SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN STUDENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to study the experiences of Sub-Saharan African students, who have earned professional degrees from American institutions and are currently living in the United States. Acculturative stressors have been identified by researchers as predictors of loneliness, depression, homesickness, and poor mental health among international students and in Sub-Saharan African students. Although academic research by scholars has shown a negative impact of acculturative stressors on international students in the US, there has been limited research on how African immigrants have succeeded in the American society. This topic was explored qualitatively through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is an appropriate method of inquiry to understand how Sub-Saharan Africans have been shaped by their experiences in U.S. graduate schools and in their post graduate careers. The research found that American-style education had a transformative impact on Sub-Saharan African students who have graduated from U.S. universities and who now live in the US as citizens. They were able to navigate their school and work environments successfully by understanding the implications of racial attitudes and in effect developed coping skills that allowed for growth and increased opportunities in the country.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Africa, international education, acculturative stress, transformative learning.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Acculturative stress creates significant challenges for international students regardless of race, language, and country of origin. These challenges have been well documented and include homesickness, (Poyrazli & Lopez (2007), language barriers, difficulties in adjustment (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez 2007), difficulties adjusting due to cultural differences, (Constantine, Caldwell, Berkel, & Utsey, 2005; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007), and perceived discrimination (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Karuppan & Barari, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). The effects of these challenges include risk for mental health issues, such as anxiety (Brown, 2008, Msengi, 2007;) and depression, maladjustment, and academic challenges (Grahame, Poyrazli & Sumer, 2008).

English language proficiency is a major stressor that leads to international students’ inability to adjust to a new environment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) and can be associated with perceived discrimination. In their study of 439 students, 198 of which were international students, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found that younger international students with less English language proficiency reported higher levels of perceived discrimination and homesickness. Moreover, the researchers found that international students reported experiencing higher levels of discrimination than did domestic students. Poyrazli and Lopez concluded that this perceived discrimination, in addition to the inability of the students to communicate effectively due to their accents, could in fact “impede students’ acculturation or adjustment into their new environment and negatively affect students’ mental health” (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007, p. 272). This finding is consistent with the findings of Khawaja and Stallman (2011) and Msengi (2007).
Perceived discrimination can be debilitating to international students trying to cope with the challenges of graduate school. It affects their academic performance, their self-confidence, and their self-esteem (Lee & Rice, 2007). In addition, it adds to acculturation stressors by increasing frustration levels in these students. Some studies show that international students do not ask questions in the classroom for fear of being considered unintelligent (Brown, 2008; Lee & Rice, 2007; Swaminathan & Alfred 2010). There is need for further research exploring international students’ experiences in the US, because, as Lee and Rice (2007) explained, “despite the enormities of issues surrounding international students’ experiences, research on the impact of international students’ social experiences is limited” (p. 388).

**Sub-Saharan Africans**

The problem this study addressed was how acculturative stressors have influenced Sub-Saharan African students who have graduated from U.S. universities. Sub-Saharan African students have been coming to study in the US and other Western nations for many decades, from the beginning of the 20th century until now. Since the 1900s, the US has been a host nation for many African students. While many return to Africa to become leaders and administrators in their respective countries, many stay behind to live and work in the US.

According to the U.S. 2010 census figures, there are currently 1.6 million Africans living in the United States, a significant percentage of which can be found in large, urban population-dense regions, such as Washington DC, New York, Dallas, Houston, Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Chicago. Of these Africans, 10.6% are under the age of 18; approximately 55% are between the ages of 18 and 44; 28% are between 45 and 64, and 6.3% are 65 and over. The median age for Africans in the US is 38 years. In addition, 56.2% are
male, while 43.2% are females. Fifty four percent of African immigrants living in the US are also married. Forty-six percent of African immigrants living in the US are naturalized citizens.

Sub-Saharan Africa falls within the areas of Africa below the Sahara Desert. Countries in this geographic location include African countries that were formerly colonized by European powers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The region now encompasses 47 independent African countries with a combined population of 800 million people according to the World Bank (2007). Many Africans come to the US primarily to attend school. Several remain in the US to live permanently. The U.S. census (2010) further shows that 27.7% of immigrant Africans hold at least an associate degree, while over 40% hold a bachelors or higher degree. Seventy-five percent of African-born U.S. citizens living in the United States are engaged in the labor force. Approximately 38% of this population take up careers in management, business, science, and the arts, while the rest find work in service, sales, and other employment situations. The median income in an African household is slightly over $50,000 dollars per year.

The International Institute of Education (IIE) report of 2011 showed a 3.8% decline in African students coming to the US, from 36,890 in the 2010-2011 school year to 35,502 in the 2011-2012 school year. African students who come to the US to study have high expectations of the American educational system. Research shows they believe that American schools are better in quality than the ones offered to them in their respective countries (Kumi-Yeboah, 2010). Western education in Africa has its roots in the European educational systems brought to the continent by the colonial powers. Educational systems in West Africa were developed to follow the systems in France, Britain, and Portugal. Kumi-Yeboah (2010) put it succinctly as follows:

The people of the African continent have been through different phases of exploitation, colonial domination, and years of political, economic, social, and cultural transformation
It has become difficult for some adult learners in Sub-Saharan Africa to gain admission to the few Sub-Saharan institutions and the lack of competent and qualified university faculty/staff is also a major problem. Inadequate infrastructural facilities and the lack of other educational resources present problems in dealing with the increasing population. These conditions have made United States desirable destination for adult learners from Sub-Saharan Africa. (p. 15).

The lack of infrastructure and other related educational facilities in Sub-Saharan Africa has also resulted in a lack of preparedness for American-style education. In addition, structural adjustment programs in many African countries, coupled with economic recession, have led to “an overall decline in educational budgets” (Beoku-Betts, 2004, p.118). In addition to the lack of educational infrastructures, other motivating factors that explain why Africans decide to study in the West, and in the US specifically, include the opportunities afforded by scholarships or being sponsored by parents.

This study examined how Sub-Saharan African students were influenced by American-style education. Research has shown that being part of a minority in a majority-White institution increases perceptions of racial discrimination in African international students as well as “feelings of inferiority based on media portrayals of or direct insults . . . negative remarks of others’ home country or culture, [and] hostility towards non-fluency in English” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 394).

**Significance of the Study**

There are several reasons why this problem has individual, group, institutional, and societal implications. Academic research by scholars has shown a negative impact of acculturative stressors on international students in the United States. However, little evidence is
available that documents how African immigrants have succeeded in the American society. There have been some doctoral dissertations about African students in the United States, mostly written by Africans. Additional studies of how African immigrants have coped with acculturative problems and whether there has been any transformative impact on their sense of awareness is important to academic counselors, college administrators, and the international student community in the sense that these findings might direct policy or provide insight into the community at a level that helps educational institutions to formulate policy.

This study is also significant in its aim to contribute to helping African immigrants succeed in college by exploring their experiences, which is of interest to educational institutions. It hoped to provide reliable information for American colleges and universities about African immigrants and the need for institutions to put in place strategic interventions that would assist African students to succeed on their campuses. Finally, it is also significant because those newly arrived Africans who choose to study and live in the US may have a clearer understanding of the factors they need to contend with in their educational experience as a result of this study’s findings, which they may be able to make use of during their educational pursuits.

**Positionality Statement**

As a member of the demographic under study in this project, the researcher’s perspective on the problem of practice is that professional Sub-Saharan Africans living and working in the United States have been transformed by exposure to American education, in not just acculturative ways, but also in the process of acquiring a greater sense of self-awareness and sense of belongingness. The researcher was a student in Northern California and earned degrees in management and graduate degrees in English and education. His journey through the American graduate school landscape was similar to the ones described by Poyrazli and Grahame
(2007), Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), and Lee and Rice, (2007); these were scholars who examined acculturative stress experienced by nonimmigrant international students while studying in the United States. The researcher experienced loneliness, homesickness, in addition to sometimes experiencing perceptions of inhospitality and unfairness on and off campus.

Having personally experienced some of the stressors mentioned in this problem statement, and having been shaped by the experiences to the American environment, the researcher was interested in discovering how other Sub-Saharan African international students made sense of their experiences. He held in mind the possibility that in most cases the transformation was not negative but instead aspirational and forward-looking. There was also the possibility that the unfortunate byproduct of this transformation would be a loss of some aspects of African cultural beliefs. Literature has shown that there is a tendency for Africans to subordinate their African cultural beliefs to the dominant culture. One such example of this is the loss of accent or the inability of offspring to speak and write the parent’s native language. Many Africans become Westernized in order to be acceptable, and unfortunately this might have an impact on their ability to function in African work or social environments. The findings of this study were thought to be of value to educators as well as African international students.

The researcher shared a common experience with the participants of this study in that he also came to the United States as a nonimmigrant and graduated from a U.S. graduate school. This shared experience includes speaking an African language and having similar educational experience and aspirational wishes as the participants. However, Africa is not a homogenous society. There are many cultural differences from one linguistic group to the next. There are even differences in lifestyle and habits within people speaking the same language. Due to the nuances and individuality associated with people from different parts of Africa, the researcher
was aware that he may not, by the mere virtue of being African, be able to fully exploit this shared language.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do African professionals who were immigrants and completed graduate schoolwork in the US describe and understand themselves and their American educational journey?
2. What aspect of American education had the most influence on these professionals who have taken the transformational journey of acquiring their graduate education and what factors influenced their decision to remain in the United States?
3. How do African students make sense of their decision to remain and work as professionals in the United States?

