

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF MINORITY STUDENTS: TWO ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

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This paper examines the explanatory power of two popular theories of minority academic achievement, the “cultural ecology” and the “cultural discontinuity” models. It does so by investigating the relationship between aspects of acculturation, ethnicity, and academic performance of Mexican-American high school students in “Liberty, USA.”

ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

Spindler and Spindler (1987, 1990) view education as “cultural transmission.” Cultural transmission requires cultural learning. School is an institution of acculturation. In their recent work, (Spindler and Spindler, 1990), they posed the question, “Are our schools so heavily culturally loaded with mainstream values that many ethnic groups and social classes find themselves in opposition to the culture promoted in them?” Their general reply is that culture is a process that includes features of achievement and success, and their opposite, failure. Failure and success are not personally predetermined, rather they are products of the interaction between people, institutions, and cultural patterns. All three of these features can be found within the context of schooling. Why then do some students succeed while others fail?

Two divergent anthropological explanations for minority student’s academic success and failure have been proposed. One camp, represented by John Ogbu, an educational anthropologist, claims that structural factors in the social and economic system that prohibit full assimilation into society lead to the establishment of classes of people who view schooling as an institution that does not work in their interest. His model is referred to as the “cultural ecology” model. The other camp, represented by Henry Trueba, also an educational anthropologist, claims that the academic success and fail-

ure of the individual is primarily the result of the “culturally discontinuous” interactions between teachers and students.

The history of marginal employment of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in this country is well documented (Acuña, 1988). Ogbu (1986) has proposed that much of the difficulty in schooling experienced by certain minority groups is tied to their perceptions of past and future occupational opportunities. He claims that it is not enough that a minority group may become acculturated. Full acculturation does not mean that full assimilation has been granted, or that it is necessarily desired.

In the United States, Blacks, Indians, Puerto Ricans, and Mexican-Americans are defined by Ogbu (1978) to be “caste-like minorities” who, because of a history of discrimination and exploitation, including the “forced” incorporation into the American capitalist economic and cultural system, have not been able to develop the status mobility systems or folk theories of success that include academic efforts. In short, they do not see how school contributes to their futures. He postulates that some minorities, as a group, have developed a perspective that equates achievement in schools as “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). “Acting white,” implies a betrayal of one’s personal and group identity. The term “collective oppositional identity,” as used by Ogbu, refers to one possible characteristic of a group identity. A form of cultural resistance then develops towards schooling that may include academic failure or dropping out. This culture of resistance is justified through the incorporation of what Ogbu terms an alternative “folk theory of success” (Ogbu, 1978, 1987a, 1987b, 1990; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986).

Trueba challenges the claims made by Ogbu. He claims that if teachers and administrators in schools are brought to a greater understanding of the cultural background of the students, and teaching methods are modified to acknowledge different backgrounds, minority students’ failure and drop out rates would dramatically decrease (Trueba, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 1990). Further, he states the resulting

taxonomies from macrosociological analysis with respect to the academic performance of minority groups are unfounded and negatively stereotype minority individuals (Trueba, 1988a, 1988b, 1990). Trueba (1987) asserts that Mexican-Americans are assimilating as rapidly as past immigrant groups, and that their apparent failure within the school system is based on issues of "cultural discontinuity" within the schools, and do not include perceptions of limited future occupational opportunities brought about by broader structural inequalities in society. Trueba's theory essentially proposes that children of minorities perform less well in school because schooling promotes middle-class majority cultural values and skills. Both the style of presentation, including language, turn-taking, teacher/student interaction, and the content of instruction are postulated to be in conflict with the minority individual's learning style, expectations, and needs. Culture, assumed to be central to the process of acculturation, must include developing a positive understanding of one's position in society and how to successfully operate within various social institutions, including schools. From Trueba's point of view, issues of group identity are not considered to play a major role in the academic success or failure of Mexican American or other minority groups.

Ogbu and Trueba agree that acculturation is an ongoing process. Both would agree that the acculturation traits of "Language Preference," "Respondents' Cultural Heritage," and "Parents' Cultural Heritage" should reveal a trend towards a loss of Mexican cultural knowledge for second generation students. The loss of native cultural traits has traditionally implied a corresponding gain of majority cultural traits. If acculturation were solely a matter of losing native cultural knowledge one could assume that, over time, new immigrants would be seamlessly woven into the fabric of mainstream culture; yet this has not happened for many minority groups (Padilla 1987).

Ethnic identity traits may be maintained in spite of the near complete acculturation of an individual (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Keefe and Padilla, 1987). Long term residence in this country does

not guarantee assimilation. The lack of opportunity for assimilation may lead to groups of individuals to look towards themselves for support and a sense of identity.

