006	.021	.035	.004	.045	.047	.004	.030	.030

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. White is the omitted category for race. Models 2 and 3 also include the following control variables: sex, region, number of siblings, parents' age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Table 4. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression of Popularity on Race and Selected Independent Variables: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

	Popularity				
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
African American	.010	.042	.079*	.024	−.027
	(.029)	(.032)	(.032)	(.031)	(.036)
Asian American	−.177*	−.164*	−.170*	−.235**	−.167
	(.074)	(.076)	(.076)	(.075)	(.093)
Family income (in $1,000s)	—	—	.020***	.018***	.018***
			(.003)	(.003)	(.003)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.094***	.083***	.083***
			(.016)	(.016)	(.016)
Parental education	—	—	.006	−.010	−.009
			(.011)	(.011)	(.011)
Does youth think that other students see him/her as a good student?					
Very good	—	—	—	.373***	.340***
				(.026)	(.029)
Not at all good	—	—	—	−.542***	−.534***
				(.039)	(.040)
African American × "Very" good student	—	—	—	—	.227***
					(.067)
Asian American × "Very" good student	—	—	—	—	−.154
					(.156)
African American × "Not at all" good student	—	—	—	—	−.089
					(.137)
Asian American × "Not at all" good student	—	—	—	—	−.368
					(.446)
R^2	.000	.004	.011	.040	.040

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. White is the omitted category for race; "somewhat good" is the omitted category for good student. Models 2 through 5 also include the following control variables: sex, region, number of siblings, parents' age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

however, that those involuntary minority students who do excel tend to feel psychological pressure from the "burden of acting white." Fordham and Ogbu (1986) explain that because African Americans develop an "oppositional social identity" that maintains boundaries between themselves and whites, they regard "certain activities or events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans" (p. 181). Because performing well in school is defined as "white," high-achieving African Americans feel burdened because other African Americans perceive them as "selling out" and "acting white," a pattern also reported among Chicano Mexican-oriented students (Portes and Zhou 1993:89).

While ethnographers find indications of peer sanctioning, we question whether this pattern prevails in a representative sample. To test whether the general cultural norm against academic achievement in high school is any more prevalent among African Ameri-

cioeconomic groups. We find no evidence of this in the NELS data. Instead, our results more closely follow the pattern reported by Hochschild (1995), showing *less* variance across socioeconomic levels in the African American sample than in the white sample.

cans than it is among whites or Asian Americans, we predict students' popularity by whether they are labeled a "good student" by others. Our composite measure of student's *popularity* is based on three questions: Do you think other students see you as (1) popular, (2) socially active, and (3) part of the leading crowd?

Table 4 presents the results of predicting popularity with "good student," race, and interactions between "good student" and race. For all students, those who report that others view them as a "very good" versus a "somewhat good" (omitted category) or "not at all good" student also report the most popularity among their peers. But with respect to the oppositional culture model, our tests contradict Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) claims. We find a positive interaction between being African American and being viewed as a "very good" student ($b = .227$), demonstrating that, relative to white students, African American students are especially popular when they are also seen as very good students.[6] Furthermore, in supplemental analyses (not shown), we compared students' responses to the question, "Among the friends you hang out with, how important is it to: study, get good grades, finish high school, and continue their education beyond high school." Again, African American students report more pro-school values among their peers than do white students, and this discrepancy increases in models controlling for background and socioeconomic differences.

Hypothesis 4: Resistance to school accounts for the racial gap in school performance between involuntary (African American) students and dominant (white) students and immigrant minority (Asian American) students.

Although their ethnographic evidence is consistent with this claim, Ogbu and associates (Ogbu 1978; Fordham and Ogbu 1986) have not systematically tested whether resistance to school *explains* the racial gap in performance. We predict students' overall grades for math, English, history, and science classes in unadjusted models. Then we introduce our measures of resistance to school—indicators of skills, habits, and styles and concrete attitudes—as blocks of intervening variables, both separately and together.