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African students who attended and graduated from U.S. graduate schools and how their experiences have influenced them. In order to fully understand the way African students are shaped by their graduate student experiences, it is important to understand how they interpret their world as a result of adjustment to the U.S. culture. Because the United States is not a color blind society, and because the issue of race relations in the United States has been a prominent topic for scholarly studies, African students arriving to study in the United States most likely recognize that their skin color, language, and cultural beliefs are factors that partly determine how they are perceived and treated by the host communities. The literature is replete with several reports of perceived discriminatory practices from host communities. Racial bias and overt racism have
been reported by several researchers in the collection of materials discussed in the review of literature (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Constantine et al., 2005; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Under these circumstances, it is important to consider how such cultural influences affect an African international student in the US. To do so entails having a theoretical framework that is inherently race sensitive. Therefore, this study had as its theoretical framework *race-centric transformational learning*, which emerged from transformative adult education learning theory after many scholars posited that Mezirow’s transformative adult education learning theory was not race sensitive (Fareed, 2009; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Ntseane, 2011; Sheared, 1994; Williams-Hameed Herukhuti, 2003). Collectively, these scholars argued that race, power, culture, ethnicity, and socio-political contexts should be at the center of analysis when basing transformative learning as a theoretical framework. Thus, there is a consensus in the available scholarship that in order to fully understand the lived experiences of African immigrants in the American higher education environment, it is essential to look at their experiences through the theoretical lens of race-centric transformative education that recognizes their culture and traditions.

Taylor (2008) asserted that “a race centric view of transformative learning puts people of African descent, most often black women, at the center, where they are subjects of the transformative experience” and that race centric transformative learning is “culturally bounded, oppositional, and nonindividualistic” (Taylor, 2008, p. 9). Ntseani (2011), who wrote from Botswana, argued that transformative learning should be “contextualized by the individual’s interpretation and meaning making of his or her environment” (p.320), which is what this study aims to do.
The race centric component of transformative learning considers race, cultural sensitivity, voice, humanness, and an all-encompassing Afrocentric paradigm (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Ntseane, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Williams, 2003). These are all important considerations when viewing Sub-Saharan African scholars’ post graduate school experience in the US. This approach was deemed to be an appropriate way to analyze and interpret the participants in this study because through this approach the participants were viewed as part of an international immigrant community and not just a peculiar “other.” It allowed the researcher to examine the participants as inclusive of a larger (immigrant) community sharing a similar inter-cultural experience like many others, yet having their own voice and specific socio-cultural heritage (African) that they have brought to the mix.

This theoretical lens advocated a culturally sensitive Afrocentric paradigm. This is because one cannot ignore the environment of race relations in the United States and how African students would fit into the social environment of the country that has a history of racism. It was safe to assume that race would play a role in how these students react to their inter-cultural experience. Kegan (2000) noted that “we not only form meaning, and we not only change our meanings; we change the very form by which we are making our meanings, we change our epistemologies” (pp. 52-53). This is at the heart of transformational learning theory.

Johnson-Bailey and Alfred (2006) described their concept of transformational learning as “learning not set forth by Mezirow and Freire” but learning that is “bound by my cultural roots and one that can be identified through the writings of the Harlem Renaissance scholars and in the slave narratives” (p. 49). Another important aspect of race-centric transformational learning to this study is that it embodies an Afrocentric paradigm in opposition to a Eurocentric concept of transformational education (Williams, 2003). Ntseani (2011) said that transformational learning
occurs when “there is an interconnected relationship between the individual, community, and other forces such as nature and ancestral spirits” (p. 309). Williams (2003) described his approach as a praxis and a paradigm based on an “Afrocentric and non-Western informed ontology” (p.269) that is rooted in freedom, liberation, justice, and equality that is associated with the work of many cultural workers and activists. Williams also argued that at the “heart of African traditional educational systems are recognition of the self and individual critical consciousness” (p.271). He suggested that Africans from time immemorial have explored self-knowledge, regarding it as the basis of all knowledge (Williams 2003).

Therefore, grounding one’s study in race centric transformative learning is to base one’s ideas on the concepts of culture, race, freedom, equality, and what Williams described as “dual consciousness,” the concept of looking at emancipation and freedom from a non-Western Afrocentric perspective (Williams, 2003). Williams believed that transformative learning should be a form of empowerment whereby the individual has gained critical consciousness (William, 2003). Similarly, Beoku-Betts (2004) argued that female African scholars who found themselves in Western educational institutions became conscious of what she termed, “burden of representation,” (p. 132) whereby individuals are perceived to be representing their race instead of themselves, especially in host institutions in the West. These scenarios often encourage African students to become aware of hostility towards them and to develop a sense of determination to overcome the hostility. According to Beoku-Betts, (2004), “Many of the women clearly articulated their determination to work hard, to keep focused on their objectives, to be self-confident, and to draw on spiritual beliefs or support from other international students as strategies for survival” (p. 132). Race and gender were also factors in the way Black students were perceived both in the experience of William (2003), who studied in Southern California,
and in the experiences of students in Beoku-Bett’s, (2004) study, the Black participants in Nebedum-Ezeh’s, (1997), in Manyika’s (2001) study, and in many of the other studies mentioned in this proposal. Therefore, from the knowledge gained through previous research and the consensus of the scholars devoted to giving voice to the experiences of this population, it was appropriate to examine Sub-Saharan African students through the lens of race centric transformative learning.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Challenges Facing International Students

Stressors in the international student community have been examined in several studies. The most frequent stressors have been found to be personal and social; challenges in adjustment and acculturative stressors, such as difficulties associated with language proficiency, isolation, and perceived discrimination; and academic stressors, such as school workload and academic performance (Rice, 1999). As a result of these challenges, international students have reported experiences of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These common stressors are first examined as they affect international students in general and then as they affect African students from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Adjustment challenges: Isolation and loneliness. Many researchers have found that international students transitioning from their home countries to new environments encounter many unforeseen problems that oftentimes lead to a sense of isolation and feelings of loneliness. For instance, Khawajah and Stallman (2011) found in their study of international students studying in English-speaking destinations that many international students come from collectivist societies and as such find it difficult to adjust to life in an individualistic society such that exists in English speaking destinations. Khawajah and Stallman adopted a qualitative approach to study the lived experiences of 22 international students from 11 countries who were studying in Australia. Simple tasks such as finding transportation, renting an apartment, and developing a general lack of familiarity with daily procedures were tasks that challenged the international students. In addition to these issues, students in this study complained about experiencing “isolation and loneliness” (p. 210). These findings are consistent with the findings of other
research exploring the challenges of international scholars (Constantine et al., 2005; Msengi, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007).

Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) found that location and setting could be factors in the types of challenges faced by international students. Using an ecological framework to study 15 international students, Poyrazli and Grahame looked specifically at students in the social sciences who lived off campus of an institution with a small enrollment (3,400). The researchers described the students as “commuter students” (p. 32). This small sample in a small town with little campus residence life allowed the researchers to examine at close quarters the challenges international students face in their educational journey, because the setting offered very little support systems to the students. For instance, there was limited public transportation as well as limited interactions with domestic students in the residential environment. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to focus groups that covered such topics as “initial transition, academic and social life, and psychological experiences” (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007, p. 33).

Poyrazli and Graham (2007) found that interactions with people in the host community, especially the domestic students and the immediate vicinity out of campus, were sometimes the source of problems for international students. The researchers found that their sample of international students raised several concerns about adjusting to their new environment due to a variety of reasons, most of which included getting oriented to the new environment. They encountered challenges in interacting with other students and professors, transportation problems, finding accommodation, and doing academic work, as well as encountering pervasive communication and language problems. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) concluded that that the stressors that students were subject to related to the “overwhelming number of bureaucratic
requirements, the lack of infrastructure that makes it difficult to settle in and focus on their studies, and the isolation that they experienced because of the lack of infrastructure” (p. 38). Msengi (2007) examined the experiences of 220 international students at a Midwestern university and found that sources of stress included simple tasks such as cross-cultural contacts, food, housing, transportation, language proficiency as sources of stress to international students. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Constantine et al., 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007) exploring the adjustment challenges faced by international students, especially in regard to African international college students, which will be detailed below (Constantine et al., 2005).

**Difficulties due to lack of English language proficiency.** English language proficiency is one of the prominent problems that all international students face. The literature shows that this problem is widespread in the international student community. Many researchers have proposed that students who feel they lack proficiency in English report experiences of learner anxiety and a culture of silence. There are several examples and reported evidence of this trend in the literature. Often, international students say that their accents are a problem. They feel often misunderstood, sometimes cannot participate in class discussions, or are ignored when they attempt to engage in conversations (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Nwabah & Heitner, 2009; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2010).

International students who participated in an Australian research project “reported English proficiency as a significant challenge” (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011, p. 211). Findings showed that poor English language proficiency results in poor academic performance, stress, depression, and poor social interactions with host communities (Brown, 2008); these experiences are described as evoking “feelings of anxiety, shame, and inferiority” (p. 75). The participants in
the Khawajah and Stallman (2011) study considered English language proficiency as a major obstacle. International students have difficulty understanding the accents of the host country, thereby making adjustment very difficult. Khawajah and Stallman concluded, “Limited English language proficiency slowed down the speech and confidence of the international students . . . these deficits reduced comprehension of the subject matter . . . and often impacted academic reading and writing” (p. 211).

