"Education is the source of all we have and the spring of all our future joys."
– William J. Edwards

The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education

April 17, 2003

"Without education, there is no hope for our people and without hope, our future is lost."
– Charles Hamilton Houston

LATEST NEWS

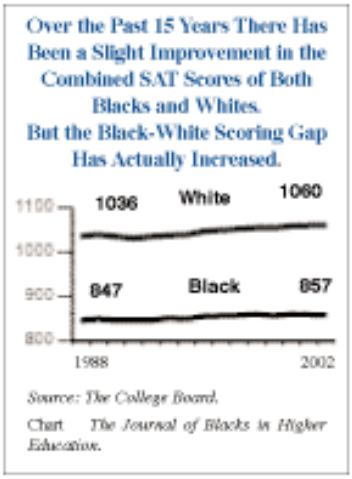
The Expanding Racial Scoring Gap Between Black and White SAT Test Takers

In the 12-year period between 1976 and 1988, the black-white scoring gap on the Scholastic Assessment Test closed significantly. The improvement in black scores was so strong that some educators predicted that within a generation the black-white gap would disappear altogether.

Unfortunately, this was not to be. In fact, since 1988 the racial gap in SAT scores has become wider and there is no compelling evidence that any improvement is in the offing.

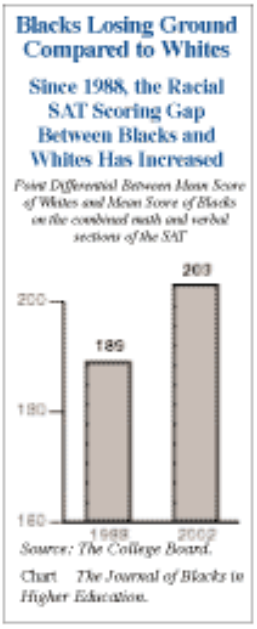
In 1976 The College Board published an analysis of the racial differences in scores of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). At that time the average black score was about 240 points, or 20 percent, below the average white score. When The College Board next examined the racial scoring gap in the early 1980s, the gap had shrunk to 200 points. Black scores were then 17 percent lower than white scores. By 1988 the black-white SAT scoring gap was down to 189 points. The trend was encouraging. Many people in the educational community came to believe that in time the racial scoring gap would disappear altogether. But progress in closing the SAT gap stopped abruptly and now it has begun to open up. For each of the past three years the gap between black and white scores on the SAT test has expanded.

In 2002 the average black score on the combined math and verbal portions of the SAT test was 857. The mean white score on the combined math and verbal SAT was 17 percent higher at 1060.



Over the past 15 years there has been only a very small improvement in African-American SAT scores. In 1988 the combined mean score for blacks on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT was 847. By 2002 the average black score had risen only 10 points, or about one percent, to 857. In 2002 the average combined score on the SAT for black students actually dropped by two points from last year.

Despite the small overall improvement of black SAT scores over the past 14 years, the gap between black and white scores has actually increased. In 1988 the average combined score for whites of 1036 was 189 points higher than the average score for blacks. In 2002 the gap between the average white score and the average black score had grown to 203 points. In the past year alone the black-white scoring gap on the SAT increased by two points.



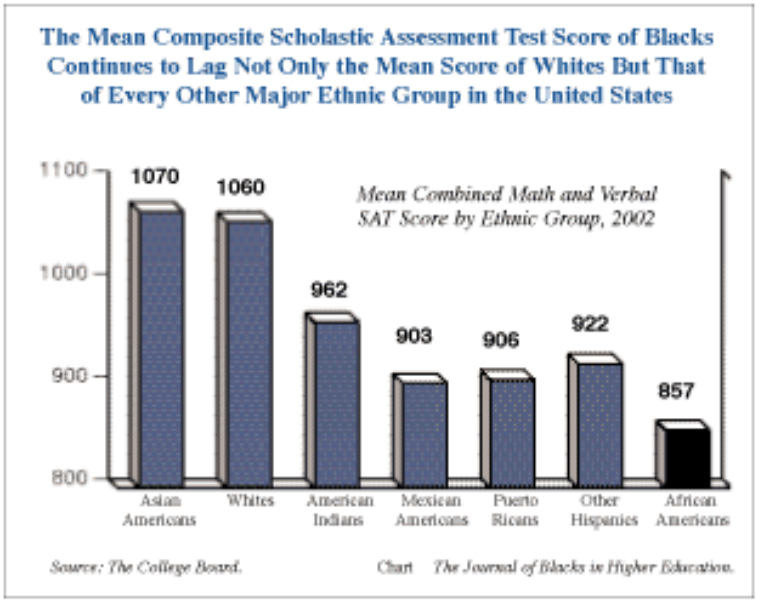
Not only are African-American scores on the SAT far below the scores of whites and Asian Americans, but they also trail the scores of every other major ethnic group in the United States including Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans. In fact, American-Indian and Alaskan native students on average score more than 100 points higher than black students.

Explaining the Black-White SAT Gap

There are a number of reasons explaining the continuing and growing black-white SAT scoring gap. A major factor in the SAT racial scoring gap is family income. There is a direct correlation between family income and SAT scores. For both blacks and whites, as income goes up, so do test scores. Some 28 percent of all black SAT test takers came from families with annual incomes below $20,000. Only 5 percent of white test takers came from low-income families. At the other extreme, 5 percent of all black test takers came from families with incomes of more than $100,000. The comparable figure for white test takers is 24 percent. But income alone does not explain the racial scoring gap. Consider these facts:

• Whites from families with incomes of less than $10,000 had a mean SAT score of 980. This is 123 points higher than the national mean for all blacks.
• Whites from families with incomes below $10,000 had a mean SAT test score that was 46 points higher than blacks whose families had incomes of between $80,000 and $100,000.
• Blacks from families with incomes of more than $100,000 had a mean SAT

score that was 142 points below the mean score for whites from families at the same income level.



Clearly, one of the main factors is that black students across the board are not being adequately schooled to take these tests. Public schools in many neighborhoods with large black populations are underfunded, inadequately staffed, and ill equipped to provide the same quality of secondary education as is the case in predominantly white suburban school districts. Many of the black students who graduate from suburban high schools are recent newcomers to the suburbs and received their elementary school education in lower-quality inner-city schools. These students have been placed in a position from which they have been forced to play catch up.

Data from The College Board shows that 52 percent of white students who take the SAT are ranked in the top 20 percent of their high school class. This compares to 32 percent of black test takers. Some 46 percent of white students who take the SAT report that their high school grade point average is in the A range. This compares to only 22 percent of black test takers. These figures alone can explain the large racial scoring gap on the SAT.

