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The “Burden” of Oppositional Culture Among Black Youth in America

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Abstract

For decades, any scholarly conversation about the academic achievement of youth of color, and especially Black youth, required at least a nod to the widely discussed topic of oppositional culture. In this review, we explore whether Black youth are burdened by a peer culture oppositional to dominant institutions and achievement norms. We begin by focusing on recent research addressing oppositional culture and find little to no support for the main propositions of this theory, even as the ideas remain popular in academic and lay circles. We then turn our attention to other recent research on Black youth's educational experiences and find evidence that these youth might be better understood as burdened by structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism that they and other minoritized students face in school. We conclude by offering suggestions for research moving forward, arguing that it is time to expand the conversation within sociology on Black youth.

INTRODUCTION

Framing the Problem of Black Youth Underachievement

For more than three decades, any scholarly conversation about the academic achievement of youth of color, and especially Black youth, required at least a nod to the widely discussed topic of oppositional culture. Sociological interest in oppositional culture has been especially strong, as the argument addresses questions of longstanding concern to sociologists about group differences in academic outcomes. In its most straightforward sense, “oppositional culture” is a term coined to capture a group’s oppositional relationship or disposition toward mainstream society and its institutions. It refers to the rejection of both dominant institutions and the behaviors required to succeed in them that marginalized groups are purported to develop in response to a perceived oppressive system. Importantly, the concept of oppositional culture is not just descriptive but is intended to explain why some groups underperform in school or have poor labor market and other outcomes relative to Whites (usually).

Curiously, even with an abundance of research showing little to no support for the main propositions of oppositional culture theory, the ideas remain popular in academic and lay circles, and especially among educators and policy makers.¹ Indeed, there is still strong belief among some, for instance, that Black youth in particular bear a unique burden to act cool and avoid behaviors and practices perceived as White, including those conducive to school success (see Lewis-McCoy 2016, Ogunyemi 2017, Woo et al. 2017). Part of the appeal of such ideas is their plausibility: They seem to provide a reasonable explanation—one that aligns with people’s folk knowledge of minoritized youth and fundamental ideas about race—for Black youth’s failure to achieve mainstream success in a society in which success is purportedly open to all who work hard. Yet studies find little evidence that Black and other minoritized youth, as a group, are any more oppositional than White youth or that such attitudes or behaviors explain outcomes such as racial differences in grades or standardized test scores. More recent scholarship argues that this framing of minoritized youth’s behaviors and attitudes reflects a misunderstanding of the problem, particularly in its failure to attend to the institutional structures shaping students’ schooling experiences, orientations, and outcomes. Similarly, within the past decade or so, research on youth of color using a critical race studies approach (Lynn & Parker 2006) has also offered a different take on the burden youth, and in particular Black youth, experience in school and other dominant institutions (O’Connor 2020). These studies focus on understanding what youth have to contend with and how they experience and perceive their world.

Thus in this review, we begin by focusing on recent research on oppositional culture but then broaden the discussion to include new directions in studies of Black youth’s experiences. We focus on Black youth because the argument about oppositional culture has been most frequently and forcefully applied to this group. We primarily discuss developments in the literature within the past decade to avoid duplicating Downey’s (2008) review of the literature and to draw attention to the research reframing the problem of Black youth underachievement, including a growing body of research offering a more critical perspective on the nature of Black youth’s burden. We conclude by offering suggestions for research moving forward, arguing that it is time to expand the conversation on Black youth within sociology.

What Is Oppositional Culture and Where Did It Come From?

Understood in their broadest form, scholarly ideas about a culture of opposition or resistance among marginalized youth have multiple origins. For example, emerging out of a tradition of

¹ Former President Obama, for example, frequently raises concerns about Black students being teased for being academically oriented.

Marxist cultural studies in the United Kingdom, Willis's (1977) study of working-class youth in England examined a group of boys he names "the lads." In *Learning to Labor*, Willis tries to understand why "these working class kids" end up in "working class jobs." Willis argues that the lads developed a substantive critique of liberal schooling. Their critique resulted in them both becoming hostile to the school's structures, institutional practices, and ideology and engaging in various behaviors to flout school norms and express their disdain for normative expectations. The lads rejected the hegemonic notions that school conformity leads to opportunity and that educational failure is explained by their own limitations, environment, background, or culture.

Willis's argument is often framed as part of the social reproduction tradition in that he suggests that the youth's resistance and counter-school culture eventually contribute to their remaining stuck in the same working-class jobs their fathers hold. The lads' hostility to their school's structure and ideology reflects the reality of the very real unlikelihood of their own social mobility and, at the same time, makes such mobility far less likely. Willis's research began a tradition of work continued in America by scholars such as MacLeod (1995) and Weis (1990), who studied resistance among marginalized youth in school. Like Willis, these other scholars find that resistance reflects marginalized youth's critical understanding of their own constrained social and economic opportunities and a rejection of the achievement ideology in schools, which suggests that those who want to can succeed.

However, these studies frame youth resistance not merely as anger or counterculture but as contestation emanating from critical consciousness and, therefore, as generative. As Willis (1977, p. 203) argues, the lads' resistance highlights "the capacities of the working class to generate, albeit ambiguous, complex, and often ironic, collective and cultural forms of knowledge not reducible to the bourgeois forms," but it is limited by the absence of a connection to a political or social movement. Thus, in the end, such resistance contributes to rather than challenges social reproduction.