The high expectations and positive notions of America that international students hold when they are enter the US are often deflated by individual experiences. Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) found in their study of international and American students that “because of language and cultural differences, international students may have a harder time adjusting to their new environment . . . [and] are at the risk of perceiving or experiencing discrimination” (p. 272). Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) went further to say that “because international students speak English with an accent and because they may belong to a visible racial or ethnic minority group” (p. 272) their learning, self-esteem, and acculturation could be impeded by these circumstances.

Research has also shown that English language proficiency also becomes an issue in post-school employment or social interaction situations. Nwabah and Heitner (2009) reported that Nigerian immigrant women expressed dismay at the level of intolerance by Americans towards Nigerian accents. Even though the participants in the study were no longer students, the findings are not unique but are consistent with studies looking at the issue of English language proficiency in student populations in Britain, Australia, and the United States (Brown, 2008; Grahame et al., 2008; Kwawaja & Stallman, 2011). The persistence of the problem appears to follow immigrants even in life and work situations.
**Acculturative stressors.** Social-cultural aspects of acculturation inherently lead to stressful encounters with the native population of the host country. Khawajah and Stallman (2011) found that *culture shock* is a major stressor for many international students. In many cases, communication between international students and the host country was “mostly tilted due to social and cultural differences” (p. 215) and this hinders effective communication between international students and their hosts. This finding tallies with the report of Lee and Rice (2007) and Reynolds and Constantine (2007). Reynolds and Constantine set out to determine the extent to which cultural adjustment issues predicted career development issues in 261 international students from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. According to the scholars, the intention was to also “examine [the] degree to which acculturative distress and intercultural competent concerns predicted career aspirations” (p. 391). They found that the level of acculturative stress experienced by international students was predictive of lower career aspirations by international students (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). This finding is similar to the reports of Lee and Rice (2007) and Khawajah and Stallman (2011). In addition, the scholars reported that international students faced “unsettling feelings of discomfort and inhospitality after their arrival at the university” (Reynolds & Constantine, 2007, p. 396). Reynolds and Constantine found that intercultural competence was predictive of lower career outcome expectations. Also, Brown (2008), in an ethnographic study that correlated language proficiency with anxiety in postgraduate students studying in Great Britain, noted that many international students experience shock on arrival, especially when they interact with the local population in a social context. Brown (2008) concluded that international students suffer anxiety because of the stress of having to learn in another language, and this affects successful academic and social acculturation.
In an article that examined cultural shock as a phenomenon that immigrant groups, such as international students, encounter in a host environment, Winkleman, (1994) suggested that cultural shock could be addressed “through cognitive orientation and behavioral adjustment involving recognition of cultural shock characteristics” (p. 121). He argued that cultural shock was a result of distress of intercultural experiences” (p. 125) and therefore could be addressed by understanding the behaviors associated with cultural shock and following it up with an intervention that requires “proactive cognitive orientation” (p. 125). Winkelman noted that his professional experience as Director of the Arizona State University Ethnographic Field School in Ensenada, Baja California, had shown him “that helping students manage their cultural shock experiences is fundamental to their success” (p. 121). This conclusion is consistent with the findings of other researchers who have examined acculturated stress (Brown, 2008; Khawajah & Stallman, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Perceived discrimination. Research that has explored challenges facing international students has shown that they are susceptible to discrimination based on cultural differences (Constantine et al., 2005; Karrupan & Barari, 2011; Lee & Rice; 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Constantine et al. (2005) examined cultural adjustment experiences of 12 immigrant Africans who all reported experiencing discriminatory attitudes towards them, not just by Americans, but also from other international students from Asia. In the Constantine et al. study, “participants [who] generally indicated prejudicial or discriminatory treatment by others . . . typically noted they were called names and racial slurs by White Americans” (p. 61) and that they “typically perceived Americans to view Africans as less intelligent than themselves” (p. 61).
Lee and Rice (2007) interviewed a sample of international students from 15 countries about international student perceptions of discrimination against the backdrop of neo-racism as a theoretical lens. Their findings tie in with the findings of other researchers, pointing to real inadequacies within the larger American system, which negatively impacts international students. Karrupan and Barari (2011) found similar sentiments when they conducted an investigation of international students. The authors concluded, “perceived discrimination has a strong, negative impact on educational experience” (p. 67).

Lee and Rice studied perceptions of racism in 501 international students attending a large U.S. university in the Southwest region. They found that a “range of international student problems suggest neo-racism as a cause” (p. 393). Although some of the perceptions of racism reported by participants could not be ascertained as actual discrimination based “on foreign status, language, or race, and how much is misperception,” (p. 393), the authors noted that there was a divide between the experiences of White international students and those of color from third world countries.

Lee and Rice (2007) further concluded that their research revealed “some of the worst hardships in negotiating university life as due to the foreign national status” (p. 405), concluding in their findings that “these difficulties run from students being ignored, to verbal insults and confrontation” (p. 405). Their findings also illustrate how “this occurs in a range of contexts, both in and outside of the classroom, by peers, faculty, and members of the local community” (p. 405).

Similarly, Poyrazli and Lopez (2007) reported perceived discriminatory attitude towards international students in their exploratory study of 439 college students consisting of 198 international students and 241 U.S. domestic students. The researchers used quantitative
methods to analyze their data and concluded, “international students would report higher levels of homesickness and perceived discrimination than would American students” (p. 272). The scholars also concluded that:

Comparison to their U.S. counterparts, international students are at greater risk of perceiving or experiencing discrimination. International students may perceive more discrimination because of their non-American status, because they may speak English with an accent, and because they may belong to a visible racial or ethnic minority group. Regardless of the reason, it is important to note that a higher level of perceived discrimination could impede students’ acculturation or adjustment into their new environment and negatively affects students’ mental health (e.g., lower their self-esteem).

Poyrazli and Lopez’s (2007) research also shows that the longer international students stayed in the United States the more they reported incidents of perceived discrimination. Older international students also reported higher levels of perceived discrimination, and there was a connection between English language proficiency, ethnicity, gender, and academic achievement (GPA) with levels of reported homesickness and perceived discrimination (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). In addition, Lee (2010) argued that one of the contributing factors to perceived discrimination reports from international students was “many higher education institutions throughout the world appear to pay little attention to supporting these students once they arrive” (p.66). Lee further noted “individuals from non-Western countries face greater challenges due to the need to negotiate cultural and linguistic differences” (p. 69).

Regarding institutional response to international students, Trice (2003) reported a rather positive picture of faculty perceptions of international students. She interviewed and collected
data from four departments (Architecture, Public Health, Mechanical Engineering, and Materials Science and Engineering) at a research university to examine their experiences with international students. Although she was quick to admit that the international students in her study were treated as homogenous entities, her findings of faculty perceptions varied from one department to the next; however, faculty members showed interest and a commitment to the success of their international students and an awareness of the problems international students face. They made concerted efforts to mitigate any problems (Trice, 2003). According to Trice, the main issue faculty noted as a major problem for international students is communication with faculty and peers.

**Effects of Acculturative Stress on International Students**

Research examining stressors faced by international students find that they are more likely to complain of stress due to alienation and discrimination in the host country than guilt over leaving their home countries (Msengi, 2007). According to Msengi, these stressors impact the mental health of international students and may also result in anxiety and depression. Several authors have also found anxiety and depression as predictors of acculturative stress. Grahame, Poyrazli, and Sumer (2008) as well as Khawajah and Stallman (2011) reported that anxiety and depression were major challenges that international students face in a host country. According to the scholars, participants’ “confidence and self-esteem declined when they failed to obtain expected grades” (p. 217). Research has shown that international students’ psychological experiences range from anxiety and depression to homesickness, disorientation, alienation, and powerlessness.

Grahame et al. (2008) conducted a cross-sectional, exploratory study in which depression and anxiety were measured among international students. In this quantitative study, the scholars
found that students’ English language proficiency correlated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, which in turn negatively affected acculturation and adaptation of the students to the host environment. There is a confluence of findings that point to a preponderance of personal and social stressors in the international student population in the United States and that self-rated English language proficiency contributes to international students’ level of depression and anxiety (Brown, 2008; Grahame et al. 2008).

International students believe that the US offers a better opportunity for their education and wellbeing. What they do not see is the variety of challenges they are likely to face as nonimmigrants living in the United States. According to Swaminathan and Alfred (2010), immigrants’ images about American educational cultures are often not what the immigrants expected. The students in the study by Swaminathan and Alfred (2010) claimed that they realized that they were different but felt that such differences “needed to be acknowledged rather than suppressed in the classroom” (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2010, p. 30). The American classroom often does not recognize the diversity in the classroom space, which inevitably leads to the immigrant’s inability to become fully engaged in the classroom discussions and activities. Differences as a result of immigration become pivotal in the process of learning, living, and becoming successful in the United States.

In sum, acculturative stressors have been identified by researchers as predictors of loneliness, depression, homesickness, and poor mental health among international students. This literature review shows that acculturative stress on international students negatively impacts their level of academic achievements. International students reported that they had problems interacting with domestic students and the immediate community around the campus because of language barriers and cultural differences. In addition, international students were challenged by
basic problems, such as transportation, finding accommodation, and doing academic work. Age, ethnicity, gender, and length of stay in the United States, and social support determine the depth and level of impact associated with acculturative stress. International students said that they develop coping skills in order to complete their studies in the US.

International students oftentimes needed to negotiate cultural and linguistic differences, and were likely to experience cultural shock due to language problems. In addition to these issues, international students, especially those from non-Western countries, perceived that they were being discriminated against when they come in contact with the host community. These experiences resulted in developing coping skills in order for them to complete their studies.