Furthermore, data from The College Board confirms that black students who take the SAT have not followed the same academic track as white students. Nearly all blacks and whites who take the SAT have studied algebra in high school. But white SAT test takers are slightly more likely than black SAT test takers to have completed courses in geometry.

In higher level mathematics courses such as trigonometry and calculus, whites hold a large lead. In 2002, 47 percent of white SAT test takers had taken trigonometry in high school compared to 38 percent of black test takers. More than one quarter of white test takers had taken calculus in high school. Only 14 percent of black students had taken calculus, about one half as many as whites. Thirty-three percent of white SAT test takers had taken honors courses in mathematics compared to 20 percent of black SAT test takers.

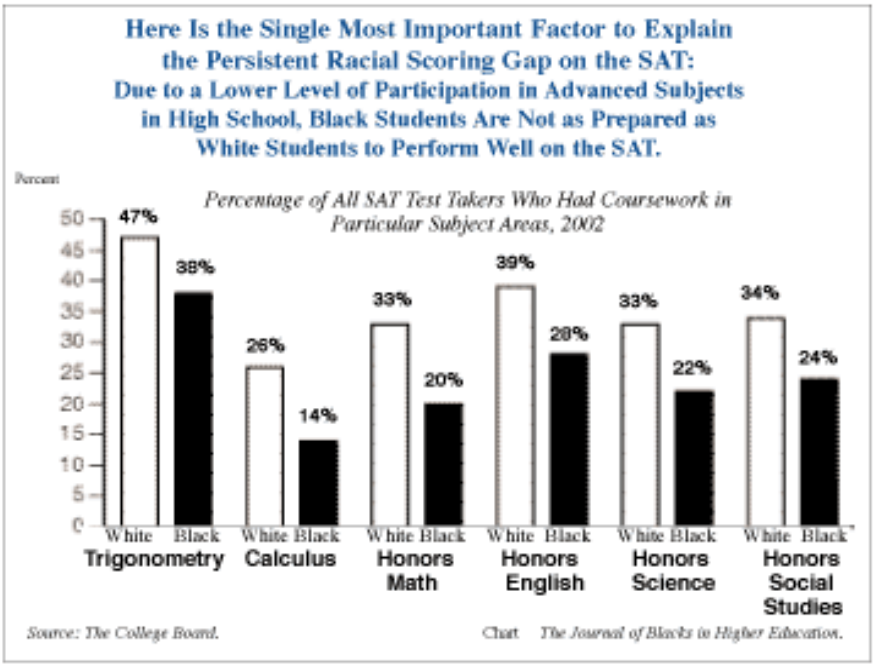
Similar discrepancies appear in the level of instruction in English, the other major component of the SAT. Some 85 percent of white test takers had completed coursework in American literature compared to 73 percent of black test takers. Nearly three quarters of whites, but only 55 percent of blacks, had taken high school courses in composition. Some 75 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks had completed coursework in grammar. A full 39 percent of all white test takers had completed honors courses in English compared to 28 percent of black test takers.

Whites were also far more likely than blacks to have taken honors courses in science and social studies. Given the huge differences in course study between black and white high school students, it comes as no surprise that white SAT scores are significantly higher than black SAT scores. Whites, who are more likely to attend high-quality schools, have simply achieved a greater mastery of the subject matter than have blacks.

There are other reasons that contribute to the large scoring gap between blacks and whites on the SAT. These include:

• In many cases black schoolchildren are taught by white teachers who have low opinions of the abilities of black kids from the moment they enter the classroom. These teachers immediately write off black students as academic inferiors and do not challenge them sufficiently to achieve the skills necessary to perform well on standardized tests.
• Black students who study hard are often the subject of peer ridicule. They are accused of "acting white" by other blacks. This so-called "ghetto chic" in the form of peer pressure to shun academic pursuits undoubtedly has a dragging effect on average black SAT scores.
• Black students may be subject to what Stanford psychology professor Claude Steele calls "stereotype vulnerability." Steele contends that black students are aware of the fact that society expects them to perform poorly on standardized tests. This added pressure put upon black students to perform well in order to rebut the racial stereotype in fact makes it more difficult for them to perform well on these tests.
• Black students in some urban schools may be taught an Afrocentric curriculum that may serve to increase black pride and foster an awareness of black culture, but this form of education pays little attention to the subject matters that are covered on the SAT.
• Even middle-class blacks tend to be brought up in basically segregated surroundings. They are not taught the pathways and modes of thinking that are embedded in white culture and reflected in standardized tests. Black families that urge their children to go to college are often first-generation college graduates who grew up in households without the systems that support first-rate academic achievement.
• School administrators and guidance counselors often believe that black students are less capable and less able to learn. They routinely track black students at an early age into vocational training or into a curriculum that is not

college preparatory. Black students are rarely recommended for inclusion in gifted education, honors, or advanced placement programs. Once placed on the slow academic track, most black kids can never escape. By the time black students are juniors and seniors in high school, they are typically so far behind their white counterparts in the critical subject areas necessary to perform well on standardized tests that they have little hope of ever matching the scores of whites on the SAT.



Almost No Blacks Among the Top Scorers on the Scholastic Assessment Test

Before we conclude our report on the black-white SAT scoring gap, it is important to note how these test scores will impact African-American higher education in the event that the current effort to ban race-sensitive admissions at colleges and universities becomes standard practice at all institutions of higher education. Under an admissions system in which race can no longer be used as a positive factor in the admissions process, standardized test scores will almost certainly become a more important component in deciding who is admitted and who is rejected at our leading colleges and universities.

The latest statistics on standardized test scores for college admissions show clearly that if the race-neutral admissions policies now in place in California, Texas, Florida, Georgia, and Washington State are applied nationwide, blacks will be almost totally excluded from admission to the nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities. The reason for this is that only a very tiny percentage of college-bound black students score at the top of the SAT scale.

Under the SAT scoring system, students hoping to qualify for admission to any of the nation's 25 highest-ranked universities and 25 highest-ranked liberal arts colleges need to score at least 700 on *each* portion of the SAT.