Framing Youth Resistance as Oppositionality

Educational anthropologist John Ogbu, who, arguably, is the scholar most often associated with the concept of oppositional culture, shifted the discussion from youth resistance (i.e., "ideological condemnation" of repressive structures) to counterproductive behavior (Aronowitz & Giroux 1985, p. 102). In seeking to understand the different schooling trajectories of minority groups in society, Ogbu (1981, 1987, 1990, 1991) developed what he called the cultural-ecological model (CEM) which, similar to Willis's work, was in part about trying to understand how nondominant groups make sense of their social location and how that sense-making shapes their subsequent engagement with important societal institutions like schools. Ogbu's CEM suggested a linear relationship between marginalized social status and what we now understand as oppositional culture. Fundamentally, the logic of the frame suggests that groups that have a marginal status in society by virtue of their involuntary incorporation in the society develop (a) an understanding of their own status as systematically oppressed, (b) a distrust of the dominant institutions that are part of their marginalization, and (c) oppositional orientations toward these dominant institutions. Because of a, b, and c, these groups then (d) engage in practices that distance themselves from these dominant institutions in ways that reduce their chances for mainstream success.

Specifically, Ogbu argued that African Americans (and other involuntary minorities) experience a castelike status in the United States, meaning they are a subordinate group in a highly stratified structure and have been consistently and historically denied educational opportunities (Ogbu 1978, Ogbu & Simons 1998). Ogbu stridently rejected the idea that schooling outcomes had anything to do with inherent differences between groups but argued that they were, instead, the result of sociocultural adaptations to this castelike system. In particular, when pressed to

explain why minority groups perform differently in school, Ogbu pointed toward groups' "responses to their history of incorporation in the U.S. society" (including their treatment by the dominant White society) along with "how their responses to that history and treatment affect their perceptions of and responses to schooling" (Ogbu & Simons 1998, p. 158). Ogbu's work generated an enormous body of research addressing his conceptual framework and arguments both empirically and theoretically. While Ogbu's explanation of the problem of racial differences in student achievement resonated with some scholars (Allen 2013, Fryer 2006, McWhorter 2000, Norwood 2007), others have been much more critical (Horvat & O'Connor 2006, Lewis 2012, Merolla 2014, Mocombe 2011), particularly of the way in which his work eventually focused primarily on Black youth culture and orientations toward school, suggesting they were the real problem (rather than, for example, the structural conditions creating castelike status). More than 30 years after he began publishing on Black children's school success, researchers still engage his ideas and continue to find new inferences to test.

From the very early days of his writing, critics have pointed out how, despite its nod to structural constraints and to racism as a major force in Black people's lives, Ogbu's writing has fundamentally placed "emphasis on the dysfunctionality of African American hybrid culture," invoking a culture-of-poverty trope (Foley 2005, p. 648; see also Gould 1999, Lewis 2012, Lundy 2003, Small & Newman 2001). Notwithstanding its fundamental grounding in an understanding of structural constraints, much of the focus of Ogbu's work has been on the subsequent oppositional culture that develops within castelike minority groups, including very detailed discussions of ways these young people and their parents behave and what they might do differently (Ogbu 1991, 2003). Although, as he puts it (Ogbu 1991, p. 446), "I attribute the lack of seriousness and effort to disillusionment," he focuses extensively on "lack of seriousness and effort" rather than on the conditions that produce disillusionment. As others have suggested, this leads to a focus more on how to change African Americans' schooling behaviors than on how to change structural racism (Carter 2005, Gould 1999, Lewis 2012, Lewis & Diamond 2015, O'Connor et al. 2006, Tyson 2011).

In the next section, we review recent research on oppositional culture. Critiques of the theoretical underpinnings of oppositional culture have been treated extensively elsewhere (Horvat & O'Connor 2006, Lewis 2012, Lundy 2003, Mangino 2013, Merolla 2013, Mocombe 2011); thus, we focus on empirical studies published since 2008 addressing the question of whether Black youth in the United States are burdened by oppositional culture.²

RECENT RESEARCH ON OPPOSITIONAL CULTURE

Challenging the Oppositional Culture Framework

As Small & Newman (2001) point out in their review of studies of urban poverty, the slipperiness in conceptual boundaries between culture and structure, particularly when writing about poor people of color, is not unique to Ogbu. Small & Newman (2001, p. 36) suggest Anderson's (2000) conceptual framing of street culture and Massey & Denton's (1993) culture of segregation are similarly likely to "slip into compendia of all undesirable cultural traits" even as they are connected to

²We focus primarily on research on K–12 children and youth. While some studies of oppositional culture have focused on Black college students, there is less concern about this group given that these young people have matriculated to college, which already suggests adherence to mainstream norms and processes for getting ahead. Still, it is worth noting that studies find scant evidence of oppositional culture among Black youth in college (Balough & Girvan 2010, Harper & Davis 2012, Webb & Linn 2016).

longer arguments that center structural dynamics that produce the urban poor. Furthermore, like the work of Willis, MacLeod, and others studying poor and working-class White youth, there is a long history of scholars writing about groups adopting attitudes in opposition to their oppressors (Mangino 2013), suggesting that Black students' displays of resistance to domination are not unique.