Table 5 shows the results of this analysis. Note that at the bivariate level (Model 1), African Americans have poorer grades ($b = -.254$) than do white students, and Asian Americans have better grades ($b = .530$). Controlling for background and socioeconomic differences (Model 3) reduces these disparities substantially. And when we introduce indicators of skills, habits, and styles (Model 4) the African American coefficient is reduced to nonsignificance, supporting the emphasis others have placed on the role of students' cultural skills for explaining racial differences in school outcomes (Farkas 1995). Skills, habits, and styles are also important for explaining Asian Americans' success—the Asian American coefficient drops from .364 to .241 on their inclusion. Model 5, which predicts grades from concrete attitudes (omitting skills, habits, and styles), exacerbates the gap between African Americans and whites ($b = -.087$ in Model 3, $b = -.280$ in Model 5), largely because African Americans generally have more pro-school attitudes. These attitudinal indicators are also key to understanding the success of Asian American students: The coefficient for Asian Americans is reduced by roughly one-half, from .364 (Model 3) to .171 (Model 5). Clearly, it would be a mistake to conclude that racial differences in school performance are solely a result of variations in school behavior. Without students' concrete attitudes in the model, we would err by assuming that African Americans would earn similar grades if their behaviors were like white students'. This is not true. In Model 4, African American students are statistically equal to whites with respect to grades, but their attitudes, which are not controlled, are much more positive. Yet when African American students have attitudes only as positive as whites (Model 6), they earn lower grades. Without such pro-school attitudes, African American students would surely be farther behind white students than they are now.

[6] Supplemental analyses revealed that this pattern is robust, whether "high-achieving" students are defined by their standardized test scores, or by grades, or by using self-concept as the dependent variable.

Table 5. Unstandardized Coefficients from the Regression of Student Grades on Race and Selected Independent Variables: High School Sophomores from the National Education Longitudinal Study, 1990

	Student Grades					
Independent Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5[a]	Model 6[a]
African American	−.254*** (.029)	−.174*** (.032)	−.087** (.031)	.017 (.026)	−.280*** (.027)	−.130*** (.025)
Asian American	.530*** (.075)	.404*** (.075)	.364*** (.074)	.241*** (.062)	.171** (.063)	.149** (.058)
Family income (in $10,000s)	—	—	.019*** (.003)	.011*** (.003)	.013*** (.003)	.009*** (.003)
Parental occupational prestige	—	—	.091*** (.015)	.056*** (.013)	.057*** (.013)	.042*** (.012)
Parental education	—	—	.179*** (.011)	.076*** (.009)	.132*** (.009)	.074*** (.009)
Skills, Habits, and Styles						
Effort	—	—	—	.275*** (.004)	—	.214*** (.004)
In trouble	—	—	—	−.054*** (.003)	—	−.034*** (.003)
Homework	—	—	—	.049*** (.002)	—	.028*** (.002)
Concrete Attitudes						
Treatment by teachers	—	—	—	—	.035*** (.007)	.020** (.007)
Attitude toward teachers	—	—	—	—	.037*** (.010)	.014 (.010)
Discipline is fair	—	—	—	—	.011 (.015)	−.015 (.014)
OK to break rules	—	—	—	—	−.025*** (.005)	.010* (.005)
Doing what I am supposed to in class	—	—	—	—	.144*** (.017)	.127*** (.016)
OK to cheat	—	—	—	—	.003 (.007)	−.010 (.007)
Good student	—	—	—	—	1.053*** (.018)	.774*** (.017)
Troublemaker	—	—	—	—	−.178*** (.020)	−.028 (.019)
Tries hard in class	—	—	—	—	.072*** (.011)	.008 (.010)
R^2	.008	.041	.080	.355	.328	.442

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. White is the omitted category for race. Models 2 through 6 also include the following control variables: sex, region, number of siblings, parents' age, family structure, and urban/suburban/rural location of school. "Disruptive" was omitted from this analysis due to colinearity issues.