For admission to the very highest ranked, brand-name schools such as Princeton or MIT, applicants realistically need scores of 750 to be considered for admission. Yet, as we shall see, only a minute percentage of black test

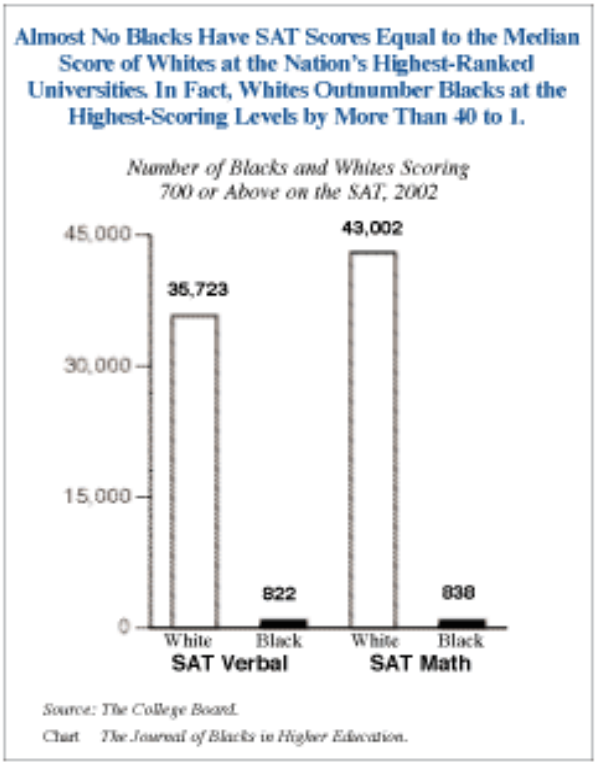
takers score at these levels. Thus, in a race-neutral admissions environment, high-ranking colleges and universities will choose their first-year students from a pool in which there will be very few blacks.

Let's be more specific about the SAT racial gap among high-scoring applicants. In 2002, 122,684 African Americans took the SAT test. They made up 9.2 percent of all SAT test takers. But only 838 African-American college-bound students scored 700 or above on the math SAT and only 822 scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT. Nationally, 83,689 students of all races scored 700 or above on the math SAT and 59,662 students scored 700 or above on the verbal SAT. Thus, in this top-scoring category of all SAT test takers, blacks make up only 1 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the math test and only 1.4 percent of the students scoring 700 or higher on the verbal SAT.

If we eliminate Asians and other minorities from the statistics and compare just white and black students, we find that 5.1 percent of all white SAT test takers scored 700 or above on the verbal portion of the test. But only *0.7 percent* of all black SAT test takers scored at this level. Therefore, whites were more than seven times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the verbal SAT. Overall, there are more than 43 times as many whites as blacks who scored at least 700 on the verbal SAT.

On the math SAT, only 0.7 percent of all black test takers scored at least 700 compared to 6.2 percent of all white test takers. Thus, whites were nearly nine times as likely as blacks to score 700 or above on the math SAT. Overall, there were 51 times as many whites as blacks who scored 700 or above on the math SAT.

If we raise the top-scoring threshold to students scoring 750 or above on both the math and verbal SAT – a level equal to the mean score of students entering the nation's most selective colleges such as Harvard, Princeton, and CalTech – we find that in the entire country 195 blacks scored 750 or above on the math SAT and 218 black students scored 750 or above on the verbal portion of the test. Nationwide, 26,838 students scored at least 750 on the math test and 20,160 scored at least 750 on the verbal SAT. Therefore, black students make up 0.7 percent of the test takers who scored 750 or above on the math test and 1 percent of all test takers who scored 750 or above on the verbal section.



Once again, if we eliminate Asians and other minorities from the calculations and compare only blacks and whites, we find that 0.18 percent of all black test takers scored 750 or above on the verbal SAT compared to 1.7 percent of all white test takers. Thus, whites were nearly 10 times as likely as blacks to score 750 or above on the verbal portion of the test. Overall, there were 54 times as many whites as blacks who scored at or above the 750 level.

On the math SAT, only 0.16 percent of all black test takers scored 750 or above compared to 1.8 percent of white test takers. Thus, whites were more than 11 times as likely as blacks to score 750 or above on the math SAT. Overall, there were 65 times as many whites as blacks who scored 750 or above on the math section of the SAT.

In a race-neutral competition for the approximately 50,000 places for first-year students at the nation's 25 highest-ranked universities, high-scoring blacks will be buried by a huge mountain of high-scoring nonblack students. Today, under prevailing affirmative action admissions policies, there are about 3,000 black first-year students matriculating at these 25 high-ranking universities, about 6 percent of all first-year students at these institutions. But if these schools operated under a strict race-neutral admissions policy where SAT scores were the most important qualifying yardstick, these universities could fill their freshman classes almost exclusively with students who score at the very top of the SAT scoring scale. As shown previously, black students make up at best between 1 and 2 percent of these high-scoring groups.

If the nation now insists on race-blind college admissions, it must face the near certainty that the percentage of black students at the nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities will drop from the present average of about 6 percent to 2 percent or less.

Black Students Are Also Losing Ground on the ACT Standardized Admission Test

Nearly as many black students now take the ACT college admission test as sign up for the competing SAT examination. But, in common with the more prestigious SAT, the scoring gap between blacks and whites is widening. In

addition, almost no blacks score at the very highest level of the ACT performance scale which is generally necessary to win admission to the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities.

The scores of black students on this year's college entrance examination of the American College Testing Program are cause for increased concern. Many students in the Midwest, the Deep South, and the Rocky Mountain states take the ACT test for college admission rather than the Scholastic Assessment Test. And the ACT test is becoming increasingly important to college-bound blacks. The number of black students taking the ACT is up 20 percent from 1998. The rise in the number of African-American students taking the ACT is the result, at least in part, of the fact that a greater percentage of high school students are now preparing for college in the heavily black Deep South states of Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In these states, almost all college-bound students take the ACT test.

Nationwide, 120,311 black students sat for the ACT test in 2002. This is only slightly fewer than the 122,684 black students who took the SAT test this year. If present trends continue, only a few years will pass before more black students nationwide will be taking the ACT test than sitting for the SAT. In 2002 blacks made up 10.8 percent of all ACT test takers. Blacks made up 11.4 percent of all students who took the SAT test.

The Racial Trend in ACT Scores

In 2002 the median score for whites on the ACT was 21.7. (The ACT test is scored on a scale of 0 to 36.) For blacks, the median score was 16.8. Thus, on average, blacks scored 14 percent lower on the ACT than did whites.

A View of Racial Inequalities:
Selected Characteristics of Black and White ACT Test Takers

Here is further information relating to race obtained from student questionnaires given to ACT test takers in 2002.

	Black	White
Will need financial aid in college	85 %	74 %
Plan to find work while in college	73	63
Family income less than $24,000	34	8
Family income higher than $100,000	2	12
Graduated in 25% of high school class	22	42
Aspire to earn graduate degree	49	46

Source: American College Testing Program.