More than just contesting the emphasis in Ogbu's work, however, a great deal of previous work has closely examined each of its key empirical assertions. Sociologists have been especially interested in investigating oppositional culture, perhaps because it is proposed as an explanation for what is arguably one of the most studied topics in sociology: social inequality. Downey's (2008) review of the research on whether Black/White differences in school performance could be explained by the oppositional culture theory, however, raises significant questions about the usefulness of oppositional culture as an explanatory frame. In the years since Downey's review, new volumes have been published that continue to fundamentally challenge many of the theory's key tenets and underlying premises. For example, in *Kids Don't Want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap*, Harris (2011) methodically tested each of the different components of the CEM (e.g., experiences with the opportunity structure, perceptions of opportunity, educational orientations, academic behaviors). Drawing on a variety of national and international data sets, he assessed how African Americans, for example, perceived their status and their relationship to educational systems, how and whether those understandings shaped their schooling behaviors, and whether they, in fact, were useful to understanding patterns in achievement outcomes.

Harris finds little to no support for any of the core components of Ogbu's theory. Specifically, he finds that Blacks understand that their opportunities are constrained but still are committed to schooling, and they value education greatly despite recognizing significant racism in their lives and in school. He also finds no evidence for a pervasive culture of Black oppositionality to school. He instead points to the evidence of inequitable schooling for Black young people and "argues for turning attention away from Black youth culture and focusing it instead on improving Black students' overall schooling experiences" (Lewis 2013, p. 282). As we discuss below, other relatively recent studies addressing Ogbu's argument, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, similarly find little support for the core suppositions.

Oppositionality to School and Academic Achievement

Oppositional culture has generated a long and robust conversation among social scientists, with considerable back and forth between qualitative and quantitative research. The claim that there is widespread oppositionality to school and academic achievement among Black students, in particular, continues to generate research as scholars find new ways to operationalize oppositionality using data from interviews, participant observation, or local and national surveys.

Survey research. Researchers have regularly employed data from state or nationally representative surveys to test or replicate claims and assumptions about Black youth oppositionality and its connection to their achievement, and to assess the role of school and classroom context. Recent studies largely confirm previous research showing that Black students are equally, if not more, achievement oriented compared to their White counterparts; the majority value good grades, engage in proschool behaviors, have college aspirations, are more likely to attend college net of background characteristics, and find support for achievement among coethnic peers.

One body of work has tested the premise that Black students feel more pressure than White students do from an oppositional peer culture to not do well in school. However, just as MacLeod (1995) wrote about decades ago in his study of two groups of adolescent boys growing up in

Boston public housing, there is significant evidence in this scholarship of Black students having significantly more proschool attitudes than similarly situated White peers. For example, Lehman's (2018) analysis of nationally representative data found that Black students are either less likely or no more likely than others to be victimized by peers when they are well behaved in class, to spend more time on homework, and to receive more academic awards. Research on younger students also shows that high achievement does not diminish Black students' standing among peers. Wilson et al. (2011, p. 93) found that among both Black and White fourth- and fifth-grade students in the Midwest, higher-achieving peer groups had "greater centrality in the classroom" and higher-achieving students held higher status within peer networks. Additionally, analysis of a 2005 CBS News poll of adolescents aged 14–24 also found that at least 90% of both Black males and females report that they would not feel embarrassed to share good grades with their friends, and more than two-thirds of each group had plans to pursue a college education (Toldson & Owens 2010).

Other studies using nationally representative longitudinal data sets find that Black students report as much or greater support for the importance of education for their future opportunities as their White counterparts (Matthew 2011, Wildhagen 2011a) and are more likely to aspire to or attend college, net of socioeconomic factors (Mangino 2010, Merolla 2013). In a recent study using data from the Education Longitudinal Study 2002, Blake (2018) found that Black students are more likely to engage in pro-college-going behaviors than their White peers after controlling for other demographic factors: Black students applied to more colleges and were more likely to take the SAT or ACT and to contact someone for college entrance information.

Another body of work has tested similar assumptions paying particular attention to school contextual factors, such as racial composition of schools, classrooms, or friend groups. Flashman's (2012) analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health data set finds that Black students' friendship networks tend to be lower achieving than White students' not because Black students prefer lower-achieving peers, but because they have fewer opportunities to choose high-achieving peers. Wildhagen (2011b) used ELS 2002 data to test two versions of the acting-White hypothesis that Black students are ostracized by coethnic peers for proschool behaviors and attitudes. Her analysis shows that Black students are not penalized any more than their less successful peers for proschool behaviors or attitudes and that they do not suppress academic effort [operationalized as Advanced Placement (AP) course taking] to avoid possible peer sanctions. In fact, on average, Black students take more AP courses than their White peers, net of various demographic characteristics. However, Wildhagen found that in school contexts where White students display more public engagement (AP course enrollment), high-achieving Black students are more likely to curb public but not private (e.g., time spent on homework) displays of effort.

