

Review Article

A Critical Look at Oppositional Culture and the Race Gap in Education

William Mangino

Hofstra University, Department of Sociology, 202B Davison Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549, USA

Correspondence should be addressed to William Mangino; william.mangino@hofstra.edu

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This paper offers a sociological critique of the perceived Black-White gap in education and of the theory of “opposition” that underpins it. The literature extending back a century discusses how oppressed and segregated groups adopt attitudes opposed to those who oppress and contain them. Failure to situate the current oppositional culture in this larger body of literature makes opposition seem specific to Black Americans; it is not. Further, among people with similar economic resources, Black Americans have higher educational aspirations and go to college more than comparable Whites. The continued framing of a “race gap” without reference to economic circumstances reifies race and lays the blame for educational failure on schools, teachers, families, and students, when the real culprits are social and economic issues like jobs, wages, and residential segregation. But because politically we are unwilling to deal with these larger socioeconomic issues, educational professionals are compelled to practice *as if* economic inequality and poverty do not matter, but in fact they do. Because Black Americans are disproportionately represented in lower economic strata, a spurious correlation exists in professional and popular discourse that mistakenly identifies Black people as “opposed” to education. Net of socioeconomic status, Black Americans are no more opposed than anyone else.

1. Introduction

When people tell you... it's poverty, that's baloney.

(Former New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein [1])

In the United States, a cottage industry has propagated around African Americans' seeming “opposition” to education. The scholarly impetus grew from Ogbu's [2, 3] influential thesis, which asserts that Black students feel pressure from peers and community to not “act White.” Equating effort in school with siding with the oppressor, Black people, the argument goes, outwardly eschew academics in order to fit in with “being Black.” Sociological critics dispute Ogbu (e.g., [4–7]). They rebut that oppositional culture does not hold up when considering Blacks' attitudes toward schooling. Study after study finds that Black Americans have high educational aspirations and proschool attitudes—in many cases higher than their White counterparts [4, 5, 8, 9].

Ogbu [3, page 446] dismisses such pro-school attitudes as simply “wishful thinking” because Black students “do not match their aspirations with effort.”

The finding of high educational aspirations among Blacks combined with their low test scores and grades gave rise to what is called the “attitude-achievement paradox” [10]. Despite pro-school pronouncements, minority achievement still lags behind White achievement. A standard way to deal with the paradox has been to doubt the credibility of Blacks' proschool self-reports ([11], for a review, see [12]). I argue that the attitude-achievement paradox is, at least in part, an artifact of how race and education are framed and of the outcomes chosen to measure educational success. This line of reasoning is inspired by Critical Race Theory [13] that implores us to question not only the standards by which evaluation is gauged but also the epistemological frameworks that organize thought and inquiry [14]. Like much critical theory, this paper strives to be reflexive and to turn the tools of analysis and criticism upon our own professional practices [15].

2. Oppositional Culture Is Not “a Race Thing”

One of the main elements of oppositional culture theory is to show how Black Americans contribute to their own disadvantage. Manipulation by an elite is not the whole story; oppressed individuals have agency, and arising from resistance to caste-like oppression, they choose to take actions that reproduce their own subordination. The oppressed group eschews much of what the dominant society specifically esteems in order to define a unique identity. The argument is intriguing, but not new. First, it is a reworking of classic culture of poverty theorizing [16], except rage and agency have replaced apathy and resignation. Further, Ogbu’s argument is quite similar to Willis’ [17] famous book *Learning to Labor* that showed how “working class lads” ended up in working class jobs. Thanks to their own opposition to education and its snobbish culture, the lads “disqualified themselves.” Perhaps even more formative for the idea of this type of opposition was Coleman’s *Adolescent Society* [18]. Coleman observed that modern age-segregated schooling created an oppositional culture among high school students. Teenagers develop their own status system which, much to the chagrin of their parents and teachers, is largely antiacademic. Going back more than a century, there is a large body of sociological literature that, while often ignoring African American voices and conditions (c.f. [19]), explores cross-group antagonisms as central mechanisms in identity formation and social stratification [20–25]. In the face of oppression, and especially when segregated, oppressed categories of people unite and adopt attitudes that run counter to those who oppress, stigmatize, and contain them ([26, 27] especially pages 165–181). Whether anti-academics, the working class, the adolescent subculture, or urban gangsters, Ogbu, Willis, Coleman, E. Anderson, and others are all studying the same mechanism: opposition. The failure to situate the current incarnation of opposition in this larger body of literature mistakenly makes opposition seem like “a Black thing.” It is not [28].

It is important to note that the preceding argument does not nullify oppositional culture per se. Oppositional culture is indeed a mechanism of disqualification; it is just not specific to Black Americans. This does not deny the urgency of the African American experience, which especially for men in cities is more likely to lead to prison or death than to college and jobs [29, 30]. Theirs is a particularly unjust expression of a more general phenomenon. The same criticisms applied in the past to culture of poverty theories and to functionalism apply here. Sometimes describing *how* a social mechanism works (e.g., opposition) distracts from *why* it is the way it is (resources and power).