The serious fact is that the racial gap on the ACT test has been expanding over recent years. The median scores for both blacks and whites had remained the same for the three years from 1997 to 1999, at 21.7 and 17.1, respectively. But since that time the black score had dropped 0.1 point each year while the white score has held steady at 21.7.

Don Carstensen, vice president for educational services at the American College Testing Program, told JBHE, "The drop in average ACT composite scores for blacks can be attributed to the fact that the number of students who have taken the ACT has increased significantly, creating a more heterogeneous group of test takers. With an

expanded pool of test takers comes a broader spectrum of performance. The good news, of course, is that black students are considering going to college."

Few Blacks at the Top of the ACT Scoring Grid

The nation's highest-ranked colleges and universities seek students who score 28 or above on their ACT test. Nationwide, only 1,180 black students scored 28 or above on the ACT test. They made up slightly less than 1 percent of all black ACT test takers. In contrast, 86,831 white students scored 28 or above on the ACT test this year. They made up 11.2 percent of all white ACT test takers. Thus whites were 11 times more likely than blacks to score at a level equal to the mean score of students admitted to the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities. This data tends to show that if colleges and universities were unable to take race into account during the college admissions process – such as is the case today for state-chartered institutions in California, Florida, Georgia, Texas, and Washington – blacks would be placed at a huge disadvantage for winning any places at the nation's leading institutions.

If we examine ACT scores at the highest scoring levels, we find an even larger disparity. Of the 120,311 blacks who took the ACT test this year, not one scored a perfect score of 36. On the other hand, there were 96 white students who received the highest score of 36.

But here is the most discouraging statistic in this year's ACT report: *In 2002 more than 87 percent of all white test takers scored at or above the median score for blacks.*

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In student test scores, a wider gap

Latest SAT results show uneven improvement, with gains by whites outpacing those of minority students. By Mark Clayton | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor* A decade of education reform has lifted the academic performance of college-bound seniors of all races and ethnicities - white, black, Asian, Hispanic.

But there's a dark side to this good news: The improvement has been dramatically uneven, with white students raising their scores on college-entrance exams to a greater degree than other students have lifted theirs.

As a result, the performance gap - long a distressing feature of American education - is wider now than it was before "standards" and "accountability" became the watchwords of reformers across the US.

Indeed, SAT scores released this week by the College Board, when compared with test scores from 1991, reveal that the 1990s can be seen as a decade of "educational backsliding" for all minority groups except Asian-Americans, some analysts say.

"The gap doesn't just 'remain.' It has widened dramatically, if you read this report with the right eye," says Seppy Basili, vice president of pre-college programs at Kaplan Inc., an education and test-preparation firm.

At a minimum, the gap suggests that minority students are not as well prepared as whites are for the academic rigors of college, the traditional

ladder to upward mobility in US society. More broadly, it is a sign that much more remains to be done to improve minorities' access to excellent schools and teaching.

The College Board, which administers the tests, puts a positive spin on this year's test results. It notes that the 1.3 million SAT takers now entering college include the "largest number of minority students in history" - more than one-third of the total.

Such numbers indicate that a rising share of minority students see college as a viable option. Nearly 364,000 SAT test takers were students whose parents had not attended college, a development that college board officials called "very heartening."

But others offer a less sanguine assessment.

"The irony is that the continuing surge [of minority SAT test takers] shows the aspiration to be highly educated is clearly there," says Hugh Price, president of the Urban League in New York. "What isn't there is reciprocal commitment on the part of public schools and society to provide a quality education to children of color."

The SAT results, he says, reflect "a continuing disinvestment" in the urban school systems that educate a vast majority of children of color.

Part of the problem, analysts say, is continued reliance on local property taxes to fund local schools. That tax base continues to grow in affluent communities, but not as much as in urban school districts.

Other reasons are often mentioned, as well. Some of the test-score disparity has to do with costly SAT test preparation, which many affluent kids in suburban schools receive and less-well-off kids in urban schools don't. Some of it is the rise of intense parent involvement in the more well-heeled communities.

"We know there's virtually no access to coaching and testing in some of those minority communities," says William Hiss, an administrative vice

president at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. "On the other hand, I know upscale communities are just pouring the gas in the carburetor to improve student achievement as measured by both grades and testing."

These differences, analysts say, are showing up in the SAT scores.

Among African-Americans, for instance, verbal SAT scores rose 6 points and math scores jumped 7 points in the past 10 years. But white students' scores rose 11 points for verbal and 18 points for math during the same period, widening an already-existing gap.

"The College Board congratulates themselves for the achievement gap narrowing between women and men," says Mr. Basili. "Why don't they note the performance gap is widening between whites and ethnic minorities? It's the wrong headline."

College Board officials duly note that a gap exists - and they agree with critics that less progress was made toward educational equity during the 1990s than many had believed. "These differences [in achievement] are a powerful illustration of a persistent social problem in our country: inequitable access to high-quality education," said Gaston Caperton, the College Board's president, in a prepared statement.

The SAT has limits as a gauge of social and educational progress. It includes only students who choose to take the test - not all students. In some states where verbal and math scores soared over the past decade, very few students took the test, distorting a state's performance.

Some critics also say the SAT is biased against minorities and women. But even the SAT's fiercest opponents say the growing achievement gap may have a silver lining.

"It could simply be that greater percentages of African-American and Latino students are taking the test, and so more 'C' students might be taking it," says Robert Schaeffer, a testing expert at FairTest in Cambridge, Mass. "That may lower the average score. But it may not be a bad thing if more kids are thinking about college."

Despite the recent foam and fury concerning the SAT - over whether it is a valid indicator of student readiness for college - many states have seen their students' SAT scores improve.

North Carolina's college-bound high school seniors saw their average verbal SAT scores rise 15 points and math scores leap 25 points during the past decade. It was the biggest overall improvement in the US among the 23 states where half or more graduates had taken the test.

Some attribute the improvement to the fact that, for about five years now, North Carolina has been paying bonuses to teachers whose students score higher on statewide tests - a tactic that seems to carry over into SAT scores.

But to Jo Dover, that big improvement is linked to something else. For three of the past four years, she was on a squad of consultants assigned to help turn failing schools around.

"It's really been due to the concentration we've given to reading, writing and math - going back to basics," she says. "That's what did it."

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Rich, Black, Flunking

Cal Professor John Ogbu thinks he knows why rich black kids are failing in school. Nobody wants to hear it.