Academic performance of second generation students is postulated by Trueba to be higher than first generation students. Ogbu considers it likely that first generation students will out perform the second generation because the second has developed identity maintaining strategies that resist successful schooling.

The following research hypotheses were synthesized from the above:

1. Cultural-discontinuity theory, as espoused by Trueba, would be supported if the findings indicate that second generation Mexican-American students have: (1) lower acculturation trait scores, (2) lower ethnic identity trait scores, (3) a willingness to participate in mainstream acculturation, and (4) higher academic achievement than first generation students.

2. Cultural-ecological theory, as espoused by Ogbu, would be supported if the findings indicate that second generation Mexican-American students have: (1) lower acculturation trait scores, (2) higher ethnic identity trait scores, (3) a resistance to mainstream acculturation, and (4) lower academic performance than first generation students.

THE INSTRUMENT

In an interdisciplinary study by Susan Keefe and Amado Padilla (1987), an anthropologist and educational psychologist respectively, Mexican-American ethnic cultural knowledge and perceptions were defined and analyzed. The categories investigated by Keefe and Padilla correspond closely to the traditional concepts of acculturation and ethnic identity. The traditional concept of acculturation involves major cultural changes that result from prolonged contact between cultures. In essence, it is a modification of culture. Ethnic

identity, while also malleable, is generally defined as “a set of ideas about one’s own ethnic group membership” (Bernal and Knight 1993, p1).

Based on studies by Padilla (1980), Keefe and Padilla (1987) have postulated that within a pluralistic society, acculturation and ethnic identity are separate processes. Indeed, they assert that pluralism may foster ethnic-group identities. As they attempted to compare the cultural traits held by Mexican-Americans, they found that some traits were common across generations while others were dropped and some new ones were added. Comprising their measure of “Chicano Ethnicity” are two broad categories which they term “Cultural Awareness” and “Ethnic Loyalty.”

Cultural Awareness is a term used to describe an individual’s knowledge of objective cultural traits, such as the language and history of a country of origin. Ethnic Loyalty, by definition, refers to a preference for certain ethnic group characteristics, it is something which individuals may “create” concerning their identity.

For the purposes of this paper, the categories developed by Keefe and Padilla of Language Preference, Respondents’ Cultural Heritage, Parents’ Cultural Heritage, and Cultural Identification are termed “acculturation traits.” The categories of Ethnic Social Orientation, Ethnic Pride, and Perceived Discrimination are the “ethnic identity traits.” This study attempted to determine the degree to which certain aspects of Mexican-American culture indicate potential for academic success or failure for high school students, and whether the results support the educational theory of Ogbu or Trueba.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that both first and second generation MexicanAmerican students in Liberty were succeeding academically, and they had a motivation to participate in mainstream society. Measures comparing first and second generation students revealed a trend in the second generation towards acculturation based

upon acculturation trait measures. Both generations exhibited strong ethnic identity characteristics. There was no significant correlation between any of the acculturation or ethnic identity traits and student academic performance. This finding is similar to that of Vazquez (1990) for university students.

The academic achievement of both first and second generation students is revealing. This finding supports the theoretical model proposed by Ogbu (1987, 1990). The higher GPA scores of the first generation reveal that they may be the result, in part, of the quality of academic preparation by Mexican students in Mexico who are now seeking an additional high school degree in the United States (Macias, 1990).¹

Trueba's claim that first generation students are likely to perform less well academically than second generation students was not supported. His rationale for such a claim is based upon an assumed cultural and linguistic barrier. According to Trueba, the middle class schools of the United States, do not provide an academic program that is sufficiently tailored to a predominantly lower class immigrant population. The typically rural and lower class immigrants then perform poorly or fail due to their inability to adjust to the unfamiliar institution.

The acculturation traits of Language Preference, Respondents' Cultural Heritage, Parents' Cultural Heritage, and Cultural Identification each showed significantly lower scores for second generation students.² The scores established that first and second generation students are categorically different in their level of acculturation.

If acculturation traits showed no change one might assume that the environment was not significantly different from the native culture's environment. In "Liberty" this would seem an unlikely possibility, but in border sections of this country, or in closed barrio neighborhoods there may not be significant acculturation trait change.

While the students were experiencing acculturation, as indicated

by the change in acculturation trait scores, certain ethnic features did not appear to be changing as rapidly, if at all. The students continued to prefer socialization with members of their own ethnic group, they continued to have pride in themselves as Mexicans, and they continued to feel some degree of prejudice and discrimination directed towards them as a group. In spite of the relatively clear indications of a continued high level of ethnic identity it is not clear whether these traits alone can establish the existence of an oppositional frame of reference as theorized earlier by Ogbu (1978).