**Sub-Saharan African Students and Acculturative Stress**

In their study of cultural adjustment experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students in the United States, Constantine et al. (2005) claimed that, among their post-sojourn impressions of the US, African students expressed the belief that American institutions were better than those in African countries. Participants in their study “typically noted that they believed there was a lot of personal freedom or choice in the United States” (Constantine et al., 2005, p. 60.). Thus, there may be tremendous appeal for Sub-Saharan African students to study in the US. However, students from Sub-Saharan Africa are an underrepresented and understudied group in Britain and the United States (Manyika, 2001; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997). Research that has focused on Sub-Saharan African students; however, has noted similar stressors and effects of stress as the studies reported above on international students. Researchers who have focused on Sub-Saharan Africans have focused on topics including acculturative stress (Constantine et al., 2005; Pruitt, 1978), coping strategies (Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997), assimilation differences amongst Africans (Nii-Amoo Doodoo, 1997), the negotiation of identities (Manyika,

One of the earliest studies involving Sub-Saharan African students was a quantitative study conducted by Pruitt (1978). He administered surveys to 296 Sub-Saharan African students studying in the United States. Pruitt (1978) reported that only a “minority felt comfortable with the basic elements of American culture while in contrast 85% were pleased or somewhat pleased with American education” (p.101). In this study, Pruitt operationalized adjustment to new environment “by the degree of happiness and the absence of problems both in the first three months of study and the current time” (p. 98). Pruitt reported that the initial problem African students in his study had in the United States had to do with the “climate, but later [these students] experienced depression, tiredness, homesickness, irritability, and racial discrimination” (p. 98). African students appear to experience acculturative stress to the same degree as many other international students. After examining 220 international students in a quantitative study, Msengi (2007) reported that “Language was reported as the main source of stress for Asian students while discrimination, alienation and cultural shock were reported by students from Africa” (p. 65). These findings are consistent with other researchers who have studied international Sub-Saharan African students (Constantine et al., 2005; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Pruitt, 1978; Rice & Lee, 2007).

In spite of these stressors, there was evidence from Pruitt’s (1978) findings that Sub-Saharan African students assimilate differently depending on the country of origin, and that a major predictor of assimilation of an African international student is the age of the student on
arrival in the US (Pruitt, 1978). Pruitt further explained that undergraduate students and/or students who expect to stay longer in the US tend to become better assimilated than graduate students, some of whom might be already married with a family. These findings have also been documented by similar research on Sub-Saharan students in the United States. For instance, Nebedum-Ezeh (1997), adopting a mixed method of inquiry, concluded that a network of family and peer support helps African students to adapt to the host environment. Researchers in psychology confirm this finding in their several studies about African students and their attitudes towards counseling.

Although there was evidence of positive coping and surviving these stressors, many researchers found evidence that Sub-Saharan international students experience similar acculturative stress as reported by Pruitt (1978). For example, Constantine et al. (2005), who conducted a consensual qualitative study of 12 Kenyan, Ghanaian, and Nigerian international students, reported that the students claimed “prejudicial or discriminatory treatment” (p. 63). The researchers said that they were interested in this group of students from the specific countries because these populations in the study site were enrolled in greater numbers than students from other Sub-Saharan African countries. Undergraduate students were not the only ones who complained about experiencing discriminatory practices. Advanced graduate students claimed that racism and gender bias played a role in shaping their educational goals (Beoku-Betts, 2004). In her conclusion, Beoku-Betts stated:

Racial and gender bias and the ways in which they intersect are experiences African women share in common with their counterparts of color in Western societies. For example, almost all of the study participants commented on how racism had affected their experiences in graduate school. In some cases it was the lack of good mentoring, in other
there were perceptions of their inability to do the work, and in still others it was the social isolation they experienced in their host institutions (p. 131).

The author also concluded that the participants in the study developed coping skills in order to resist and survive their hostile environments. Beoku-Betts, (2004) identified themes such as mentoring, peer group relations, coping with academic work, and marriage and family life as factors that influenced African graduate students who studied in US and Canada.

Nwabah and Heitner (2009) also reported that Africans who were enrolled in graduate schools or who were working in the West experience perceived discrimination. Nwabah and Heitner (2009) conducted individual and group interviews to investigate leadership experiences of African women in Texas. They interviewed 22 female Nigerian-born women in Texas who were also employed in U.S. based organizations. These women voiced their determination to overcome racial stereotyping, immigrations problems, work related problems, and perceived discriminatory incidents. Unlike the participants in the Beoku-Betts study who had to return to their native countries, the participants in the latter study had remained in the United States. They indicated that they had to adapt to the American work culture in order to survive in the American workplace.

There were a few common perceptions in both studies that require mention. One of these is that participants in these studies saw the United States as a land of opportunity, and hence many wanted to come to the US to further their studies. For most, if not all Sub-Saharan students, the first choice of preference is the United States, followed by Canada, then Great Britain. This was also a theme that was quite common in all the studies: the West was perceived as a place for opportunity. The second is that there was also the universal belief that one has to cope with challenges in the face of tremendous acculturative stress. These perceptions were
universal among Sub-Saharan African students, even when one considers the variables of ethnicity, language, nationality, economic, and social backgrounds of the students.

**Effects of acculturative stress on Sub-Saharan African students.** Although the research on Sub-Saharan Africans is limited, research has found these students to be quite resilient in the face of acculturative stressors. Sub-Saharan African students are motivated to succeed due to their need to meet expectations of self, family, and community (Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997). Acculturative stress, such as language problems, loneliness, feelings of isolation, perceived racism, depression, academic work, and exhaustion have been found to lead Sub-Saharan African students to work harder, seek help within their own communities, and to find ways to assimilate quickly into the American cultural ways (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Essandoh, 1995; Msengi, 2007; Pruitt, 1996).

African students arrive in the United States with preconceived notions of America. The students believe that the US offers a better opportunity for their education and wellbeing. What they often do not see is the variety of challenges they are likely to face as immigrants living in the United States. According to Swaminathan and Alfred (2010), in their article about immigrant students in America’s higher education classroom, immigrants’ images about American educational cultures are often not what the immigrants expected. The students in the study claimed that they realized that they are different but that such differences need to be “acknowledged rather than suppressed in the classroom” (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2010, p. 30). In their study of cultural adjustment experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students in the US, Constantine et al. (2005) found that African immigrant students believed American institutions were better than those in African countries. Participants “typically noted that they
believed there was a lot of personal freedom or choice in the United States” (Constantine et al., 2005, p. 60).

In spite of their strong motivation to succeed in the US, Sub-Saharan African students in particular have been found to have difficulties adjusting to the American school environment (Essandoh 1995; Manyika, 2001; Mensah, 2008; Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997; Traore, 2006). Because of racist attitudes towards minority international students (Brown, 2008), there is a cultural mistrust of the larger American society, which forces African immigrants to struggle for self-identity and to negotiate their identities around race, class, and nationality (Manyika, 2001).

**Coping mechanisms in response to stressors.** It is clear from available research that international students develop coping mechanisms to deal with these predictors of anxiety, depression, cultural mistrust, culture shock, unmet expectations, and academic difficulties. Yet, there is very limited research on how these stressors impact the international students who remain as professionals in the United States as permanent residents or naturalized citizens. African students who graduate from American graduate schools face tremendous problems when they arrive for their education and in time develop coping skills. How these problems of assimilation and the skills developed to counter these challenges have impacted their sense of awareness, their identity, and the extent to which they have been able to meet their life goals remain to be examined. The literature had been inadequate in exploring the lived experiences of Africans from Sub-Saharan Africa who graduated from graduate schools in the United States. Their coping skills develop as a result of their experiences in the US; however, they are often not aided by professional counseling support.
Underutilization of counseling support. African students come from a variety of heterogeneous communities in Africa, all of which have their own languages, practices, customs and indigenous traditions. These customs and traditions, many of which are superstitious, influence African students’ towards mental health issues (Essandoh, 1995). African-rooted religious and cultural beliefs about mental health lead to Africans underutilizing mental health counseling support on campuses (Essandoh, 1995). Essandoh (1995), citing earlier research of Taft and Zwingman, noted, “international students face . . . a phenomenon known as ‘uprooting disorders,’ characterized by disorientation, nostalgic-depressive reactions, feelings of isolation, and feelings of alienation” (p. 352), adding that “most African students in the United States retained their traditional beliefs. This retention of traditional beliefs may slow down the process of acculturation” (p. 352). Stebelton, (2007) went a little further by describing the uniqueness of the languages, practices, and customs retained by African students in the US and how this leads to career development issues. While Essandoh focused on personal belief practices of the Africans, Stebelton traced their acculturative problems to the impact of colonialism, slavery, and the pressure to negotiating an identity, which tended to “influence their self-worth and self-esteem” (p. 292).

Summary

The literature provides tremendous insights into the challenges faced by international students in general and African students in particular. International students who study in the US generally experience several stressors, such as homesickness, language barriers, acculturation problems, and financial hardships. This literature further indicates that many have developed coping mechanisms in dealing with these stressors, which unfortunately, also negatively affects learning and mental health. These acculturative stressors have been identified by researchers as
predictors of loneliness, depression, homesickness, and poor mental health among international students and in immigrant Sub-Saharan African students. It was the intention of this research to explore the degree to which these stressors influence the educational experiences of Sub-Saharan African immigrants. Also, it was pertinent to know the lingering effects, if any, of these stressors as immigrants become permanent residents or naturalized citizens of the host country. There is an established trend among researchers to equate African immigrants with other Blacks, thereby ignoring the specific African differences of ethnicity, culture, language, religion, and any other psychological and sociological variables that impact assimilation by a minority group in a host country. The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in existing literature by exploring the experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans who have professional careers in the US after completing their graduate studies in American institutions.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this research project was to study the lived experiences of African immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who have studied in graduate schools in the United States, who have earned professional degrees from American institutions, and who were, at the time of the study, living in the United States. The study examined how these individuals were influenced by their experiences in graduate school and in their professional lives. The following research questions served as a guide to this study.