In another study, Goldsmith (2011) examines peer effects and school racial composition using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study 1988–2000 and the 1990 Census. He reports a mix of advantages and disadvantages for students in White-concentrated and minority-concentrated schools, which largely offset one another. Contrary to the argument that antischool norms are pervasive among minoritized youth, Goldsmith's analysis shows that peers do not explain the lower educational achievement and attainment of students who attend segregated minority schools. Research testing an intervention on middle-school students in Wisconsin provides additional support for this point. The study finds that high-minority schools do not pose a larger threat to Black students' social identity—which would potentially discourage academic striving—than low-minority schools (Hanselman et al. 2014). The findings of these studies suggest that peer norms are less consequential for shaping students' orientations and outcomes than institutional structures.

In one of the more comprehensive examinations of oppositional culture arguments in recent years, Diamond & Huguley (2014) build on previous research to investigate the impact of school

racial composition on oppositionality among Black students. Using survey data on Black and White students in more than 100 secondary schools in 10 states, they assess questions about the relationships between students' academic orientation and their academic achievement; between oppositional attitudes and behaviors, race, and friendships; and between racial disparities in oppositional attitudes and racial disparities in achievement. Similar to other research, the study finds that, after controlling for students' class background, Black students report more proschool attitudes and study time than White students, generally experience more positive peer pressure than White students do, are more likely to aspire to college, and report that their friends place higher value on the pursuit of postsecondary education. The researchers also report that among Black students, having fewer friends of other races was related to lower aspirations and less time studying, but they attributed this finding to racialized tracking, which disproportionately assigns Black students to lower-level classes with same-race peers. However, the study found no relationship between school racial composition and student achievement or achievement orientation. In the final assessment, Diamond and Huguley conclude that differences in academic orientation between Black and White students are too small to make any significant contribution to the Black-White gap in academic achievement.

Taking a more novel approach to the question of Black youth oppositionality, other studies focus on teachers' perceptions of students and students' drop-out behavior. In a study attempting to assess different explanations for the racial achievement gap, Kozlowski (2015) argues that if Black students are willfully engaged in resisting school norms, teachers' reports should reflect the students' low effort and be consistent with the students' self-assessments. However, her analysis of the match between students' self-reports and teacher reports in the ELS 2002 found that teachers were more likely to underestimate the effort of Black students compared with Whites. Agreement between students' and teachers' reports of low effort was stronger among White than Black students, indicating that teachers had a more accurate picture of White students' efforts than Blacks'. In another study, Bradley & Renzulli (2011) operationalize oppositionality as drop-out behavior and propose that if oppositional peer norms exert more influence on Black students than on their White peers, we should find that Black students are more likely to be pushed out of school. However, after controlling for socioeconomic status, the researchers found no support for this proposition.

In addition to studies focused on intergroup comparisons of Black and White students' orientations toward schools and whether Black young people feel intragroup pressure to disengage from school, numerous studies have investigated ideas about the relationship between academic achievement and the salience of students' Black identity or their awareness of racism. Testing the premise that understanding the structural constraints in society leads Black children to become more oppositional, Friend et al. (2011) assessed whether Black parents' socialization practices that emphasize race and the likelihood of discrimination negatively affect African American students' achievement. With survey data collected from 132 African American fifth-grade students, the researchers found that parental socialization did not predict achievement, but socialization for bias (being socialized to expect and prepare for discrimination) was positively associated with grade point average for Black boys. Similarly, Herman (2009) used survey data from students in seven California and Wisconsin public high schools to test the proposition that minoritized students who place a high value on their ethnic group membership will suffer a grade penalty but found no support for this claim. Additionally, the study found no significant racial differences between students on educational aspirations, peers academic values, or beliefs about education. Likewise, researchers investigating the relationship between Black students' connection to their racial identity/group and educational outcomes using a Maryland data set find no support for the notion that Black students who adopt a raceless identity have better outcomes than their peers (Harris &

Marsh 2010). Overall, scholars have consistently found that being Black identified is not associated with negative academic outcomes.

Qualitative studies. Qualitative studies have produced evidence largely consistent with survey findings challenging the existence of widespread oppositionality to school and academic achievement among Black youth. Among the most consistent findings across studies using participant observation or interview data are that (a) Black students do not frequently equate acting White with academic achievement and (b) high-achieving Black students are seldom ostracized by same-race peers for earning high grades or exhibiting other indicators of academic achievement (Akom 2003, Allen 2013, Carter 2005, Hoff 2016, Lee et al. 2014, Lewis & Diamond 2015, Mickelson & Velasco 2006, Tyson 2011, Tyson et al. 2005, Warikoo 2011). In fact, research involving immersion in minoritized youth's school lives finds that Black students value doing well in school and that less academically successful Black students admire and respect their high-achieving Black peers (Fisher 2005, Tyson 2002). Warikoo's (2011) ethnographic study of 1.5-generation immigrant youth in low-performing schools in New York and London shows that although the Afro-Caribbean and other students in her study adopt Black-identified styles of dress and popular music, they do not gain status among their peers for doing poorly in schools. Instead, Warikoo found that the youth expressed pride in achievement. In fact, low-achieving, popular youth tried to mask their low performance by claiming to be doing well. Almost a decade earlier, Tyson (2002) described identical findings among students in all-Black elementary schools. This body of work finds that school success and peer social worlds "are not in opposition to one another" among low-achieving African American and Black immigrant youth (Warikoo 2011, p. 108).