Caste-like perceptions and minority group “oppositional frames of reference” were investigated by asking questions of the students about their post graduation plans. This interview format was designed to help determine if the students were resisting mainstream acculturation. Twenty of the students indicated that they would seek some form of formal post-secondary schooling. Several of the seniors had been accepted to baccalaureate colleges, those that had not were planning on attending community colleges. If they follow through on their plans, their profile would be significantly different from the national statistics that show Mexican-American enrollment in post secondary institutions to stand at 30 percent of high school graduates (NCLR 1990), and at approximately 15 percent for the population as a whole (NCLR 1990). Four of the male students indicated a desire to join the military. The other four students thought they would most likely work after graduation, perhaps continuing school at a later time.

The interviews found that students thought they might settle in the town. The students expressed the desire for education to provide them with the skills and credentials necessary to be successful in future careers. Clearly mainstream values and goals were being adopted by the students. In all cases the parents or guardians of the students were employed in blue collar positions, many at the local turkey processing plant. Many students had part-time jobs at the plant as well. This situation of full employment may have a large bearing on the perceived opportunities and motivations for students’

performance.

Neither theorist seems to have an adequate explanation for the degree of success of these students. The acculturation trait results support the expected findings for both Trueba and Ogbu, the ethnic identity results support the expected findings for Ogbu, the mainstream interest score supports the expected findings for Trueba, while the academic performance results generally support Ogbu. While the pattern of acculturation and ethnic identity traits would tend to support the second hypothesis, that of Ogbu, the academic performance of the students and their desire to fully participate in mainstream culture confounds their positions.

SIGNIFICANCE

The findings demonstrated that these Mexican-American students were acculturating and that they continued to maintain a strong ethnic identity. Cultural features, as measured by this research, seem to not have a negative influence on academic performance. This is not an insignificant finding. Too often Mexican American students are viewed as having cultural deficiencies; something in the home, or background values may be accused of preventing academic success. "Culture" may serve to detract the educator from viewing the individual as an active participant in defining reality (Aguilar & Vallejo 1984). Studies have shown that ethnic biases may influence the labeling of minority children more frequently into problem categories (Juarez 1981). Tomlinson (1991) suggests that the school a student attends is a larger factor in determining academic performance than ethnicity. This study has demonstrated that acculturation and ethnic identity traits alone do not inhibit or necessarily enhance student academic performance.

Trueba (1988) speaks about the importance of peer socialization as a major factor to be considered in developing dropout prevention programs. Ogbu (1986, 1990) speaks of the importance that identity, and of being a part of a group, plays in determining the per-

ceptions a student has towards school. The pressure to not “act white” stands in the way of academic success for some minorities (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Gregory 1992). Culture, as learned, is not static (Spindler and Spindler 1990). Individuals can and do choose to adopt cultural traits. The Spindlers’ definition of culture recognizes the important role that interaction plays in developing culture within an individual. No group is homogeneous. Mexican-Americans may view themselves as recent immigrants, or consider themselves to have roots in this country going back many generations. Individuals may share some cultural traits, but have considerably different perceptions of their position and power within this society.

While neither theory alone is sufficient to explain the findings of this study, the researcher believes that both theories can be used to help understand the academic successes or failures of any minority. The motivation to succeed in school cannot be long divorced from economic or cultural rewards offered outside of the academic environment. At the same time school programs must be designed to effectively develop the cognitive skills of students. As Fetterman (1989) has stated, arguments that suggest that one approach is better than the other are misleading, because the approaches of cultural discontinuity and cultural ecology address the same problems at different levels. Ogbu uses a macro analysis that can miss important local and individual variations, though he does not deny that some individuals will succeed. Trueba’s focus on the successful performance of minority individuals through a well designed curriculum may reduce the percentage of dropouts in select locations, but does nothing to address the primary motivating elements for success in school, its relevance to the student’s life at present or in the future.

Indeed, if we are defining culture as a process involving interaction with the environment, one would need to acknowledge the economic and social setting as an integral part of the environment of the Mexican-Americans. The relative economic success of any “minority” community may be the pivotal element in swinging a minority’s academic performance from failure to success, from drop-

ping out to participation.

The Sage Colleges

ENDNOTES

1. The mean GPA of those born in Mexico was 2.25, versus 1.93 for those born in the United States.
2. Mean scores for first versus second generation students are as follows: Language Preference (35.00 versus 25.93), Cultural Heritage (53.31 versus 43.93), Parents' Cultural Heritage (40.15 versus 34.87), and Cultural Identification (57.31 versus 49.8).

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