Research Questions

1. How do African professionals who were immigrants and completed graduate schoolwork in the US describe and understand themselves and their American educational journey?

2. What aspect of American education had the most influence on these professionals who have taken the transformational journey of acquiring their graduate education and what factors influenced their decision to remain in the United States?

3. How do African students make sense of their decision to remain and work as professionals in the United States?

Methodology

These questions were thought to best be examined through the adoption of a qualitative research design. Therefore, the research method adopted for this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is an approach introduced by Jonathan Smith (1996), who argued for “an approach to psychology which was able to capture the experiential and qualitative” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 4). IPA is a confluence of three theoretical approaches to qualitative inquiry: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith, et al.
(2009). Phenomenology lends itself to exploring how certain individuals have lived through a specific phenomenon.

In their discussion of the advantages of adopting IPA as an exploratory approach to research questions, Smith et al. (2009) argued that IPA, having been influenced by phenomenology, provides the researcher with an excellent philosophical means of gathering and examining a phenomenon pertaining to the lived experiences of the study’s participants. IPA methodology allowed the researcher to make interpretations (hermeneutics) of the distinct (idiographic), lived (phenomenology) experiences of African students who graduated from American colleges and universities.

The African immigrant community in the San Francisco Bay Area of northern California is closely knit; many of them reside in various surrounding cities. Having participants recollect their graduate school experiences and how they have been influenced was not thought to be a difficult task to research because this is a very common narrative in the community. In order to engender structured and open-ended inquiry, the researcher adopted an attitude of being open and curious so that participants would be able to render salient accounts that were rich and in-depth regarding their lived experiences. One way of establishing credibility in qualitative research is through admitting to the researcher’s biases or perspectives on the phenomenon under study and then setting those aside (Creswell, 2003). The researcher, therefore, attempted as much as possible to avoid interjecting the researcher’s particular perception of the phenomenon into the participants’ experience of the phenomenon.

Following the suggestion of Smith and Osborne (2007), the researcher adopted a “two-stage interpretation process [in exploring how] . . . the participants are trying to make sense of their world” (p. 53). This process has been called a “double hermeneut . . . [in that] the
researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 53). Thus, each participant in this study was able to tell his or her own story based on his or her own individual experience and the researcher made an interpretative analysis of the experience.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary instrument of data collection. Participants all experienced the phenomenon of Americanized graduate education. As an African, the researcher had also been exposed to American-style education; this background put the researcher in a position to interpret and analyze the data using IPA protocols. Therefore, IPA was ideally suited for this study.

Participants

Four participants, three of whom were nonimmigrants during graduate school but who were at the time of the study immigrants, having graduated from an American university and having stayed in the US to pursue professional careers, were recruited for this study. Professional careers included any career that requires a state or federal certification or license and included but was not limited to fields such as medicine, engineering, pharmacy, teaching, journalism, public administration, social work, or nursing. These particular criteria were meant to ensure that participants could grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomenon under study, that is, how graduate and subsequent experiences in the US influence Africans who go on to launch their professional careers in this country (Smith, et al. 2009). In addition, utilizing professionals helped to ensure “homogeneous sampling” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49) in regards to socioeconomic status. Due to the fact that the methodological approach was IPA, which is an ideographic approach “concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts” (Smith, et.al. 2009, p. 49), the sample size was small. This small sized
sample aligned with IPA analytic approach suggested by Smith et al. (2009), who argued that IPA researchers work within the three to six participant range because “this range should provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). Participants were between the ages of 50 and 65, and there was an equal representation of gender as suggested by Smith et al. (2009); therefore, an attempt was made to recruit men and women equally. This strategy was designed to ensure a well-distributed range of experiences correlated with age and gender.

**Data Collection**

Purposive homogeneous sampling was adopted for this study following the suggestions made by Smith and Osborn (2008) and Smith et al. (2009). This approach was theoretically consistent with the qualitative paradigm in the sense that it allowed for the collection of data that yielded insight into a specific and particular experience. Creswell (2007) also suggested that the concept of purposeful sampling is used for qualitative research because participants can purposefully ‘inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Before participants were recruited the IRB gave approval to conduct research (Appendix A). Contacts were made by telephoning potential participants and acquiring word of mouth referrals, also referred to as snowball sampling, to access participants within the African community in the San Francisco Bay Area (see Appendix B for participant recruitment letter). Once contacted, participants were told about the nature and purpose of the study and a determination was made as to whether they fit the criteria. If they fit the criteria, they were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews that they were told would last approximately 90 minutes. They were told of their rights as a participant as outlined in the
Unsigned Informed Consent from the Human Participants Committee (Appendix C) and the form issued by the researcher (see Appendix D).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) requires that participants give a first-hand account of their experiences (Smith, et al. 2009). Therefore, data collection was made in the form of “semi-structured in-depth interviews” (Smith, et al., 2009, p. 62). This is an interview protocol of open-ended questions and subsequent categorization during the analysis that is consistent with suggestions by other noted scholars (see Creswell, 2007; Moustakas 1994; Polkinghorne 1989). Smith et al. (2009) suggested that it is best to ask participants their choice of an interview spot. The researchers also recommended an interview schedule of “4 and 10 open-ended questions” (p. 60), which, in their judgment should produce 45 and 90 minutes of conversation, respectively. The interviews for this project were conducted by the adoption of 10 structured questions (see Appendix E for interview protocol). Follow-up questions were asked as needed (see Appendix F). The main data collection instrument was digitally recorded face-to-face 90-minute interviews. In the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked the questions directly. This method of data collection was consistent with suggestions made by Smith et al. (2009) and other researchers conducting phenomenological studies in the qualitative tradition.

**Data Storage**

No identifying information were given in the reporting of this research in order to protect participants’ anonymity. Data were stored on the researcher’s laptop hard drive, which was password-protected, and a back-up copy was stored on an external drive for safekeeping. Printed transcripts were kept in a file and locked up in a file cabinet, and transcripts were destroyed at the end of the project.
Data Analysis

The researcher self transcribed data in order to capture the nuances of each interview. IPA does not prescribe a single method for data analysis (Smith, et al. 2009), instead, “the essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus” (p. 79), and this focus is the attention towards “participants to tell their stories and to speak freely and reflectively” (p. 56). In analyzing data using IPA methodology, Smith et al. (2009) argued that IPA analysis is a joint product of the participant and the analyst in the sense that the participants make meaning of their lived experience and the analysis of the data is always an account of how the “analyst thinks the participant is thinking—a double hermeneutic” (Smith et al. p. 80). For the purposes of data analysis, the researcher adopted the process explained below. As earlier indicated in the positionality statement, Sub-Saharan African students come from a variety of backgrounds and different cultures that must be recognized in understanding the unique nuances of each participant. Due to those factors, the researcher kept in mind that he may not be able to interpret the full meanings of the participants’ experiences.

**Reading and rereading.** The participant was the focus of analysis and as such the researcher explored in detail how each participant has made sense of his or her experience at an American college or university and subsequent experiences in the US. The first step in interpretative process was to listen to the entire recorded interview then read and reread the transcript. Reading and rereading allowed the researcher to enter into the world of the participant in order to be better able to identify the specific micro details of the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009).
**Initial noting.** A two-column text box was created to begin making initial descriptive notes for the first participant. The left side contained the original transcript, while the right side was used for making annotations and significant notes about the data. These were exploratory notes that described the content. Key words, phrases, or explanations made by the respondent were recorded here. According to Smith et al. (2009), these initial comments were both linguistic and conceptual, because they highlighted the assumptions, sound bites, experiences, and emotional responses of the participant.

**Developing emerging themes.** A second three-column text box was created for the first participant. The first column contained emergent themes from the close reading of the transcript. The second column contained original transcript excerpts, and the third column contained the exploratory comments. The researcher analyzed the exploratory comments and then mapped chunks of data texts for interrelationships, connections, and patterns in order to identify emerging themes.

**Searching for connections across the emerging themes.** The themes were ordered chronologically in the order they came up in the data. A third textbox was designed to develop clusters of related themes. This form of abstraction—placing related themes into their own groups set the stage for creating superordinate themes, which then appeared at a higher level of analysis and had their own titles. Once the researcher was satisfied with the outcome of the analysis at this level, a fourth data box, or a graphic representation of major themes titled superordinate themes, was designed for the first participant. This process was repeated for all the participants. In this way, the unique idiosyncratic nuances of each participant was noted and analyzed.
Looking for patterns across the cases. As described in the preceding step, each participant was considered a case, and was written up in detail on an individual level (Smith, et al. 2009). This procedure was to keep faithful to the idiographic nature of IPA. After all the participants had been coded and analyzed on an individual level, the researcher looked for connections and patterns across the cases. If needed, reconfiguring and relabeling of themes were adopted in order to develop a master table of themes for the group. A final table titled master table of themes was designed for all the participants. Writing up the themes and discussing the analysis followed this process. According to the IPA scholars, the strategy enumerated here is not mutually exclusive and project researchers are encouraged to be creative. This researcher successfully followed this pattern for as much as the data allowed.