[a] When we include perceptions of future opportunity in Models 5 and 6 as additional measures of attitudes toward school, the African American coefficient is −.292 in Model 5 and − .144 in Model 6.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

SUMMARY EVALUATION OF THE OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE EXPLANATION

Our goal has been to evaluate key claims of the oppositional culture explanation for racial differences in school performance. Using data from a national survey, we found that the model is inconsistent with the data in several ways. The fundamental flaw of Ogbu's (1978; 1991a) oppositional culture explanation is that African American students do not perceive fewer returns to education and more limited occupational opportunities than do whites. Without support for this cornerstone of the theory, African Americans' relative lack of skills, habits, and styles is open to alternative explanations. Also, while others have shown that African Americans report relatively high educational expectations (Solzarno 1991), we demonstrate that this pattern extends much further. On a host of specific questions about their everyday lives in the classroom, African American students report more pro-school attitudes than do white students. And rather than suffering sanctioning from peers, African Americans who are viewed as good students are more likely to be popular than are their white counterparts.

How do we reconcile our results with those garnered from the many ethnographies that describe anti-school attitudes among African Americans (Gilmore 1985; Ogbu 1978; Solomon 1992; Weis 1985)? One way is to restrict our sample to the most discouraged students: dropouts. Fortunately, the NELS located and surveyed many of these dropouts, so we were able to compare dropouts' occupational expectations and attitudes toward school with those of the rest of the sample. Focusing only on those African Americans who dropped out of school between the eighth and tenth grades reveals a group of African Americans much like the ones Ogbu describes—frustrated with their occupational chances, pessimistic about their futures, and resistant to school goals (results available from authors on request).

Because the goal of the oppositional culture model is to explain societal racial differences in school performance (Ogbu 1978, 1991a), we contend that tests of the full range of African American students rather than those focusing only on the most discouraged are more appropriate. We agree that, *under some conditions*, African Americans may see little profit in continuing their educations, in part because they perceive limited opportunities in the labor market. Yet when we analyze a representative group of African Americans, we see patterns that contradict the oppositional culture model. It is important, therefore, not to misconstrue the problems of the most disadvantaged African Americans as necessarily characteristic of the experiences of all African Americans.

The second reason why our results are inconsistent with Ogbu and his colleagues is that we systematically *compare* African American students with their white counterparts. This careful comparison of attitudes toward school with a representative sample reveals that African American students have more pro-school attitudes than do whites. Again, this type of comparison is not incompatible with ethnographic research. MacLeod (1995) observed the attitudes and behaviors of two groups of teenagers living in a low-income neighborhood—the mostly white "Hallway Hangers" and the mostly black "Brothers." He compared their perceptions of occupational opportunity and found greater optimism among the African American group. Interestingly, comparing occupational expectations and attitudes toward school among African American dropouts with those of white dropouts in our sample produces patterns similar to those in Tables 2, 3a, and 3b, although the differences are less likely to reach statistical significance because of small sample sizes. Even among this disenfranchised group, therefore, African Americans maintain more pro-school attitudes than do whites (results available from the authors on request).

RETHINKING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ATTITUDE–ACHIEVEMENT "PARADOX"

How can we make sense of African Americans' optimistic occupational expectations and positive concrete attitudes yet relatively poor classroom behavior as indicated by skills, habits, and styles? African Americans appear to value school but fail to put forth the necessary effort for success. We assess

three possible explanations: (1) abstract versus concrete attitudes, (2) positivity bias, and (3) values versus material conditions.