Perhaps most importantly, qualitative studies that begin with questions about oppositional culture often have ended by shifting the frame and pointing us in new directions for understanding what Black youth experience in schooling. These studies find little evidence of oppositional culture and instead have shed light on the ways in which institutional arrangements shape Black students' opportunities for success, academic self-image, and peer relations (Carter 2005, Hand 2010, Lewis & Diamond 2015, López 2003, Tyson 2011). Here, scholars have emphasized the importance of context and the racialized experiences of young people within school buildings. Drawing on multiple studies across North Carolina, Tyson (2011) shows first that there is not a pervasive pattern consistent with oppositional culture among Black youth in schools. Second, where ideas about race and schooling are linked (that school achievement is a White thing), Tyson shows that it is school practices, such as racialized tracking, that produce the link between race and achievement, not Black youth culture. Her findings suggest that peer perceptions about academically successful Black youth (e.g., those in higher-level courses such as honors and AP) depend on whether schools are internally segregated. Specifically, to the extent that a peer culture oppositional to achievement norms can be detected among Black students, it is driven by racialized tracking—having an extremely small share of Blacks in higher-level courses within the schools. However, when Blacks are well represented in higher-level courses, where tracking isn't racialized, this sort of oppositionality is imperceptible among less academically successful Black youth. This reframing is important as it suggests that the solution to oppositionality would be a reorganization of school structures rather than a retooling of Black youth's orientation to that structure.

In their study examining racialization processes in schools, Lewis & Diamond (2015) reveal how the practices of school staff and White parents in the racially diverse suburban high school they studied privilege White students and disadvantage Black students. For example, their analysis of interview data shows how White parents' actions to secure the best resources for their children contributed to highly racialized tracks. The study describes the structures and practices of schools that produce racially stratified academic hierarchies (O'Connor et al. 2009) and reinforce

racialized understandings of achievement. Specifically, Lewis & Diamond note that educators' daily enactment of school organizational routines deviates from the fairness and race neutrality conveyed in the formal version of routines (the formal rules, procedures, and documented modes of operating). The performance of the organizational routines that govern daily procedures ends up being far from race neutral, favoring mostly White and middle-class students relative to their Black and Brown peers. This results, for example, in the latter groups being disciplined more and the former groups having higher rates of enrollment in higher academic tracks net of academic ability.

However, there is a frequent exception to the pattern of nonfindings with regard to one aspect of the oppositional culture theory. Several studies report some support for the idea that high-achieving Black students face a possible popularity penalty among same-race peers (Fryer 2010, Harris 2011, Tyson 2011). However, as Flashman (2012) demonstrates, this is largely a result of differential opportunities. Indeed, qualitative studies show that in desegregated contexts where academic tracks are racially stratified, Black students in high-track courses are structurally isolated from same-race peers, making it more difficult to form friendships with other Black students (Tyson 2011). Some of these Black young people also struggle with navigating school practices that affirm racial stereotypes about intelligence and achievement (Allen 2013, Mickelson & Velasco 2006). Collectively, studies using qualitative methods reinforce the importance of thinking about the role of school demographics, structures, and practices for understanding Black students' experiences.

As the foregoing discussion of the literature suggests, there is a substantial body of research on oppositional culture showing limited empirical validity for the thesis. Previous published reviews of research on this topic reach the same conclusion (Andrews & Swinton 2014, Lewis 2013, Whaley & Noel 2011). Given the abundance of evidence challenging the main tenets of oppositional culture, it is striking that the topic remains so popular among scholars, the press, and the general public. As Lewis (2013) raises in a review of some of this work, a major question one confronts after reading the research in this field is, "Why are we still talking about this?" Why is this argument about Black students' oppositionality so popular despite all the evidence questioning its explanatory power (Horvat & O'Connor 2006)?

Race or Racism?

Part of the reason for the continued focus on oppositional culture may well be that, for a very long time, there were few alternative explanations for pressing issues such as the Black-White achievement gap. And, indeed, academic reviewers and editors have often insisted that scholars conducting research addressing the achievement gap or Black students' outcomes and orientations consider the influence of oppositional peer culture. However, we view the persisting focus on oppositional culture also as a collective failure of imagination, due in part to the ways the formation of knowledge in the field has been shaped by American racial mythology. As philosopher Charles Mills (2007) reminds us, epistemology is fundamentally social—social arrangements shape our routes to knowledge and what we take as given or worthy of consideration. Here, Mills challenges us to pay attention to how racial dynamics are a part of not only social life but also scientific inquiry. As Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi (2008, p. 18) argue, race is important not only "as a subject for investigation" but as a structural factor "that partly shapes researchers and their scientific gaze."

Since the 1960s, most scholars have been willing to acknowledge that White supremacist logic shaped the science of eugenics and the early science of IQ testing, but we are not always as eager to reflect on how racial logics may play a role in the unfolding of our own fields in a more proximate way (McKee 1993, Morris 2015). This includes, for instance, the presumption in many studies that

schools function fairly until there is evidence to the contrary, rather than that schools function unfairly until there is evidence to the contrary. Fundamentally, this is about whether we assume that racism is an exception or the norm. These are questions sociologists have posed for at least several decades. Mickelson (2003), for example, suggested almost 20 years ago that we reframe the often-asked question, “When are racial disparities in education the result of racial discrimination?” and ask instead, “When are racial disparities in education not due to discrimination?”

