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PREVIEW

**Adolescents' Ethnic Minority Status  
as it Relates to  
School Involvement and Academic Performance**

**By  
Nicola A. Holder, M.S.Ed.**

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology  
in the Department of Psychology at Pace University**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Research indicates that African American adolescents attending inner city schools are underachieving when compared to their counterparts in other ethnic groups, as measured by standardized test scores, drop out rates, and disproportionately low rates of placements in advanced, gifted, or honors programs, among other indices. Existing theories and explanatory models have proposed that factors such as heredity, “cultural deprivation”, and/or differences in learning styles may account for differences in adolescents’ academic performance and school-related behaviors.**

**In contrast, Ogbu (1978, 1990, 1991) proposed that in order to accurately assess students’ behaviors in the school setting, researchers must look at how they have been socialized to view education, as these perceptions play a critical role in demonstrations of competence. According to Ogbu’s theory, African American adolescents’ status as involuntary minorities negatively shapes their attitudes about education and the behaviors that they demonstrate in school. Conversely, adolescents in immigrant families, i.e., voluntary minorities, hold more positive attitudes about education and demonstrate more vigorous school involvement and better academic performance.**

**Ogbu’s theory has found some support in qualitative studies conducted in the past two decades. However, the relationships are not strictly linear. The literature indicates that parental support, peer support, and the adolescents’ own**

attitudes about education are critical, inter-related, factors that help to determine adolescents' school related behaviors. However, there have been little or no intra-racial, inter-ethnic studies conducted using quantifiable data to evaluate Ogbu's theory, particularly within the context of these variables. Thus, the current study sought to examine the relationship between ethnic minority status, parental support, peer support, and attitudes about education in a sample of Black adolescents: African Americans and West Indians.

The sample consisted of 115 adolescents enrolled in two public schools in Brooklyn and Queens, New York. Participants completed a research protocol which included four questionnaires to glean salient data regarding their ethnic minority status, parental support, peer support, attitudes about education and their level of school involvement and academic performance.

Hypotheses were developed based on significant literature findings and in keeping with Ogbu's thesis. Data were analyzed using t-test analyses and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses to determine the nature of relationships among these variables.

Overall, findings from the current study provide partial support for Ogbu's thesis that ethnic minority status is a salient variable in determining Black adolescents' school related behaviors. Across ethnic groups, the adolescents in this sample derived most significant benefits from their parents' expectations for achievement in specific academic areas and from their parents' efforts to support

their academic endeavors in concrete ways. Adolescents who reported that their peers were engaged and performing well in school were themselves likely to report strong school involvement. Findings further indicate that, overall, the adolescents, regardless of ethnicity, were in general likely to endorse mainstream, positive attitudes about education. Notably, however, some differences were apparent: African American Male adolescents in this sample were more likely than the other sub-groups to endorse pessimistic attitudes about the importance of education. Across ethnic groups, male respondents were more likely than their female counterparts to downplay academic accomplishments in order to avoid being criticized or ostracized by peers.

In general, these results support findings from previous studies. However, there were notable discrepancies among the data with regard to ethnic identity and generational status. Specifically, disproportionate numbers of the respondents, regardless of nationality or generational status identified as West Indian, rendering results difficult to interpret within Ogbu's conceptual frame. Findings from the current study indicate that it may be necessary to amend Ogbu's theory to address the interaction of broad social factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnic minority - *and* generational status on Black adolescents' school involvement and their academic performance.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Research findings continue to indicate that African American youth are under-performing academically when compared with their counterparts in other ethnic groups. Numerous indices have been used to support these assertions. For instance, African American youth perform below their Asian and Euro-American counterparts on most standardized achievement testing. They are less likely to be in honors or gifted programs. They are disproportionately placed in lower educational tracks and remain there. And, they drop out of school at disproportionately high rates (Children's Defense Fund, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Hacker, 1992; Kozol, 1991).