Abstract versus Concrete Attitudes

Mickelson's (1990) distinction between attitudes that matter for educational performance and those that do not could explain our results. She explains that researchers have been puzzled by African American students' pro-education attitudes yet relatively poor school achievement because they measure attitudes with *abstract* indicators (e.g., "Education is the key to success in the future") that simply reflect the *dominant ideology* rather than *concrete* indicators "rooted in life experience" (Mickelson 1990:51). Mickelson claims to resolve this "paradox" by noting that African American students support education at the abstract level but feel frustrated with schooling at the concrete level, and that concrete attitudes predict students' grades, while abstract attitudes do not.[7] Similarly, Ogbu (1991b) explains away blacks' pro-school attitudes by claiming that they represent "wishful thinking" and that blacks "simply do not match their aspirations with effort" (p. 446). As a result, although ethnographic researchers and survey researchers agree that blacks report pro-school attitudes, Ogbu (1991b) dismisses these attitudes as unimportant.

But our data, and that of many others, demonstrate that stated preferences, or attitudes, *do matter for success in school*. Researchers have consistently documented African Americans' strong educational aspirations, but to be consistent with Mickelson's and Ogbu's explanations, educational aspirations would have to have little impact on educational performance. This is not the case (Kerckhoff and Campbell 1977). Similarly, in our study African Americans reported more pro-school attitudes for nearly all of our attitudinal measures, and these same indicators were meaningful predictors of educational success above and beyond the effect of behaviors.

In addition, we find that correlations between attitudes and behaviors for blacks are only slightly lower than those for whites. In supplemental analyses using the NELS data, we tested whether students' occupational expectations influence skills, habits, and styles and concrete attitudes differently for African American students than for white students. The interactions were not significant and produced no consistent pattern. We also tested whether African Americans' pro-school attitudes have a smaller effect on their grades than do pro-school attitudes for grades of white students. This claim was supported for only two of our nine indicators of school attitudes ("good student," "troublemaker"). In sum, compared to white students, African American students' responses to our questions regarding attitudes toward school correlated equally well with occupational expectations and nearly as well with grades.[8] The paradox cannot be resolved, therefore, by arguing that the pro-school attitudes reported by African Americans are meaningless for educational success.

Finally, by simply noting that a given attitude is rarely the *only* independent variable predicting a behavior, we can understand how blacks can have more positive attitudes (valid ones) and poorer behaviors (valid ones) than whites. In a multivariate model, if blacks are disadvantaged on other independent variables that predict behaviors, (e.g., material conditions and other unmeasured variables) then they could easily have a higher group mean on attitudes but a lower group mean on behaviors. There is no need to invoke an attitude–behavior inconsistency argument.

Positivity Bias

An alternative explanation is that black students are, on average, reluctant to present themselves negatively to a research enterprise conducted by whites. Although within-race attitude–behavior correlations may be similar, the argument is that African Americans' responses to both attitudinal and be-

[7] Note that we borrowed Mickelson's *concrete* term to highlight the way in which our attitudinal indicators measure students' views of their own everyday school experiences.

[8] For many attitude–behavior relationships, Asian American correlations more closely match those of African Americans than those of whites. Based on predictive validity, therefore, Asian Americans' responses are no more credible than those of African Americans.

havioral survey questions reflect "positivity bias" and are therefore less trustworthy. For example, blacks may report working "very hard" in school but, on average, they may not put forth the same effort as white students who report the same attitude.

Actual as opposed to correlational attitude–behavior inconsistency is not easily determined, however. For example, in the NELS data African American students who reported that they work "as hard as they can almost every day" in their classes also reported doing an average of 3.9 hours of homework per week. In contrast, Asian American students and white students who reported working "as hard as they can almost every day" averaged 7.5 and 5.4 hours of homework per week, respectively. It is unclear whether black students' attitudes are inconsistent with their behaviors, however, because there is no definite number of hours students who work "as hard as they can almost every day" are *supposed* to spend on homework.[9] Consequently, we are no more justified in concluding that blacks exhibit positivity bias than that whites suffer from negativity bias.