This review of the research suggests the need to move past oppositional culture explanations; yet, it is still no less important to engage with questions of how to understand what minoritized youth are experiencing and how they are making sense of and responding to the world around them. That is, as many critics of oppositional culture explanations have acknowledged, there is “more than a grain of truth” (Foley 2005, p. 654) to the notion that young people are critical of dominant institutions. In enacting their critique, these youth sometimes engage in behavior that puts them at odds with the institutions they are moving through. However, as the extant research on oppositional culture indicates, Black youth are no more likely to adopt antiachievement norms than their White counterparts, which is why this argument fails to explain racial differences in achievement. The difference here is that although both Black and White youth sometimes exhibit oppositional behaviors, school officials are much less likely to recognize or characterize White youth’s behavior as such.

Ogbu and other proponents of oppositional culture explanations understood the behavior they worried about (e.g., academic disengagement, speaking nonstandard English) as a response to an oppressive dominant society and its agents and institutions. However, the problem was that these responsive behaviors were then imagined to be the main problem, taking on a life of their own (e.g., culture of poverty explanations), and to be responsible for the fact that marginalized youth and communities are suffering. Indeed, oppositional culture also makes sense to people because it fits within a larger narrative of meritocracy that permeates much of American culture. If Black students are not doing well academically, it must be their own fault because, in America, the door to success is open to everyone willing to work hard. These kinds of justifications for failure certainly are not new. As historian James Anderson (2004, p. 360) put it, “being blamed for one’s own subordination is a cross that African Americans have borne for centuries.”

Scholars have paid too little attention to Black youth’s critiques of schooling and other systems, often interpreting their critical attitudes and behaviors through a deficit lens—as defiance and insolence—and their underachievement as a lack of effort, rather than interpreting them as indications of an inherent problem with the system of schooling. Research on the achievement gap, some of which we describe above, has only recently begun to expansively consider where Black students are positioned within schools, the opportunities to which they are exposed, and their relationships with teachers and other adults at school. For too long, researchers have operated under the presumption that schools function in an equitable manner in the face of considerable evidence that they do not and that they never have. Research on oppositional culture unwittingly contributes to this narrative by framing questions not so much to understand what Black youth are experiencing and responding to, or how they see the world in which they live, but to determine how much they reject school and assess the extent to which this affects their achievement outcomes and compares to the behavior of White students.

New Directions for Research on Black Youth (Racism not Race)

More recently there has been a new, critical focus on the institutional structures in which youth are embedded and the policies and practices that shape youth’s experiences (Carter 2012, Shedd 2015, Vaught 2011). This scholarship has attempted to recenter understanding the qualitative

experiences of minoritized young people. What we learn from this body of scholarship, though, is that Black youth may be properly understood as burdened, but not by oppositional culture. They are instead burdened by racism in its structural, institutional, and interpersonal forms.

A growing body of work, for example, captures the parameters of institutional racism in schools. One area of focus here explores the fact that Black and Brown students experience disproportionate punishment in schools nationally. This has been subject to particular scrutiny in recent years as research on disproportionality in discipline has shown that students of color are no more likely to break school rules even though they are punished far more often (Fenning & Rose 2007, Losen et al. 2012).

Evidence of disproportionality in discipline starts early, with even Black preschoolers 3.6 times as likely as their White peers to be suspended (US Dep. Educ. 2016). Scholars trying to understand these patterns have captured the various ways that young people's behavior is often misread, racialized, and adultified, such that young people of color engaged in behavior that is developmentally appropriate and facially equivalent to that of their White peers are seen and understood differently (Goff et al. 2014, Kohli et al. 2017, Laura 2014, Lewis 2003, Lewis & Diamond 2015, Morris 2006, Morris 2016). Both ethnographic studies in schools and experimental work by psychologists have discussed the tendency of teachers to monitor and make sense of Black children's behavior differently (Ferguson 2000, Gilliam et al. 2016). For example, Yale psychologists (Gilliam et al. 2016) studied early childhood educators to try and understand how much of the differential discipline in preschool might be attributed to implicit bias of educators. Drawing on experimental methods, they showed teachers videos of children playing and used technology to track who teachers were watching. They found that when prompted to "expect challenging behaviors" among the group of White and Black children in the video, teachers monitored Black children and particularly Black boys more closely.

The recent research on how young Black students are adultified (Goff et al. 2014, Morris 2016) is another example of work that helps us to make sense of some of the possible mechanisms at play in differential disciplinary outcomes. In earlier work, Ferguson (2000) found that teachers imputed intention to Black children's behavior in a way they did not with White children. For example, teachers interpreted Black boys' actions as intentionally defiant and adultified rather than as childlike and developmentally appropriate. This led to Black boys receiving more punitive treatment for engaging in the same behavior as their White peers. Goff et al. (2014, p. 527) use experimental and field methods to test whether Black boys are given the "protections of childhood" (e.g., assumptions of innocence) in the same manner as other children. Investigating whether these boys are understood to be less "childlike," Goff et al. (2014, p. 526) found that Black boys are "seen as older and less innocent and that they prompt a less essential conception of childhood than do their White same-age peers." Recent survey research by the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown Law found widespread evidence of adultification of Black girls. On a range of measures, researchers report that "adults surveyed view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than White girls of the same age, especially between 5–14 years old" (Epstein et al. 2017, p. 2). Wun (2016, p. 192) writes about the ways Black girls are subject to "constant surveillance" and "gratuitous punishment." Similarly, scholarship by Monique Morris (2016) documents the way Black girls in particular are targeted, surveilled, adultified, and pushed out.