Existing theories explaining this group's lower levels of academic performance have focused on characteristics such as race and heredity, "cultural deprivation", and differences in learning styles as primary influences (Eells, Davis, Havighurst, Herrick, & Tyler, 1965; Jensen, 1969; Shade, 1982). More recently, researchers have begun to look at relationships between adolescents' attitudes about education and their school-related behaviors, i.e., their degree of school involvement and academic performance (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986;



Fordham, 1988; Mickelson, 1990; Midgely, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

Findings have varied, indicating – paradoxically – that African American adolescents report holding positive attitudes about education, but many continue to perform poorly in comparison to adolescents in other ethnic groups (e.g., Steinberg et al, 1992). Findings from some recent studies suggest that, together, these adolescents' ethnic minority status, disproportionately low socioeconomic status, their concentration in traditionally under-served urban communities, and their pessimism about future occupational and economic activities opportunities significantly relate to the actual behaviors they demonstrate in school (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1998; Fine, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1988; Peng, Wang, & Walberg, 1992; Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991). Specifically, for African American students, particularly those in traditionally underserved inner-city communities, demonstrating behaviors consistent with good academic performance may be contingent on whether or not they view education as a viable pathway into mainstream society.

Efforts to understand the factors that contribute both individually or collectively to affect inner-city African American adolescents' school-related behaviors are further complicated by the increasingly large number of foreign-born Black youth enrolled in the public schools systems in urban communities. Most of these immigrant students are from the West Indies (Rivera-Batiz, 1996).

For instance, New York is one of the six states, which together hold close to 75% of all West Indian immigrant families (Model, 1991). Children and adolescents from Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago represent three of the top six immigrant populations in the New York City school system (Rivera-Batiz, 1996).

Unlike previous waves of West Indian immigration, where the families were mostly of middle-class origins, a significant number of the most recent influx of these children and their families are from the lower classes in their home countries (Cummings, Lee, & London, 1983). Immigrant students vary in their levels of preparedness and abilities. Some come to the United States with educational backgrounds that surpass what they are expected to know in inner city public schools. Others may have had little or no formal education and may be semiliterate in Standard English (Cummings, et. al, 1983; Tanners, 1997; Waters, 1997). West Indians often settle into poor inner city communities and their children often attend schools with the least resources. As such, these youth face many of the adversities of their African American counterparts (Kasinitz, 1992; Rivera-Batiz, 1996; Waters, 1997).

Formal data on West Indian adolescents' academic performance and school-related behaviors are sparse, as between-group research on this and other constructs tends to categorize children across racial and socioeconomic categories, with little or no reference to within-racial-group ethnic differences (Seidman, 1991).

**African American and West Indian adolescents have much in common: First, racially, they can both be identified as “Black”. Second, they are both concentrated in inner-city urban settings; and third, they both attend public schools in these communities in large numbers. However, African American and West Indian adolescents belong to different ethnic groups and have been socialized according to different norms and practices, in different cultural environments.**

**Given these differences and similarities, an opportunity arises to test one segment of a theory proposed by social anthropologist John Ogbu (1978, 1990, 1991). Ogbu has contended that when studying ethnic minority children’s academic or school-related performance, researchers must take into account the status of the group to which the child belongs – whether group members are voluntary or involuntary minorities. He asserts that the ethnic minority group’s status is an important variable that helps to shape group members’ attitudes about education and their specific behavioral responses in the school setting. Ogbu’s theory has most often found support in descriptive studies (e.g., Hemmings, 1998; Waters, 1996a, b), but assumptions contained within have rarely, if ever, been analyzed quantitatively, using data gathered from these two groups.**

**The roles of parental support, peer group support, and attitudes about education, as correlates of adolescents’ school-related behaviors are well documented in the literature. Given Ogbu’s theory, an important question guiding**

**this study, is whether the relationships between these variables and school involvement and academic performance is the same for native- and immigrant Black adolescents, i.e., African American and West Indian adolescents.**

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## **CHAPTER II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Ethnicity**

People who belong to the same ethnic group share common values, traditions, and behaviors that may be passed on through socialization and/or heredity. Within such groups, children are socialized to “acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group and come to see themselves as members of such groups” (Phinney & Rotheram, 1987, p. 11). As such, children learn about the world around them within the framework of their primary social group – parents, and the broader community (Ocampo, Bernal, & Knight, 1993).