Validity and Credibility

The researcher obtained informed consent from all participants. Participants were also allowed to make checks to ensure trustworthiness of the data collected. Since the researcher also shared attributes with this population, there was clear articulation of researcher bias. Also, member checks were performed to allow participants access to the data for the purpose of “credibility of the findings and interpretation” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Participants were also allowed to read both the drafts, and later, discus the data, in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data and subsequent interpretations.

Reactivity

Due to cultural reasons, it was thought that some participants would not be completely forthcoming because they might feel uncomfortable talking about their experiences, or they may hold back information that might affect the collection of rich data. The researcher therefore emphasized that data would be kept confidential and that names would be masked in the final
In addition, the researcher let participants know that data would be destroyed at the end of the project.

**Limitations**

Four participants were interviewed for the project. Their experiences reflected a small sample of this population currently residing in the United States, and the results may not be generalizable to the entire population of Sub-Saharan Africans who have studied in the US and gone on to pursue professional careers.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher obtained fully informed consent from all participants. There was full disclosure to participants about the research.

**Conclusion**

This doctoral research was designed as a qualitative study to examine the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African students who earned graduate degrees in the United States. The design was unique in that it adopted an IPA technique to make meanings and interpretation of the unique experiences of the participants. This methodology was ideally suited to the research questions enumerated in the problem statement. IPA was deemed to be the best-suited method for analysis because of the meaning-making endeavor that provides an opportunity for participants to ground their experience in their understanding of the world.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans who attended and received degrees from U.S. graduate schools. In order to fully understand the way African students are shaped by their graduate student experiences, it is important to understand how they interpret their world, as a result of their process of adjustment to the U.S. The study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, which allowed the researcher to make interpretations (hermeneutics) of the distinct (idiographic), lived (phenomenology) experiences of African students who graduated from American colleges and universities. Purposive homogeneous sampling was adopted for this study. IPA requires that participants give a first-hand account of their experiences (Smith, et al. 2009). Therefore, data collection was in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews as suggested Smith, et al. (2009).

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions: (a) How do African professionals who were immigrants and completed graduate schoolwork in the U.S. describe and understand themselves and their American educational journey? (b) What aspect of American education had the most influence on these professionals who have taken the transformational journey of acquiring their graduate education and what factors influenced their decision to remain in the United States? (c) How do African students make sense of their decision to remain and work as professionals in the United States?

Data Collection

Four immigrant Africans, three of whom were nonimmigrant students when they arrived in the US, graduated from American universities, and then stayed in the U.S. to pursue
professional careers, were recruited for this study. Participants included two males and two females, who ranged in age from 50 to 65. All were living on the U.S. West Coast at the time of the interview. Semi structured interviews were administered and digitally recorded at various times over a period of 4 weeks. The data was transcribed and analyzed by the researcher manually. The data that was collected and analyzed by the researcher offered sufficient points of similarity and differences for analytical and interpretative purposes.

Participants’ Profiles

A total of four participants, who were natives of Nigeria, took part in the research project. This section details information about the participants, including short biographical information, gender, college degree earned, marital status, and work status, as well as some of their responses to the semi-structured questions. The participants’ names have been replaced with a pseudonym.

Remy. Remy is a 50-year old female social worker who works for a private company that performs contract services for the State of California. She holds a bachelor’s degree in sociology and political science and has a master of social work (MSW) from a university in Southern California. She is married with a child.

When asked to explain what brought her to the United States and what factors led to choosing a graduate school and the career that followed, Remy explained that she was actually born in the United States to parents who were attending college decades ago. She returned with her parents to her home country, where she attended elementary through high school. At 17, she was sent back to the U.S., primarily to attend college. At that time, two siblings were already living in the U.S., and she lived with one of them while attending college. The choice of which college to attend was largely determined by her parents because they had first-hand knowledge
of schools in Southern California. According to Remy, there was a positive bias towards American-style education in her family:

My parents had studied here. That’s why I was born here; they valued the American education. They felt it was not so narrow, and so I think I’m somewhat biased as well. They seem to understand it better because their graduate study had been here, both of my parents. My mom had a bachelor’s degree, and my dad did veterinary medicine here. I came back in 1980, so that’s been about 33 years.

Remy received her bachelor’s degree in sociology and political science from a parochial, predominantly White college in California. Deciding what school to attend for her undergraduate studies was a family decision taken by the parents, but the decision of which graduate school to attend was hers. Her decision of which graduate school to attend was based on accessibility, tuition cost, type of program, and the school’s name recognition. She decided to continue to study sociology, and she initially attempted to enroll in a program where she could earn both her master’s and doctoral degree:

I actually initially started in a joint masters and PhD program at a college. It was combined. It was a little cumbersome. I think that it was too much. I realized it was a little too much and sociology was going to be a degree. At the back of my mind, I needed to get a PhD. I wasn’t mature enough to know what that meant I think at that point in time.

Remy ended up entering a program to earn a master’s degree in sociology:

I ended up pulling out of that program and going for master’s because from all indications, discussions with people, I didn’t know what I would do with it [a doctorate degree] once I was done.
She excelled in her field and rose to the position of supervisor.

**Ladi.** At 59 years old, Ladi holds a bachelor’s and master’s degree in art. He also earned a PhD in art education and is a dean of students at a high school in Northern California. Ladi has two children and is divorced. When asked by the researcher to talk about what factors led to his decision to study in the United States, Ladi remarked that when he worked in his native country as a graphic artist and illustrator, he was intrigued by American art and American-style education. He pointed to the fact that his father was a law professor at a local university and that he had nursed an ambition to come to the United States to study art. In addition, Ladi reported that he was also influenced by the artwork coming out of the United States:

- Some of the things I saw, as products of art coming from the US were fascinating.
- Illustrations, magazine photographs, and I was able to name a few of the artists themselves. They’re actually exemplary and intriguing. It’s inspiring sometimes.

Ladi was accepted to four American universities and was conflicted about which one to attend; he decided that he would attend any of the universities located in a community with many Black people and possibly with a Black mayor. He remarked:

- Eventually one day, I had to make the announcement on a Sunday morning to my family, my brothers and sister, my father and mother that I would like to do this but that I am having difficulty choosing where to go. My propensity would be to go to a city that’s Black and historic and actually the mayor happens to be a Black man and not to go to a cold region where I feel like a stranger.

He succeeded in going to a college in a city with a Black mayor and where nearly half of the residents were African Americans. He was able to earn his doctoral degree at another
university in a nearby city, which he reported offered a great learning and practical teaching experience.

**Bola.** Bola has lived in the United States for 38 years. After the death of her parents, she followed her siblings to the US in 1975, primarily to go to school. An older brother was already living in the country when Bola arrived, and she reported that she quickly moved out of her brother’s place in order to be independent and to be able to pay her way through college. She began her American educational journey attending a community college and later transferring to a 4-year university, where she earned a bachelor’s degree and an MBA in accounting. The choice of which university to attend for her accounting degree was influenced by a professor at the community college who directed her to a specific university, telling her that the university was the best in accounting studies. Bola is 61 years old and is married with children.

**Kwame.** Kwame is a 65-year old retired human resources manager for a city on the West Coast. He came to the United States 43 years ago to go to school. He first settled in the East Coast and later came to the West Coast to attend college. He received a bachelor’s degree in industrial technology and later an MBA in management. He has a son and is divorced. He had a number of varied jobs before earning his MBA degree, and he always intended to go back to Nigeria to use his skills in industrial technology. He went back several times but needed to further develop his skills in the area of industrial technology in the U.S.

**Data Analysis**

IPA methodology focuses on the individual participant, and the idiographic aspect of IPA required the researcher to recognize the uniqueness of each interviewee. Therefore, each data set was coded and analyzed separately and was organized into a set of superordinate themes for each individual. The researcher read and reread each interview in order to find specific nuances of
each participant and to make initial descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on the transcript. According to Smith et al. (2009), such initial comments capture the assumptions, sound bites, and emotional experiences of each participant. The researcher then coded and developed emerging themes for each participant based on the initial comments. There were several differences and similarities in the rendition of each account. The researcher then searched for connections across the emergent themes in order to create a master table of themes for the entire group. The master table of themes was organized into (a) themes emerging from participants’ perceptions of graduate school experiences (b) participants’ perception of self, and (c) participants’ perceptions of the people around them.

Themes

A table of each superordinate theme was made for each participant and subsequently the researcher made a master table showing similarities. See Table 1 for the master table of themes. Each of the themes had at least two subthemes, while one, Emergence of racial identity consciousness, had three subthemes.
Table 1

_Master Table of Themes_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table No.</th>
<th>Themes/ Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Transformative Impact of American Education</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Opportunities to Practice Skills During Internship</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Developing Self-Confidence and Sense of Competence</em></td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Emergence of Racial Identity Consciousness</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Interactions With Professors Spark Self-Reflection on Racial Identity</em></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Race Really Matters</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Constantly Validating Oneself to Others</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Standing up for Oneself in the Workplace</em></td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Leadership and Professional Opportunities Due to Acquired Skills and Academic Connections</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Initial Intent to Return to Native Country</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Connection with Mentors and Other Professionals</em></td>
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**Transformative impact of American education.** When asked about their experiences in American educational institutions, all participants remarked that the education they received had been beneficial and transformative. The participants believed that a transformation occurred to them due to their acquiring of practical skills and having opportunities that increased their sense of competence, which ultimately helped them gain satisfying work in their chosen field.
They reported that they believed that American institutions offered them what their native country could not, which came in the form of the size of the campus and the materials that were offered. Ladi was very stimulated by the campus itself on his first day there:

The first time I arrived at the school, I wasn’t expecting that big campus. There was more or less just one department in my college from Nigeria. There were no old stones. There were no boarding houses for men, but there was one for women. The school was clean. Visually, it’s very, very stimulating.