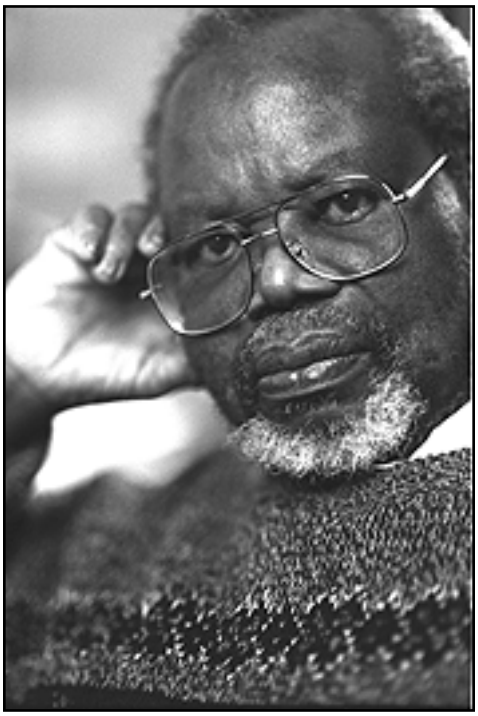
BY SUSAN GOLDSMITH

The black parents wanted an explanation. Doctors, lawyers, judges, and insurance brokers, many had come to the upscale Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights specifically because of its stellar school district. They expected their children to succeed academically, but most were performing poorly. African-American students were lagging far behind their white classmates in every measure of academic success: grade-point average, standardized test scores, and enrollment in advanced-placement courses. On average, black students earned a 1.9 GPA while their white counterparts held down an average of 3.45. Other indicators were equally dismal. It made no sense.

When these depressing statistics were published in a high school newspaper in mid-1997, black parents were troubled by the news and upset that the newspaper had exposed the problem in such a public way. Seeking guidance, one parent called a prominent authority on minority academic achievement.

UC Berkeley Anthropology Professor John Ogbu had spent decades studying how the members of different ethnic groups perform

Chris Duffey



John Ogbu has been compared to Clarence Thomas, denounced by the Urban League, and criticized in *The New York Times*.

Amy Weiser

academically. He'd studied student coping strategies at inner-city schools in Washington, DC. He'd looked at African Americans and Latinos in Oakland and Stockton and examined how they compare to racial and ethnic minorities in India, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, and Britain. His research often focused on why some groups are more successful than others.

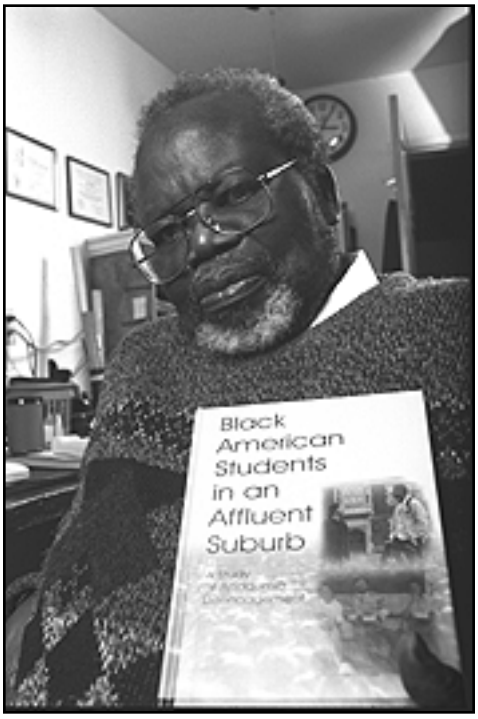
But Ogbu couldn't help his caller. He explained that he was a researcher -- not an educator -- and that he had no ideas about how to increase the academic performance of students in a district he hadn't yet studied. A few weeks later, he got his chance. A group of parents hungry for solutions convinced the school district to join with them and formally invite the black anthropologist to visit Shaker Heights. Their discussions prompted Ogbu to propose a research project to figure out just what was happening. The district agreed to finance the study, and parents offered him unlimited access to their children and their homes.

The professor and his research assistant moved to Shaker Heights for nine months in mid-1997. They reviewed data and test scores. The team observed 110 different classes, from kindergarten all the way through high school. They conducted exhaustive interviews with school personnel, black parents, and students. Their project yielded an unexpected conclusion: It wasn't socioeconomics, school funding, or racism, that accounted for the students' poor academic performance; it was their own attitudes, and those of their parents.

Ogbu concluded that the average black student in Shaker Heights put little effort into schoolwork and was part of a peer culture that looked down on academic success as "acting white." Although he noted that other factors also play a role, and doesn't deny that there may be antiblack sentiment in the district, he

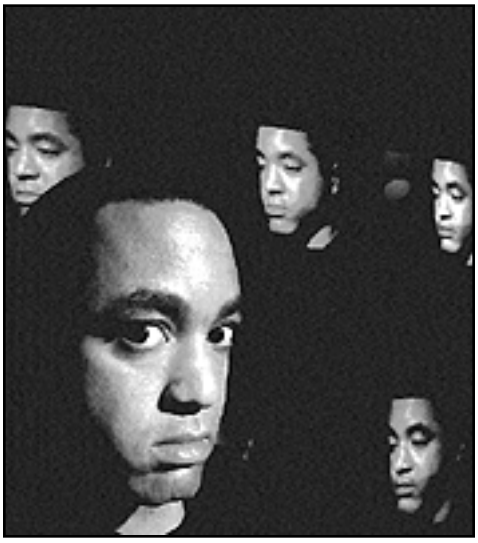
It wasn’t socioeconomics, school funding, or racism that accounted for the students' poor performance, Ogbu says; it was their own attitudes, and those of their parents.

Chris Duffey



Lionel Fluker

concluded that discrimination alone could not explain the gap.



John McWhorter believes academia too readily blames white people.

"The black parents feel it is their role to move to Shaker Heights, pay the higher taxes so their kids could graduate from Shaker, and that's where their role stops," Ogbu says during an interview at his home in the Oakland hills. "They believe the school system should take care of the rest. They didn't supervise their children that much. They didn't make sure their children did their homework. That's not how other ethnic groups think."

It took the soft-spoken 63-year-old Nigerian immigrant several years to complete his book, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*, which he wrote with assistance from his research aide Astrid Davis. Before publication, he gave parents and school officials one year to respond to his research, but no parents ever did. Then Ogbu met with district officials and parents to discuss the book, which was finally published in January.

Details

News Category: Education

The gatherings were cordial, but it was clear that his conclusions made some people quite uncomfortable. African-American parents worried that Ogbu's work would further reinforce the stereotype that blacks are intellectually inadequate and lazy. School district officials, meanwhile, were concerned that it would look as if they were blaming black parents and students for their own academic failures.