3. The Mismeasure of Culture

Much of the demonstration of, and debate about, oppositional culture in education uses dependent variables that are less than ideal for reflecting the outcomes of a respondent’s culture. Test scores, grades, and teacher reports are the most often used measures of academic performance. Despite the recent resurgence of cultural sociology (e.g., [31, 32]) and reworked cultures of poverty ([33], see [34] for a multiauthor

debate about the “new” culture of poverty), my position implores us to return to some foundational conceptions of “culture.” In an influential article in sociology’s premiere journal, Swidler [35] defines culture not only as “skills, habits, and styles” but also as a tool box filled with *strategies for action*. Culture manifests in the individual as the repertoires that are available when faced with a behavioral choice. Earlier, Merton [23] too defined culture as normative frames that guide behavior. At the individual level, then, cultural outcomes should be measured as the *actions* that actors actually take, given the opportunities and constraints presented to them. “Pure” measures of individual agency—what people actually choose to do—would be most appropriate. Of course, a “pure” measure of agency does not exist, but it is still useful to consider how some outcomes are more or less pure than others. For example, test scores, grades, and teacher reports reflect a student’s academic effort (agency), plus a judgment of that effort. In this sense, an evaluation potentially contains two cultures, the student’s and the evaluator’s, and those cultures can clash. If an evaluator is not sensitized to the actor’s repertoires or codes, then intentions can go unrecognized. Concretely, such mechanisms are commonly studied as testing bias and teacher bias [36, 37]. Further, what are deemed to be “legitimate” knowledge and modes of expression are themselves not neutral. They are products of the dominant culture and, whether latent or manifest, serve to protect the interests of those who defined the standard—the incumbents get to decide what counts and what is invalid. “Equality of opportunity,” in this context, is only the right to be *judged* by the same standard, while the standard itself often goes unchallenged.

While no measure of academic achievement can escape the evaluative constraint, there are indicators where judgment is less proximate. Such indicators are, therefore, closer estimates of action. The choice to invest in education is one such measure. The individual’s choice kicks in in late adolescence, when a person is no longer compelled by law to attend school. Thus, the choice can be measured by years of education completed [38], educational transitions including high school graduation [39], the decision to go to college [40], and the accumulation of credentials [12]. These items are less filtered by judgment because they reflect an actor’s status attainment strategy, given the constraints perceived by the actor.

There is an important caveat. In order to understand one’s educational choice, other mechanisms of disqualification must first be controlled. Most obviously, to assess educational decision making, one’s socioeconomic status (SES) must be considered, as financial resources are perhaps the prime barrier to education beyond the compulsory levels. After controlling for SES and other relevant external obstacles, what is left is the individual’s strategy for action; the actor must put her/his culture into practice and decide whether to proceed in education, or to turn away. A test score or grade does not measure such agency—they are not strategies of action, although they certainly might constrain or enliven certain paths of action. Much of the industry surrounding oppositional culture is based on the existence of a “race gap”, but when measured as action rather than judgment, the attitude-achievement paradox evaporates. As we have known

for years, Black Americans have higher proschool attitudes [4, 5, 8, 9], and now an emergent body of literature shows that, when economic resources are present, Black people translate those attitudes into action by investing in education at disproportionately high rates. In sum “*oppositional culture*” should be defined as the aversion to education that remains after economic barriers are considered.

4. The Disappearing Gap

“[S]ome students may resist school success, [but] this behavior may be the result of differences in social class and material conditions, rather than being the racialized reaction Ogbu proposed” ([41] page 160). Indeed, there is a large body of research that disaggregates by race the choice to invest in education. Once socioeconomic controls are added, the widespread finding is that any initial aversion to education by non-Whites can be accounted for by other mechanisms, like family and neighborhood income, family wealth, household structure, and urbanicity [38, 39, 42]. Knowing only these most basic socioeconomic indicators not only eliminates the stereotypic race gap but also reverses it and shows superior educational attainment among Blacks. Supporting research includes Charles et al. ([43] page 347), who use the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS). They find that “when differences in family background, parental investments, and prior achievements/attainment are controlled, black students are nearly three times more likely than their white peers to attend college.” Also using NELS, Bennett and Xie ([44] page 578) “indicate that the net black advantage is real: . . . black high school graduates [are] more likely than their white counterparts to enroll in . . . college,” once SES is considered. Combined, Charles et al. [43] and Bennett and Xie [44] cite nine other studies that also find a Black “net advantage” in college attendance. A review by Kao and Thompson [45] documents even more. Additional support is provided by Conley [39], who uses data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). Once family wealth is controlled, Black children graduate high school and go to college at higher rates than Whites. Using the Current Population Survey, Hauser [46] too found a Black advantage in college attendance in the 1970s once family income was considered, although in that data the effect diminished through the 1980s. Even Herrnstein and Murray [47] in their controversial book *The Bell Curve* find that among people with equal Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) scores, Blacks go to college more than Whites. Finally, superior educational attainment among Blacks is also present in economic literature. Mason [38], in particular, uses the PSID to show that compared to White men, African American men more efficiently translate economic resources into years of education. This finding is so widespread and robust that after marshaling supportive evidence with the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Mangino ([42] page 165) argues “that blacks’ superior educational attainment should be considered an ‘empirical generalization’—an agreed upon, yet always tentative, ‘fact’ to be integrated into established conceptualizations of a topic.” The current paper hopes to move us down that path.