#### **Ethnic Minority Status: Ogbu’s Theory**

According to John Ogbu (1978, 1990, 1991), much of the research on ethnic minority students’ academic performance and school-related behaviors overlook the following considerations: 1) Forces that have existed within the society that either encourage or discourage group members’ efforts towards success. 2) The ethnic group’s understanding of the educational system and the relationship between effort and outcomes in terms of academic performance. 3)

The group's perceptions of the educational system and whether it is seen as beneficial to them in their reality.

Ogbu (1991) developed a model for observing the above variables. He differentiates between voluntary and involuntary ethnic minority status, and contends that membership in these groups plays an important role in shaping individuals' perceptions of the educational system and the behaviors they demonstrate in the school setting. His concepts as they relate to American society are as follows:

*Involuntary* minorities exist at the lowest level of the society's socioeconomic / political ladder. They originally became a part of the American society through "slavery, conquest, or colonization". Ogbu (1978,1991) has contended that membership in this ethnic group is analogous to existing in a caste. Existence in a caste-like system has significant implications for functioning within all spheres of the social order. African Americans are an example of such a group. Specifically, for native-born Blacks, their history of slavery and the subsequent denial of equal access to education and other basic rights shape their perceptions and responses to the educational system. According to this conceptualization, the behaviors demonstrated in the school setting may reflect group members' adaptation to repeatedly blunted attempts to gain access to the mainstream. Native American Indians are another example of such a group.

*Voluntary* minorities are populations who migrate to the United States of their own accord, usually with the belief that the relocation will assure greater opportunity for them and their families. Such groups are represented in this study by West Indians. According to this conceptualization, West Indian immigrants, having no consistent history of racial subjugation in this country, are likely to perceive and respond differently to the educational system than their African American counterparts.

In summary, Ogbu has contended that a group's status (e.g., as voluntary or involuntary) helps to determine if and how they perceive injustice and how they respond to such experiences. He (1990) outlined three broad domains that subsume specific response patterns for native and immigrant groups:

*Instrumental responses* include 1) A dual-status frame of comparison. 2) Folk theories of "making it" in America. 3) Collective efforts to change those rules of "getting ahead" that do not work well for minorities. 4) Alternative survival strategies, developed by minorities to compensate for barriers encountered in the opportunity structure. 5) Role models. *Relational responses* refer to the trust that minorities have in the dominant culture and those institutions under that culture's control. *Expressive or symbolic responses* refer to the minority-group members' sense of group identity, their cultural frames of reference, and their ideal ways of behaving.

Furthermore, Ogbu (1990) proposed that *cultural inversion* can occur when, for example, the involuntary group perceives a set of “behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings,” as the exclusive province of the dominant group and thus inappropriate for the involuntary group. In response to these perceptions, involuntary minority group members in turn assume a set of behaviors that are in opposition to those demonstrated by the dominant group.

Given their status as involuntary minorities and Ogbu’s formulation, we might expect African Americans to be less likely than immigrant minorities to perceive education as a viable vehicle for “making it” than are other groups. African Americans may respond to the societal system as it exists through collective protest in an attempt to change the rules for getting ahead, or they may develop compensatory strategies to circumvent restricted pathways. These group members may also be distrustful of the educational system and perhaps to adopt specific identifications or modes of behavior that reflect their negative view of the system. A frame of reference may operate in direct opposition to that of the mainstream.

In contrast, we might expect West Indians, given their immigrant minority status and dual frame of comparison, to be more optimistic in their perceptions of their chances of success, more trusting of the educational system and more accommodating in their behavioral responses to discrimination. That is, they may