Participants all reported that one transforming aspect of their education was the opportunities they were afforded to practice their skills during internships. They reported that these were training grounds in which they developed a sense of self-confidence and competence. Thus, two subthemes emerged: Opportunities to Practice skills during internship, and Developing sense of self-confidence and competence.

**Opportunities to practice skills during internship.** Ladi, upon finishing his undergraduate degree, left for graduate school where he pursued a doctorate degree in art education. He described his graduate school experience as an opportunity to learn new skills as an artist and as a budding educator. He reported:

What was great about it was I had all the apparatus to do everything I wanted to experiment with academically and visually, professionally, and artistically. For instance in the college, I had an opportunity to teach the little ones during the summer. It was a beautiful experience. I had an opportunity to teach at a public high school . . . . The teachers in the public schools just left their classrooms for me to do whatever I needed to do with the students. The students were very happy that they had a fresh look, because I taught them what would not be taught at high school level in a high school. I taught them
graphic design cum illustrations and mixed with artistry and it was very contemporary and very modern.

Ladi also reported

The opportunity [was] my graduate school experience, which I would call a laboratory, to actually experience teaching and demonstrate the abilities and skills to teach what we have learned from professors and theoretically how to make a lesson plan; how the lesson plan can actually be implemented, and having all these resources.

These opportunities in graduate school provided Ladi an environment in which he could gain teaching skills in a hands-on manner, a point that was also made by Remy, Bola, and Kwame. Remy also spoke about the opportunity her education afforded her a transformational experience. She talked about the way in which her program was particularly helpful in getting her to self-reflect, which was also a transforming experience:

I think with the process of doing anything in psychology, you tend to have to go through certain evaluations of yourself as an individual, and it’s very, very challenging. You are going to be transformed by that experience. I really think by that. I actually do see the difference at work. I’m not elitist. You don’t have to have a master’s to do this work. . . . [But] I would say it is transformational [to undergo master’s level experiences]. I see the difference in people who have a master’s in psychology or social work even on the job, especially in helping professions. The social workers’ ability to cope, the ability to accept people and . . . to keep the sense of who they are . . . [is] a matter of training. We have to be very clear about boundaries, about what we’re taking on. It’s all part of our training in graduate school and I find that people who have gone through that training fare better in my profession than people who have not.
Thus, Remy’s training experience in graduate school helped her develop the expertise she would not have had otherwise. It also necessarily gave her a sense of herself as being competent.

**Developing Self-Confidence and Sense of Competence.** Remy developed a sense of self-confidence and competence in herself through her graduate training, which encouraged introspection:

I think my American education has been transformational because of the profession I chose. We had to go [through] both the clinical and nonclinical route. You have to have a good sense of who you are, and you have to be introspective. You have to evaluate your own values as opposed to somebody else’s, so that when you’re counseling somebody, you’re making sure that you’re not leading them the way you want.

Ladi stated that he had been transformed by his contact with American-style education in terms of gaining knowledge of the world and sense of self-competence:

It had changed me. Human beings are dynamic. If I was in Nigeria, I would’ve changed too, but coming here has changed me a lot. For instance, I talk the way I talk because I was influenced by the talk in the classroom and in the streets and even on TV, so my accent has changed . . . . I have changed because I now see the world in a larger view. My view of the world is a little bit larger than [if I had] stayed back at home. Although I was a man who knew everything that was happening in the world, I have changed psychologically too. There are things I wouldn’t do [now].

Ladi’s confidence in his own voice and point of view grew to the extent to which he was able to express a dissenting opinion, even in the face of what he called “blow back” from his peers:
Then I finally found my own niche by writing about exhibitions of my peers. Those were doing the MFA in painting, sculptures ceramics, and all that. I would go out and actually observe what they’re doing. [I would] interact with them, come back, and write a review about the exhibition. . . . I wasn’t shy about saying what needed to be said. For instance, I got a big blowback from the community when I described an art exhibition as an excuse to have a party—[it] was all gibberish but that was when people get to drink a Budweiser—and that cost me a lot of flack; but nonetheless at the end, people saw it for what it was.

Bola believed that the skills she learned at college changed the way she thought about issues as well, increasing her sense of competence in herself as an analytical thinker. She said, “I can dissect anything, and anywhere. I became very, very objective in terms of thinking.” She said that her graduate school education gave her the confidence she needed to be able to further her career from accounting to finance without any further training: “The graduate school actually gave me the confidence because once I finished working as an accountant, I could transform to finance without any formal training. So [it] kind of gave me the confidence.”

For all the participants, acquired skills from undergraduate and graduate school cumulated into a change in the way they thought about things, and they found themselves reacting to life situations in ways that were different from their presojourn days in their native country. These new ways of thinking and reacting developed into a sense of confidence and competence. Kwame described his experience at a technical university as “a dream come true” and expressed that he could now see how technical education was what was needed in his native country. He remarked that he realized then that he “needed to return to found a technical school where “I can bridge the gap between the engineer and the technician.” Kwame noted that he
developed a sense of competence in himself, which allowed him to transfer his skills in the field of human resources. He said:

My graduate school education gave me the skills to train other people to become job ready for technician jobs. I accepted a job in human resources with a company where I not only prepared them to pass eligibility exams but also [helped them] to upgrade their skills for the available state technical jobs. I could not have been competent to train other people if I did not myself become excellently skilled; you know, American education changed me, made me competent in my field —unfortunately I could not find work in industrial technology, but I trained other people!

Ultimately, Kwame persisted and found a job in IT as will be touched upon later.

**Emergence of racial identity consciousness.** Participants in this study recounted experiences of interactions with professors and indeed some domestic students that helped to shape their racial identity in the US. These professors and students would exhibit racial attitudes towards them both in and out of the classroom. Participants noted that a constant sore point was when professors awarded grades the participants believed did not truly reflect their academic competence. Another experience they recollected concerned times when professors were reluctant to support student research work, or when they deliberately steered them into fields of study that were less practical or which the students assumed to be less lucrative than their own choices. These incidents appeared to have made the students become aware of racial tones, racial relations in this country, and their own need to develop attitudes to deal with the problem. They all reported that through these experiences and self-reflection they forged an identity that enabled them to be successful in dealing with people in the future. They reported that these incidents made them stronger. Three subthemes emerged from this larger theme of emerging
racial identity consciousness: Interactions with professors spark self-reflection on racial identity.

Discovering discrimination through grading, and Finding one’s voice.

**Interactions with professors spark self-reflection on racial identity.** Interactions with professors and the college community precipitated incidents and events that led to self-reflection on how they were perceived by others, as well as how this affected their success. When asked to explain why she did not challenge a professor who she perceived to have displayed a racial attitude towards her, Remy explained:

I remember that my professor—I think part of it was my upbringing that your teacher is always right—so I would not have questioned him, but he was hard. I was relatively young; I was trying to formulate my thesis. [I was struggling with] the questions I’m going to ask, how am I going to do the statistics, how am I going to gather that, all that kind of stuff? In a meeting with him, he was asking me how far I had gotten what I was writing, and he saw that I hadn’t gotten far and he essentially was very condescending. He was Caucasian. He said something like; “I’m not going to write this for you.” Now I realize it was totally uncalled for, and I was totally overwhelmed [at the time]. I remember that experience [was] overwhelming me but the two things—being Nigerian and being very determined to get my education—I also knew I was not going to be intimidated but always have respect for my teacher. [So] I just let it go and I just had to pretty much do it on my own. I don’t believe that I really got any real direction from him.

Reflecting on the incident decades later, Remy felt her inability to fully understand the professor’s actions were due to her inexperience in such matters of race relations.
Ladi spoke of a similar interaction with a professor that sparked reflection on race relations in the U.S. Ladi said there was one professor who was “being overtly racist.” He explained:

He doesn’t believe that a Black man can actually be at this level as a graphic designer, but I was beyond that. I was actually doing graphic work as a professional back home. I was actually making a living as a professional artist back home, and besides, the class was a second year or sophomore course, whereas I had already achieved the equivalent of a bachelor degree, maybe even more. I was cruising [doing very well], but this guy actually thought that I did not know much.

*Discovering discrimination through grading.* Kwame believed that his accent was an issue in the classroom and noted that some professors simply ignored him, even to the point of giving him what he described as “getting a grade I did not deserve.” Through these kinds of interactions, an awareness of racial identity began to emerge in Kwame. Remy’s encounter with a professor sparked a great deal of reflection on herself as an African student:

I have no idea. I think that if . . . it happened to me now; I could pinpoint exactly what was going on. Being in this country maybe about 5 years, I hadn’t yet formulated that identity of being African American fully. I remember him [one professor] looking at my grades and looking at me and smiling and just saying, “I could tell that you’re not African American by the way you carry yourself.” . . . I had to ask him, “How could you tell?” Because I was trying to explain my name and he said, “Don’t worry. I can tell you’re not African American.” I wondered later . . . It never crossed my mind to challenge him, but now I probably would have. He probably didn’t trust that I could do it; that’s why he was that way.
Through her graduate school experiences with professors, Remy concluded that she was prejudged because she was associated with being African American, but when she got good grades she was separated out as an African. She said, “Now fast forward to being in the work place, I recognized different things. Sometimes there’s a difference from being an African and being an African American. Sometimes the difference is on the side of the African.”