But in the weeks following the meetings, it became apparent that the person with the greatest cause for worry may have been Ogbu himself. Soon after he left Ohio and returned to California, a black parent from Shaker Heights went on TV and called him an "academic Clarence Thomas." The National Urban League condemned him and his work in a press release that scoffed, "The League holds that it is useless to waste time and energy with those who blame the victims of racism." The criticism eventually made it all the way to *The New York Times*, where an article published prior to the publication of Ogbu's book quoted or referred to four separate academics who quarreled with his premise. It quoted a Shaker Heights school official who took issue with the professor's conclusions, and cited work by the Minority Student Achievement Network that suggested black students care as much about school as white and Asian students. In fact, the reporter failed to locate a single person in Shaker

Heights or anywhere else with anything good to say about the book.

Other scholars have since come forward to take a few more swipes at the professor's premise. "Ogbu is just flat-out wrong about the attitudes about learning by African Americans," explains Asa Hilliard, an education professor at Georgia State University and one of the authors of *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*. "Education is a very high value in the African-American community and in the African community. The fundamental problem is Dr. Ogbu is unfamiliar with the fact that there are thousands of African-American students who succeed. It doesn't matter whether the students are in Shaker Heights or an inner city. The achievement depends on what expectations the teacher has of the students." Hilliard, who is black, believes Shaker Heights teachers must not expect enough from their black students.

To racial theorist Shelby Steele, the response to Ogbu's work was sad but predictable. Steele, a black research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution and the author of *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, has weathered similar criticism for his own provocative theories about the gap between blacks and whites. He believes continued societal deference to the victims of racial discrimination has permitted blacks "the license not to meet the same standards that others must meet," which has been detrimental to every aspect of African-American life. "To talk about black responsibility is "racist' and "blaming the victim,'" he says. "They just keep refusing to acknowledge the elephant in the living room -- black responsibility. When anybody in this culture today talks about black responsibility for their problems, they are condemned and ignored."

Ogbu knows that better than anybody. In the months since publication of his book, he's been called a sellout with no heart for his own people, and dismissed entirely by critics who say his theory is so outrageous it isn't even worth debating. It is not surprising that Ogbu himself is now a bit uncomfortable discussing his own conclusions, although he has not backed down at all. After all, many scholars are eager to blame everything *but* black culture for the scholastic woes of African Americans. "I look below the surface," he says, in response to his many critics. "They don't like it."

Parents in Shaker Heights began trying to explain the disquieting gap months before Ogbu arrived. A small group of black and white parents gathered in the mid-1990s to study the issue months before the student newspaper at Shaker Heights High School published its article. Their preliminary explanations were divided into four broad categories: the school system, the community, black parents, and black students. The group concluded that the academic gap was

an "unusually complex subject, involving the internal and external synergistic dynamics not only of the school system, but also of the parents and of students, collectively and individually, as well as our community as a whole."

It was a diplomatic way of saying there was much blame to go around, some of it attributable to black parents or students. Although many black parents would later react negatively to Ogbu's work, this biracial group had in fact beaten him to some of his conclusions. "Ogbu didn't find anything new," recalls Reuben Harris, an African-American parent who served on the subcommittee. "It's just a community where you wouldn't think this kind of gap would occur."

Ogbu agreed. And because he had spent much of his prior career looking at inner-city schools, he was particularly intrigued by the idea of studying a relatively affluent minority group in an academically successful suburban district. This was an opportunity to do a new kind of research. Why were there such stark differences when the socioeconomic playing field was comparably level? How could you explain the achievement discrepancies when they couldn't be dismissed with the traditional explanations of inadequate teachers or disparities in school funding?

Shaker Heights is an upper-middle-class city whose roughly 28,000 residents live on lovely tree-lined streets that run through neighborhoods of stately homes and manicured lawns. Years ago, both blacks and Jews were prohibited from living in the community by restrictive real-estate covenants, but the civil rights era brought a new attitude to the Cleveland suburb, which voluntarily integrated and actively discouraged white flight. Today, blacks make up about one third of the community, and many of them are academics, professionals, and corporate executives.

Ogbu worked from the 1990 census data, which showed that 32.6 percent of the black households and 58 percent of the white households in Shaker had incomes of $50,000 a year or more -- a considerable sum in northeast Ohio. It also was a highly educated community, where 61 percent of the residents graduated from college, about four times the national average. The school district was a model of success, too: Considered one of the best in the nation, it sent 85 percent of its students to college. Today, the district has approximately 5,000 students, of whom 52 percent are African American.

These were the kids of primarily well-educated middle- to upper-class parents, and yet they were not performing on a par with their white classmates in everything from grade-point average to college attendance. Although they did outperform other black students from across Ohio and around the country, neither school officials nor parents were celebrating.

Ogbu's approach was to use ethnographic methods to study the problems in Shaker Heights. In ethnography, the point is to try and "get inside the heads of the natives," he says. "You try to see the world as they see, and be with them -- as one of my colleagues puts it -- in all sorts of moods." An ethnographer lives in the community, talks to his subjects extensively, observes the environment, reviews data, but then derives his own conclusions about the situation.

Many of Ogbu's academic critics take issue with his methods, which they say are way too subjective. Most of them are sociologists, who rely on their subjects' own sense of the situation when studying something. It is the view of those being studied and not the view of the researcher that counts most. "They do surveys," Ogbu says. "They ask questions. I live in the community and socialize. My research is not confined to schools. I tell you what I observe."

Ogbu addresses this point in the introduction to his book: "The natives' own account of their social reality is also a social construction rather than a reality that is out there." He uses the example of racial attitudes in Shaker Heights to show why he believes this approach fails. Ask people there about race relations in the community and you will get wildly divergent opinions, depending on whom you ask. Whites, he found, say it is a racially harmonious and tolerant place. African Americans, meanwhile, describe the community as racially troubled and filled with tension between blacks and whites.

There are other differences between Ogbu's approach and that of most other academics who study minorities and education. They focus their scrutiny on the academic system or society at large, pointing to factors such as socioeconomics, inadequate urban schools, or the legacy of racism in the United States. Such theorists often cite the 1994 publication of *The Bell Curve*, which argued that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, as evidence that negative stereotyping of African Americans still exists.

Ogbu, however, trains his eye elsewhere. "I am interested in what kids bring from home to school," he says. "And it seems to me there are different categories of students and they bring different things. I want to know what are those things."

The question of what students in Shaker Heights brought to school from their homes turned out to be profound. Black homes and the black community both nurtured failure, he concluded.

When Ogbu asked black students what it took to do well in the Shaker district, they had the right answers. They knew what to say about how to achieve

academic success, but that knowledge wasn't enough. "In spite of the fact that the students knew and asserted that one had to work hard to succeed in Shaker schools, black students did not generally work hard," he wrote. "In fact, most appeared to be characterized by low-effort syndrome. The amount of time and effort they invested in academic pursuit was neither adequate nor impressive."