5. The Injustice of Oppositional Culture

The United States has vast educational gaps, but calling them “race gaps” distract us from the major issue. Despite that “it is unclear whether a large black/white gap exists independent of contemporary material conditions” ([6] page 114), as a research and practice and popular community we operate as if one does—as if the Black-White gap is “common sense.” In a hegemonic way, academicians, policy makers, and educational practitioners forget, or do not realize, that the *small* [37] Black-White gap that remains after environmental controls are considered is a *test score gap* and does not generalize to education *en toto*. Given our identification of this seemingly real race gap, we (educationalists) then make careers out of elaborating “the gap”, its mechanisms, and designing programs to ameliorate it; the educational community has an objective interest in the existence of “the gap”, and we perpetuate it in public consciousness. Yet, the evidence outlined above overwhelmingly supports that insofar as strategies of action are concerned, Black Americans are motivated to invest in education at least as much as Whites, and probably more.

Black or White, the key to implementing a strategy of educational investment is having the economic resources to do so. Because Black Americans are disproportionately represented in lower economic strata (to understand why this is the case, see [39, 48, 49]), and because low SES is the prime barrier, a spurious correlation exists in professional and popular discourse that mistakenly identifies Black people as “opposed” to education. Net of socioeconomic status, Americans of color are no more opposed than anyone else.

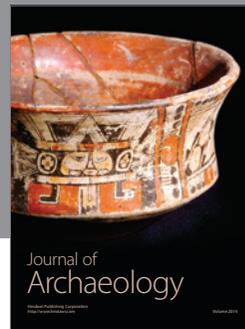
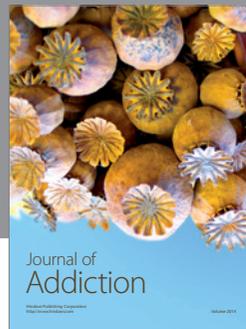
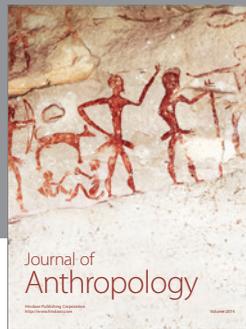
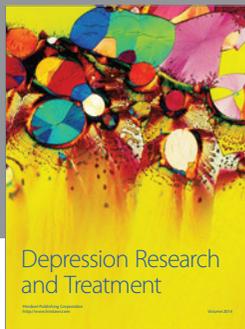
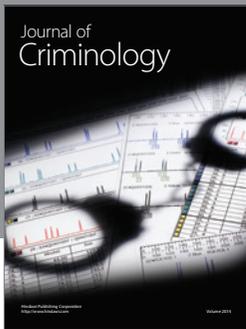
The continued framing of a “race gap” without constant reference to economic circumstances reifies race and lays the blame for educational failure on schools, teachers, families, and students, when the real culprit is political economy [50, 51]. It seems that James S. Coleman [52] was basically right all those years ago: in the aggregate schools are a dependent variable produced by the demographics of the communities in which they are embedded [53, 54]. If we were *politically* willing to address social and economic issues like jobs, wages, and residential segregation by class and race, then the seemingly systemic failures of the US educational system would be vastly abated. Traditional inputs like per pupil spending, high quality teachers and infrastructure, and the latest pedagogical innovations certainly are necessary and effective (for a review see [55]) but they will have their full effect only when the larger socioeconomic environment is addressed. Because politically we are unwilling to address these larger issues, educational practice is forced to act *as if* economic inequality and poverty do not matter, but in fact they do. Perhaps former New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein, captured the idea best in the quote that prefaces this paper. In an interview discussing the etiology of the city’s Black-White educational gaps, he summarily dismissed poverty as a potential cause: “When people tell you . . . it’s poverty, that’s baloney” [1]. With no attempt to situate the gap in its economic context, we are left with an incorrect story. Perhaps family and neighborhood poverty are beyond

a Chancellor's (or a teacher's or an administrator's or a researcher's) control, but surely they are not "baloney."

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