This literature on adultification is important not only because it illuminates one possible mechanism contributing to the widely reported patterns of disproportionality in discipline in schools but also because it is an example of work that uncovers some of the mechanisms through which racial ideology shapes experiences and outcomes in school. The belief that Black children are less childlike or worthy of the protections and presumptions of childhood innocence has a long historical legacy dating back to slavery, when Black children were not seen as worthy of protection

from hard labor (Litwack 1998, Dumas & Nelson 2016). It also intersects with other stereotypes, including links between Blackness and criminality (Muhammad 2010) and stereotypes of Black women as sexually aggressive (Collins 2000). Here we are dealing with not just the ways that “cultural differences are only turned into deficiency in the context of structural discrimination” (Gould 1999, p. 194) but also the ways that implicit bias and interpersonal racism and discrimination turn developmentally appropriate behavior into punishable disobedience (e.g., adultification).

Recent research in schools has revealed the presence, pervasiveness, and consequences of these stereotypes for students in school today. For example, Edward Morris’s (2006) work illustrates how raced and gendered stereotypes shape how schools discipline different students such that, for example, even when Black girls are excelling academically, they are questioned for their manners or disciplined for being too loud. Oeur’s (2018, p. 15) recent work on all-boys high schools serving predominantly African American boys describes how these schools and those in them are collectively navigating the controlling images of what he calls “deviant Black masculinity.” Oeur (2018, p. 6) argues that, too often, the measure of students’ educational success is the extent to which they show “the individual willpower, effort, and hope needed to transcend a racial subject position marked mostly by its defects.”

Other research illustrating possible mechanisms at play in differential outcomes investigates how race shapes teachers’ performance expectations at both the individual and organizational levels (Dee 2005, Diamond et al. 2004, Ferguson 1998, Irizarry 2015, Lewis & Diamond 2015, McKown & Weinstein 2008, Pigott & Cohen 2000). Drawing from a range of theoretical traditions and on different kinds of data (ethnographic, interviews, national surveys), this work collectively documents patterns in teachers’ holding lower academic expectations for students. For example, Irizarry (2015) draws on national survey data to show not only patterns of negative teacher perceptions of Black students but nuanced information about how such patterns of teacher perception impact different racial/ethnic subgroups (e.g., Southeast Asians versus East Asians). McGrady & Reynolds’s (2013) analysis of ELS 2002 similarly shows that Black students are viewed more negatively than other racial/ethnic groups by White teachers. While some scholars have found there are important differences in how race shapes teachers’ academic expectations across different contexts (McKown & Weinstein 2008, Ready & Wright 2011), others have found consistently lower expectations for Black students, particularly with regard to behavioral expectations (McGrady & Reynolds 2013). Perhaps it should not be surprising that, as Starck and colleagues (2020, p. 273) recently found, teachers also “hold pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases.” Or, as Diamond (2018, p. 350) recently articulated in discussing the legacy of White supremacy in schools, “Because of the dominant white supremacist and antiblack ideology in the United States, when someone is identified as ‘black,’ there is a semiautomatic set of negative beliefs that are triggered in most whites. . . [these] stereotypes about gender, race, and intelligence are productive of structural inequality.” This work highlights particular burdens that Black youth face, which should prompt us to ask questions about how youth make sense of and respond to differential treatment.³

Reframing Black Youth’s “Burden”

When we take seriously the burdens of structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism that minoritized students face in school, then we necessarily also operate with a more critical frame for understanding when and where students of color are engaged in behavior that represents a response to their differential treatment or alienation, when their behavior is truly about resistance

³Young’s (2006) research on Black men is a great example of this kind of work for a slightly older cohort.

(i.e., includes critique), recognizing that such behavior is often quite rational (Nolan 2011). While those responses can be counterproductive to young people's desires for social mobility, they can also be simultaneously liberating or protective. For example, years ago, writing about youth who leave school, Fine (1991) discovered that the young people who left school had better mental health (i.e., were less depressed) than those who stayed. Young people's refusal to play by the school's rules in this case is seen as protective and productive and, as we discuss more below, possibly the key to their own sanity if not liberation. Cohen (2004, p. 30) refers to this as a "new politics of deviance," reminding us that, although the choices "individuals with relatively little access to dominant power" make

are not necessarily made with explicitly political motives in mind, they do demonstrate that people will challenge established norms and rules and face negative consequences in pursuit of goals important to them, often basic human goals such as pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect.

Such work makes room for what critical race and indigenous studies scholar Eve Tuck (2009, p. 416) describes as the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives." What we learn from these studies that examine the meaning youth attach to their behavior, then, is that youth can both be critical of schools and understand the importance of education (Nolan 2011). Resistance and reproduction, unfortunately, are not mutually exclusive (Tuck 2009). However, work in critical youth studies is beginning to document how minoritized youth are working to channel their critiques of mainstream institutions into productive action for change (Kwon 2008).