We emphasize this point because scholars considering this issue tend to start with the assumption that white Americans' attitude–behavior relationship is normative and that departures from this norm are deviant.[10] Consider an alternative scenario that assumes that African American's attitude–behavior relationship is normative. The "paradox" then becomes, "Given their relatively strong achievement, why do white students have such anti-school attitudes?" Our point is that for the types of attitudinal questions we use in our study, determining whether blacks' reported attitudes are more positive than they *should be* or whether white's reported attitudes are more negative than they *should be* is not a resolvable question.

Of course, black students and white students may employ different reference groups when answering attitudinal questions. Whether one "tries hard in school" may mean different things to black students and white students because they are surrounded by different sets of peers with varying norms and expectations regarding school-related behaviors. Recognizing that the meaning of survey questions may differ for black students and white students, however, does not justify labeling African Americans' responses as less credible than those of whites or Asian Americans.

Values versus Material Conditions

Continued occupational discrimination (Farley 1984), residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993), and differential treatment (Cose 1993; Feagin 1991) should foster frustration and resentment among African Americans rather than optimism. In many ways, African Americans do express continued frustration with current racial conditions. For example, Hochschild (1995) explains that African Americans

> . . . are more sure than whites that racial discrimination inhibits black Americans . . . , more pessimistic about how much success blacks can anticipate . . . , more convinced that blacks' life chances are not within their control . . . , and slightly less confident that they control their own life chances. . . . Nevertheless, African Americans remain more confident than whites about their own prospects. (P. 69)

So while cognizant of and frustrated by persisting inequalities, African Americans tend to maintain optimism regarding their own personal chances for success. Why? First, even disenfranchised groups tend to share the values of the dominant ideology (Hochschild 1995; Wilson 1996), and so it is not surprising that African Americans are also shaped by the rhetoric of the American Dream. Second, African Americans as a

[9] This pattern may also simply reflect a bias among teachers in assigning more homework to white students and Asian American students.

[10] This assumption may stem from some surveys that suggest that blacks' responses are less reliable than whites. For example, Jones and Forrest (1992) report that blacks are more likely than whites to underreport abortions. Similarly, Fendrich and Vaughn (1994) and Alexander, Entwisle, and Bedinger (1994) note that blacks less accurately recall prior information. While these studies suggest that blacks' responses to surveys may, in some cases, be less reliable than those of whites, it is not clear whether this pattern extends to our analyses. Of course, even if blacks' reports in the NELS are less reliable than those of whites, that is still no justification for categorically dismissing them.

group historically have placed great value on education. Indeed, the struggle for equal access to education is a central element of African American group identity. Because there have been some tangible victories (Brown *v.* Board of Education, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964), African Americans maintain optimism that they personally will be able to succeed, although they hesitate to expect success for fellow blacks. Third, our data demonstrate that pro-school attitudes matter for success. The rational student, therefore, may strategically adopt pro-school values because this is one element of the educational process within their control.

On the surface, our data suggest that African Americans believe in the American Dream but do not act like they do. To understand how a group may have relatively positive school attitudes yet relatively poor school behaviors, it is useful to think about how a group's material condition might shape its members' "tool kit" of cultural skills (Swidler 1986). African American students tend to live in neighborhoods with material conditions (e.g., high unemployment and nontraditional family structures) that are less likely to foster the kinds of skills, habits, and styles that lead to school success. For example, contrast the life of student A, who lives in a world in which parents rise daily to prepare for work and other adults in the neighborhood also follow the structured routine of work, with student B, whose parents and many other adults in the neighborhood are unemployed. Other factors being equal, student A will be more likely than student B to develop the habit of being on time to school because of exposure to and emphasis on a daily schedule. Despite valuing education, therefore, African American students are less likely to exhibit the kinds of school-related behaviors that teachers reward because "[s]kills, habits, and styles are often shaped by the frequency at which they are found in their own community" (Wilson 1996:72).[11]

[11] Although some Asian groups have developed skills, habits, and styles useful for success in school despite limited material conditions, they have not experienced the levels of economic deprivation or residential segregation that African Americans have endured.