Ogbu found a near-consensus among black students of every grade level that they and their peers did not work hard in school. The effort these students put into their schoolwork also decreased markedly from elementary school to high school. Students gave many reasons for their disinterest. Some said they simply didn't want to do the work; others told Ogbu "it was not cool to be successful." Some kids blamed school for their failures and said teachers did not motivate them, while others said they wanted to do well but didn't know how to study. Some students evidently had internalized the belief that blacks are not as intelligent as whites, which gave rise to self-doubt and resignation. But almost of the students admitted that they simply failed to put academic achievement before other pursuits such as TV, work, playing sports, or talking on the phone.

The anthropologist also looked at peer pressure among black students to determine just what effect that had on school performance. He concluded that there was a culture among black students to reject behaviors perceived to be "white," which included making good grades, speaking Standard English, being overly involved in class, and enrolling in honors or advanced-placement courses. The students told Ogbu that engaging in these behaviors suggested one was renouncing his or her black identity. Ogbu concluded that the African-American peer culture, by and large, put pressure on students *not* to do well in school, as if it were an affront to blackness.

The professor says he discovered this sentiment even in middle- and upper-class homes where the parents were college-educated. "Black parents mistrusted the school system as a white institution," he wrote. They did not supervise their children's homework, didn't show up at school events, and failed to motivate their children to engage in their work. This too was a cultural norm, Ogbu concluded. "They thought or believed, that it was the responsibility of teachers and the schools to make their children learn and perform successfully; that is, they held the teachers, rather than themselves, accountable for their children's academic success or failure," he wrote.

Why black parents who mistrusted the school district as a white institution would leave it up to that same system to educate their children confounded Ogbu. "I'm still trying to understand it," he conceded. "It's a system you don't trust, and yet you don't take the education of your own kids into your hands."

Ogbu's critics find much to argue with in his Shaker Heights work. They believe his methods were shoddy, his research incomplete, and his assumptions about Shaker Heights outdated or wrong. They say the black community is far less affluent than Ogbu portrayed it and add that many of the black parents are first-generation college graduates with fewer family resources than their white counterparts. By and large, they blame the district and outside forces such as discrimination, stereotyping, and poor job opportunities as the cause of its academic problems. Talk to these critics and you also get a sense that they see Ogbu as a bit heartless.

"I find it useless to argue with people like Ogbu," says Urban League educational fellow Ronald Ross, himself a former school superintendent. "We know what the major problems in this school system are: racism, lack of funding, and unqualified teachers." Although Shaker Heights is in fact an integrated, well-funded, and well-staffed school district, Ross is nonetheless convinced that it suffers from other problems that contribute to the achievement disparities between the races.

Ronald Ferguson, a senior research associate at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government who also is studying Shaker Heights, believes the denial of equal educational and socioeconomic opportunities is at the root of the gap. He argues that Ogbu didn't pay enough attention to these essential differences, which he blames for the achievement disparities. The key to those differences is the amount of preparation students receive for academic challenges. "The differences in homework completion are not necessarily signs of lower-level academic disengagement," Ferguson says. "Instead, they're signs of skill differences, and in family-background supports."

Ferguson notes that even in affluent Shaker Heights, the rates of parental education are lower among African Americans than whites, and half the black students report living with one or no parent. "Ogbu writes as though the differences in family background are not very great, but in fact, they're substantial," he says.

Ogbu rejects this criticism in a way that suggests he's sick of hearing it.

"Nonsense," he says, dismissively. "What about other groups that come from one-parent families, like refugees, and they do better than the blacks? In Shaker Heights, 58 percent of the whites in 1990 made $50,000 to $100,000. Thirty-two percent of the black families made the same amount. The people who invited me are lawyers, real-estate agents; one was elected judge just last year. Over 65 percent of that community had at least four years college education. It's not a poor community."

Ogbu points out that another recent study of fourteen affluent communities around the United States found that the achievement gap between well-heeled whites and blacks is widespread, and not confined to Shaker Heights. "This is not unique," he says.

Although it's perhaps not surprising that Ogbu's theory would be criticized by a competing researcher with his own explanation for what's happening in Shaker Heights, even colleagues who have worked with Ogbu in the past are eager to put some distance between themselves and the anthropologist's latest work. Signithia Fordham is a professor of anthropology at the University of Rochester in New York who did research with Ogbu in the 1980s. It was that research that popularized the concept of "acting white," the notion that black students avoid certain behaviors like doing well in school, or speaking Standard English, because it is considered "white." The two researchers were criticized harshly over that research, which has been attacked in at least ten doctoral dissertations. Ogbu is now writing a book about that work.

Although Fordham did not want to comment on Ogbu's latest work, it is clear that her beliefs are almost exactly opposite from those of her former colleague. She believes school pressure to speak Standard English and "act white" is the very thing that makes black students fail. "What I found, the requirements in school compelled them to act in ways as if they weren't living in black bodies but who were essentially white or mainstream Americans," she says. "Kids found it difficult to deal with that and they found strategies to deal with it. They had to speak a certain variety of English in order to be successful. They had to buy into the ideas that dominate mainstream America. ... Black kids couldn't just be who they were."

In Ogbu's work with other American minority groups, the anthropologist has identified a core distinction that he believes is central to academic success or failure. It is the idea of voluntary, versus involuntary, minorities. People who voluntarily immigrate to the United States always do better than the involuntary immigrants, he believes. "I call Chicanos and Native Americans and blacks 'involuntary minorities,'" he says. "They joined American society against their will. They were enslaved or conquered." Ogbu sees this distinction as critical for long-term success in and out of school.

"Blacks say Standard English is being imposed on them," he says. "That's not what the Chinese say, or the Ibo from Nigeria. You come from the outside and you know you have to learn Standard English, or you won't do well in school. And you don't say whites are imposing on you. The Indians and blacks say, 'Whites took away our language and forced us to learn their language. They caused the problem.'"

Georgia State University's Hilliard brushes all this attitude stuff aside. He is convinced that the way teachers approach students of different races is key to understanding academic disparities. "It doesn't matter whether the students are in Shaker Heights or an inner city," he says. "The achievement depends on what expectations the teacher has of the student. There are savage inequalities in the quality of instruction offered to children. ... Based on other things we do know, many teachers face students who are poor or wealthy and, because of their own background, make an assumption certain students can't make it. I wouldn't be surprised to find that would be the case in Shaker Heights."