A growing body of work in this field offers important insight and direction for future research on Black and other minoritized youth. Deeply engaged with questions of what youth are experiencing and how their needs are or are not being addressed, much of the research in this area raises important questions about how young people, particularly youth of color (or minoritized youth), are often framed as "the root causes of their own problems" (Ginwright & James 2002, p. 29). These scholars describe the same world as Ogbu and others but with greater attention to context, and they come to very different sets of conclusions. For example, in their study of youth engaged in political action, Ginwright & James (2002, pp. 28–29) argue that

Racism, mass unemployment, pervasive violence, and police brutality pose serious threats to youth and their families. . . These toxins impede productive development for young people, who are expected to develop under these hostile conditions, and place them at a greater risk than those living in stable and safe communities.

These scholars imagine the missing link in what research on oppositional culture observes as dysfunctional resistance, to be instead youth development (rather than, for instance, youth concession). Contrary to work focused on social disorganization, this scholarship documents the many prosocial and healthy activities that young people are involved in and seek out (Ginwright & Cammarota 2007). It also documents the nonschool community and neighborhood-based organizations that help to provide young people with what they need—not only spaces to play and learn but places where they can have a chance to connect and to discover how they can be a part of addressing pressing community problems (Baldrige 2014, Baldrige et al. 2017, Ginwright & Cammarota 2007, Kwon 2008, Ngo et al. 2017, Winn & Jackson 2011). Much of this work focuses on community-based educational spaces that have historically played an important role in reducing the impact of educational inequality on the lives of youth of color (Baldrige et al. 2017). Recognizing that schools have too often been a site of Black suffering (Dumas 2014, Love 2019), education beyond the school is understood to hold great promise as a place of resistance (Baldrige et al. 2017) or even transformation (Ginwright & Cammarota 2007). In fact, nonschool

spaces have a long history of providing counter-spaces of “respite, healing” and cultivating “strong, social, cultural, and political identities” (Baldridge et al. 2017, p. 396).

This work in critical youth studies helps us to think about how to reorient our studies of Black and other minoritized youth and of what has been missing from the conversation on oppositional culture. While the oppositional culture framework gives a nod to racism (or caste) and recognizes the idea of opposition to oppressive conditions, in the end it focuses solely on the behavior of young people (and occasionally their parents). In the effort to render Black youth as full subjects, Ogbu and others gave them more than agency—they gave them full responsibility. The point of reorienting the research is to highlight that some of the behaviors that youth are engaged in are not only developmentally appropriate but necessary for survival. Some of it may be resistance; some of it is just youthfulness (which is sometimes read by others as defiance/resistance); and some of it is play, joy, and thriving (Laura 2014, Love 2019; see also work by Hunter et al. 2016).

CONCLUSION

Implications for Future Research

This burgeoning research also challenges us fundamentally to begin scholarly projects with different starting assumptions. This would mean shifting our research gaze and, as O’Connor (2020) argued recently, using a wider lens. Similarly to a number of scholars in recent years who have challenged us to think critically about how race is deployed as a variable in research, we are asked to consider “how schools produce race as a social category” (O’Connor et al. 2007, p. 546) and to “concretely name racism as a problem” (Kohli et al. 2017, p. 183). As Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi (2008) remind us, race is not skin color, it is a relational phenomenon and experience. The historical record of White supremacy and pervasive anti-Blackness in our culture and institutions suggests that we might have done well to heed Mickelson’s (2003) nearly two-decades-old charge to begin studies of Black youth with the understanding that racism is a fundamental part of their experiences. They are navigating a world that has not valued their full humanity since the very inception of the category “Black” that is ascribed to them. Our task, then, is to map out the parameters of the multiple and nuanced manifestations of White supremacy and anti-Blackness in their lives and in their schools.

There are several challenges with this shift, however. As Mills and others suggest, such a shift will likely face some resistance as the hegemonic notions in the discipline suggest that categorizing something as racism requires evidence. The other challenge is limitations in the kinds of data that have been collected historically that make it challenging to study the problem comprehensively or holistically. Data on institutional and everyday forms of discrimination, for example, are often absent from existing national surveys, which leaves race as a variable to stand in as a proxy for an unspecified set of mechanisms or processes that generate differential outcomes.

Beginning with different assumptions would help, however. One example comes from recent research by Skiba and colleagues on national patterns of disproportionality in discipline (Skiba et al. 2002, 2011; Gregory et al. 2010). They have collected new kinds of data and analyzed existing data in creative ways to show important nuance in school discipline patterns (e.g., whether children are being punished for objective or subjective kinds of infractions). This work yields what should be rather mundane findings—all children are breaking the rules. It then forces us to conduct new research to study why, then, patterns of punishment are so different by race.

Along these lines, rather than continuing to focus on oppositional culture, sociologists interested in educational outcomes should design studies to uncover the structural, organizational, and interpersonal racism that burden Black youth inside and outside schools. How do we engage with and test the claims emanating from critical race and critical youth studies? What can we learn

about spaces of liberation, where Black youth are thriving and where the substantive critique of the world they are developing within is taken up rather than disciplined? Perhaps if their insights into their own lives and experiences received more serious scholarly attention, the oppositional culture framework would fade and more fruitful frameworks for understanding differential outcomes and Black youth's behavior would take hold.

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