DISCUSSION

The oppositional culture model has become so respected in the academic community that it threatens to divert attention from other explanations for the racial gap in school performance. We hope our results, which contradict key claims, will stimulate a new dialogue. Understanding racial differences in school performance remains an important goal, but generating a credible answer to this issue was not our goal—our more modest aim was to assess the merits of one specific explanation. Still, our study has important implications for scholars studying racial and ethnic differences in school performance.

We agree with Ogbu (1978, 1991b) that material conditions shape students' behaviors in school, primarily by influencing the kinds of skills, habits, and styles they develop. And we note that these behaviors are strong predictors of educational performance and substantially mediate racial/ethnic effects on grades (Farkas 1995). Distinct from Ogbu, however, we contend that students' preferences, when measured as concrete attitudes regarding specific issues, also can be good predictors of grades, above and beyond the effects of skills, habits, and styles. That our indicators of concrete attitudes successfully predict educational outcomes disputes Ogbu's (1991b) claim that African Americans' responses to survey questions represent mere "wishful thinking" and Mickelson's (1990) argument that African Americans' positive attitudes toward school have little impact on performance. The message for scholars is clear: Indicators of specific attitudes regarding daily school experiences can be meaningful predictors of school performance. Indeed, models lacking these indicators are probably misspecified.

There is also a lesson here for the debate over policy and the controversy in the general public regarding the extent to which African Americans are responsible for the racial gap in school performance. The oppositional culture argument has led some scholars to argue that the greatest hope for reducing the gap in educational performance lies in African Americans changing their value system. For example, D'Souza (1995) writes,

> [W]hen hundreds of thousands of black men gather on the Mall in Washington to emphasize

> atonement, self-help, entrepreneurship, strong families, and taking responsibility for their actions, the world is changing and there are grounds for hope. (P. *xxxi*)

This argument is misplaced. If anything, African Americans maintain *more* pro-school values and are *more* likely to esteem their high-achieving peers than are whites. What African Americans lack, however, are the material conditions that foster the development of skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers. Furthermore, it is unlikely that African Americans will demonstrate these cultural skills at the same level as whites until they enjoy comparable material conditions. Rather than admonishing African Americans to take responsibility for improving their own conditions, therefore, the best way to reduce the gap in educational performance is to implement policies that reduce economic inequality and residential segregation.

Our conclusions are tempered somewhat by limitations in our data. We used the 1990 wave of the NELS primarily because it has many good indicators of students' resistance toward school, but this decision restricted our analyses to high school sophomores and therefore limits the generalizability of our study. We are guardedly optimistic that the patterns presented here, however, extend to older and younger high school students. We explored several indicators of school resistance in the third wave of the NELS when the students were seniors in high school, and the results were highly consistent with the patterns we report here. And we went backward to the 1988 base-year data when the students were eighth graders. Again, the few available indicators of students' resistance toward school produced results paralleling the ones presented here, suggesting that our findings are not simply a function of the selectivity of a sample of students persisting to their sophomore year in high school.

Finally, this is an example of how an attractive theory can become so captivating that scholars no longer demand the usual degree of methodological rigor. Although empirical corroboration should be expected at each stage of theory development, it is especially important when a theory's major assumptions are no longer seriously questioned. Our study highlights the advantages of testing a theory generated and supported mainly by studies using one data collection method (in this case ethnographies) with data from an alternative data collection method (in this case survey data). Oppositional culture proponents have been too quick to disavow survey research, seeing it as inherently incapable of measuring resistance to school—just as some survey researchers reject ethnographic work because of its limited generalizability. Rather than arguing for the inherent superiority of any one data collection method, scholars will benefit from struggling to reconcile apparently discrepant findings.

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