Ogbu did, in fact, note that teachers treated black and white students differently in the 110 classes he observed. However, he doesn't believe it was racism that accounted for the differences. "Yes, there was a problem of low teacher expectations of black students," he explains. "But you have to ask why. Week after week the kids don't turn in their homework. What do you expect teachers to do?"

Vincent Roscigno is not convinced by Ogbu's Shaker Heights theory. A sociology professor at Ohio State University who studies race and class disadvantages in achievement, he says Ogbu's latest premise descends from a long line of blame-the-victim research. "A problem in racial research historically has been to vilify the culture of the subordinate group," Roscigno says. "In the 1960s, a popular explanation for poverty was a culture-of-poverty thesis. That thesis argued the problems of urban poor people had to do with their culture and they were being guided the wrong way by their culture. ... At the turn of the century, the culture of white immigrants was blamed for their poverty and all the social conditions they faced."

Roscigno also believes Ogbu's research methods are flawed because he failed to do any comparative research on white families in Shaker Heights, substantially weakening his premise. "He's drawing very big conclusions about black students and black families in a case where he doesn't do much comparison," Roscigno says. "We don't know if white students would say anything different."

Ogbu barks a bit defensively in response: "I was invited by black parents. If I had more money and more time, I could study everybody."

John McWhorter, the author of *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, says Ogbu's book roiled the waters of academia, which he believes is too invested in blaming whites for the problems plaguing black America.

"There's a shibboleth in the academic world and that is that the only culture that has any negative traits is the white, middle-class West," says McWhorter, a UC Berkeley professor of linguistics who is currently serving as a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a New York think tank.

McWhorter's own book, based largely on the author's experiences as a black man and professor, blames a mentality of victimhood as the primary reason for most of the problems in black communities -- including educational underachievement. "There's an idea in black culture that says Plato and hypotenuses are for other people," he says. "There is an element of black identity today that sees doing well in school as being outside of the core of black identity. It's a tacit sentiment, but powerful. As a result of that, some of what we see in the reluctance of many parents, administrators, and black academics to quite confront the 'acting white' syndrome is that deep down many of them harbor a feeling that it would be unhealthy for black kids to embrace school culture too wholeheartedly."

Nor is Steele, who's also been dismissed as a sellout in his day, surprised by the way the scholarly world has reacted to Ogbu's latest work. "Academics are a sad case," Steele says. "They support the politics of white responsibility for black problems. If they were to do research that found blacks responsible they'd be 'Uncle Toms,' and that's how they've treated Ogbu."

Ogbu seems a bit bothered by the avalanche of criticism that's come his way. He treads carefully when he talks about his work and reiterates repeatedly in his writing and in person that he is not excusing the system. First of all, he concedes there are historic socioeconomic explanations to account for some black academic disengagement. Historically, there has been a weak link between academic success and upward mobility for African Americans. Blacks traditionally saw big leaps in social mobility only during times of national crisis such as war -- or during shortages of immigrant labor. "If those are the points where they move, it's not a kind of experience that allows a group to plan their educational future," Ogbu says.

In his book, he writes that the school district in Shaker Heights could do more to involve black parents and work at building more trust. He believes school officials should expand their existing Minority Achievement Committee, adopt more cooperative approaches to learning, and educate teachers about how their expectations can affect student performance. "I don't think it's one thing," he says cautiously. "There are a whole lot of things involved. My advice is we should look at each very carefully."

But Ogbu is adamant in his belief that racism alone does not account for the distressing differences. "Discrimination is not enough to explain the gap," he says. "There are studies showing that black African immigrants and Caribbean

immigrants do better than black Americans even though some of them come with language barriers. It's just not race."

Ogbu believes he knows this firsthand. The son of parents who couldn't read, he grew up in a remote Nigerian village with no roads. His father had three wives and seventeen children with those women. Ogbu has a difficult time explaining his own academic success, which has earned him numerous accolades throughout his career. He did both undergraduate and graduate work at Berkeley and has never left. When pressed, he says he believes his own success primarily stems from being a voluntary immigrant who knew that no matter how many hurdles he had to overcome in the United States, his new life was an improvement over a hut in Nigeria with no running water. Involuntary immigrants don't think that way, he says. They have no separate homeland to compare things to, yet see the academic demands made of them as robbing them of their culture. Ogbu would like to see involuntary immigrants, such as the black families in Shaker Heights, think more like voluntary immigrants. In doing that, he says, they'd understand that meeting academic challenges does not "displace your identity."

The parents who invited Ogbu to Shaker Heights are uncertain about what to do with his theory. They know he is one of the preeminent scholars in his field, and yet his premise makes many of them uncomfortable and angry. They insist that they care deeply about education, which many say is the reason they moved to Shaker Heights. They feel betrayed by the very person they turned to for help.

Khalid Samad, the parent who compared Ogbu to Clarence Thomas, believes the professor fails to understand the black experience in America and how that creates problems for African-American students. "The system has de-educated and miseducated African Americans," he says. "Africans came here having some knowledge of who they were and their history and they had a self-acceptance. For several generations there has been a systematic robbing African Americans of their sociocultural identity and their personal identity. The depth of that kind of experience has created the kinds of problems we're still grappling with today."

Meanwhile, Howard Hall, a black Shaker Heights parent who is a child psychologist and professor at Case Western University, believes Ogbu had his mind made up before he even started his research. "It's scandalous to blame the kids for this," he says. "It's a good school system, but there are weaknesses in addressing the racial disparity and it's not the parents' fault. Effective schools set up an environment where most kids reach their potential."

Obgu's theory did find some support among black parents. Although they are in the minority, these parents believe he's pointed out a painful but powerful truth, and are happy to see it aired. "I already held his position before he did his research," says Nancy Jones, who has one child in the district and two who have graduated. "You can't get African-American parents to get involved and stay involved."

Jones says she is sick of the finger-pointing and blaming in her community, and was thrilled to see Ogbu highlight why this is detrimental. "We come from this point of view of slavery and victimhood and every problem is due to racist white people," she says. "That victim mentality is perpetrated by parents and they're doing their kids a disservice. ... My primary objective is not to hold someone accountable but to close the achievement gap."

Other parents also agree with Ogbu, Jones says, and will admit it privately, but publicly, it's too politically charged. "When you're in a public setting people are less apt to speak their mind if they think it's politically incorrect."

Sadly, Jones says, harsh criticism of Ogbu's Shaker Heights work has made any positive change nearly impossible. "Experts are telling the parents, 'The research wasn't good,' and, 'Disregard him,'" she says. "Besides, the parents' gut instinct tells them the district is at fault. When you have that many academics trashing him, it's easy to write off his conclusions. I'm having my doubts his work is going to motivate African-American parents and kids."