Bola also reported that some professors were not impartial in how they awarded grades for class assignments:

There was one class in which we had to do a written exercise, and somehow when we were having an examination in class—that is the one that got to me so much. The written exercise—it could have been a group written exercise—The other people—let's say there are three people in the group, the other two—will get an A, [and] even though you did [most] or you were the lead person in that project, you were the one leading it, running around doing all the work, you will get B+. And you tend to wonder how could that be possible. You are the lead person, you are the one who did all the work, and yet these people who didn’t do as much just because they are not Black like me—they received an A in the class. And there have been instances where you are taking an exam in the class, and the professor is standing right in front of you when there are other people around, and you can see there are some people who are cheating in the class and he does not focus on them.

Ladi also recalled an incident in graduate school that stood out for him when he was given an unfair grade:

A German professor . . . actually decided to give me a bad grade. It was quite the fact that I was an outstanding student in class and that I was the one teaching other students in
the classroom. Time and time again when he saw my work, he actually gave enough praise, but when it came to the final grade, he gave me a bad grade.

Ladi spoke about getting a lower grade from another teacher:

I realized that in all my doctorate degree classes that I took, I had A’s except for her class; she gave me B– and I wondered why. I was one of the youngest in the class. That time, I was about 27 or 28. But she seems to have had it in for me. I was the only Black person in class. Most of the people in the classroom were older people. Some were superintendents, directors in public schools. But she gave me a B–.

**Finding one’s voice and sense of resilience.** Through the kinds of incidents described above, participants became gradually aware of their own racial identity and learned how to stand up for themselves. They gradually learned how to handle themselves in the midst of such unfair treatment and often these experiences made them stronger.

**Finding one’s voice.** Some participants spoke up for themselves right away after receiving a grade they thought they did not deserve. Others realized that for themselves, they preferred to take a different tactic. Finding one’s voice meant different things to different individuals. Ladi noted a time when he did speak up for himself:

Without mincing words, I went to talk to the dean, and the dean set up a committee for the professors to actually look at our portfolios. Three other students of the same class and my portfolio were compared, and he assembled a couple of experts in the field. I pointed out that most of those professors were my professors. When they finally saw me, they said, “We don’t need to be doubtful of his work because we know the quality of what he does.” Basically, they didn’t even want to check the portfolio. They asked me what kind of grade I wanted, A or B, or pass or fail? That’s when it was clear to me that I
was just a victim of racism—because I was better than most of the students in the classroom. But I was the only Black man. The others were young Japanese and Chinese students who came from their continent to actually study. I was teaching them most of the things that they presented in class. Art being what it is, what you see is what you get. Nothing is hidden because all the work is displayed on the wall for everyone to see.

Kwame also said that at first he reported such conduct from a professor to the dean. The dean stepped in and an investigation was conducted. He remarked

The worst thing that happened to me was I noticed in one class [that] my grades were not what they were supposed to be. . . . I got into trouble with the department because I complained [to the dean] and that set off an investigation. I learned from the experience never to report or complain about a professor.

Through Kwame’s experience, he had discovered that sometimes it is better to take a different course of action. He was also in a situation where calling attention to incidents of discrimination was likely to be less successful than if he were attending school in other areas of the country. Kwame was in Arizona and mentioned several times “Arizona is Arizona, It was terrible in the undergraduate school,” referring to the discrimination. On the other hand Ladi, who was successful at calling attention to his lower grade, was in California. However, Ladi also said there were times he thought it was best not to fight it. When he received a B– in a class, which he thought was unjustified, he decided not to act on it:

My advisor said I should fight it but I said, “no,” I don’t need to fight it. I don’t have to have anything more than she wanted to give me; plus at this point, grades do not make any difference. It’s what you know that really matters.
**Sense of resilience.** Kwame said that these experiences actually helped him in furthering his relations with people he took to be allies and in furthering his identity as an African. Kwame reported:

As for the instructors, some were very, very helpful, and some were not so helpful. . . . It [experiences of discrimination] helped me in how I relate to people, especially Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics. Each group relates differently to Africans.

In relating to students, Kwame said some of the White students actually helped him:

You, know, Arizona is Arizona. It was terrible in the undergraduate school, but better for me at the graduate level. Some White kids helped me, you know, some of them, especially the athletes who share dormitory rooms, they are nice kids.

As a result of Remy’s interaction with professors during her undergraduate and graduate education in the U.S. educational system, she became aware of race-related issues and how these issues related to her first as a student, and later as a professional social worker. Initially, she attributed her lack of race consciousness to her being new to the American college environment. Later, her connections with others, especially professional African Americans and other minorities, began to influence her perceptions of the events around her and her understanding and interpretations of those events as they impacted her. According to her, such interactions with African Americans boosted her self-confidence, as well as increased her capacity to be less judgmental of others:

I have to say. I have come to embrace being African American. I didn’t initially embrace it because it was foreign to me to identify myself as an African American or even as an African. I was a Nigerian and I identified as being a Nigerian and all that that entails. There’s a lot that that entails but I think in the work place, I know that I am seen
as an African American, and it comes up a lot because I don’t have a heavy Nigerian accent.

Bola said that her interaction with professors, and especially receiving grades she believed she did not deserve actually made her stronger:

So that type of experience to me, I think, is ignorance on their part, and it makes me stronger; it makes me want to work harder to prove to them that yes, yeah, I can do the job, and I am even better than most of them.

Bola also added that experiencing these types of injustices not only made her stronger, but increased her pride in herself as an African and made her want to really show what she could do:

I got my MBA in finance; the university was really hands-on, and I learned a lot from there. As an African student in the American high education it wasn’t—well, I was working and going to school at the time so it’s—it can be a little bit challenging because most of the time you’re the only Black in the classroom. And sometimes they kind of look at you, I mean, some of the professors they tend to judge a book by the color right away without trying to find out what you’re capable of. Once you prove yourself, they appreciate you more. What it did to me was it made me stronger. It really made me want to prove myself more and to show to them that just because this person is from Africa they have the same common sense, they can learn, they are as intelligent as anybody else in the class is.

“Race Really Matters:” Constantly validating oneself to others and standing up for oneself in the workplace. This theme has two subthemes: Constantly validating oneself to others and Standing up for oneself in the workplace.
*Constantly validating oneself to others.* Participants spoke about the challenge of constantly needing to prove themselves or to validate themselves to others in the workplace. Despite her academic qualifications in terms of graduate school success, Remy reflected that at work, she always had to validate herself and qualifications to others. It appeared to her that people were always questioning her qualifications both in their behavior and in their conversations with her. This behavior seemed to mirror her experience at college, when professors would challenge her. In the workplace, there were colleagues who did not think she was qualified for the position she held as supervisor. She added that incidents arose due to perceptions others have about qualification:

I’m working in a field that’s very open and very liberal to start with, because I work in a field of developmental disabilities so there’s a tendency to be very accepting of different people and their different abilities and things like that. I think I’ve had a very positive work experience. [However,] like I said, there are things that come up every now and then, especially as you try to move up a career ladder—people question my qualifications; people maybe question who I am, but for the most part, I think my work speaks for itself.

Remy spoke about a specific instance where she her qualifications were challenged because of her ethnicity:

A parent came in, because we work with families, to talk to me about a challenge she had with one of the supervisors who’s Caucasian and her first question to me was, “Exactly tell me,”—Even though we had talked on the phone and she’d seen me before, she needed me to validate who I was, and before, it would’ve gone over my head, but I knew why she was asking that—She said to me, “Tell me again, what is your position here?
Tell me again, what is your name?” Before we could even get into the challenge, I told her, “I’m the associate director of client services. I am the supervisor of supervisors.”

Bola’s greatest challenges have been connected to her experiences as a professional working and living in the United States. She talked about how co-workers would sometimes undermine her achievement or even claim her work as theirs. She claimed that some employees appeared to feel “intimidated” by her. Her strategy is to always assert herself:

I say “no apologies,” “I earned it.” Sometimes I get defensive if somebody insults me by challenging my authority. Because of this behavior, I put down all of my education when I send an email; I put down all my education. I do not want people to undermine me, and I do not like condescending attitudes from people. Yeah, they think because you have an accent . . .

Ladi believed that despite his academic qualifications and the fact that he has worked in the school system for decades, there are still those who doubt his competence and academic credentials simply because he is African. He echoed the sentiments of other participants in this study who claimed that the fact that they came originally from Africa affected people’s perceptions towards them. He admitted that there seems to be an attitude towards him where his competence is continually in doubt, as well as his opportunities for a superintendent level promotion.

The degree offers you mobility and it gives you the confidence and the competence to actually perform. As somebody who’s never relented on his ambition, I actually wanted to be a superintendent of the school district. But I’ve gone through this route for 20 years; I know the politics overtakes my [ability to realize my] vision. Usually, they want somebody who looks like them to represent them because I would represent the whole
township. It is hard for a typical American to actually find out that an African is the one that is carrying the flag, but nonetheless, associate superintendent would not be too much. A director of curriculum development would not be too much.

Ladi believed that his “forte is teaching” because he loves to teach. His preference was to teach at the university level, but such a job never materialized and he added, “race really matters.”

All the participants noted that others were sometimes envious and intimidated by their qualifications. All the participants noted that they were usually accepted by educated Americans and that it was the less educated Americans who were intimidated by them, especially those who were White males. Bola said

Some of them, they have minimal education. That is where the problem comes. If you are more educated than they are, they tend to put you down and say you are incompetent. But if someone, if your boss is someone that is well-read, you know, well-educated, confident within themselves; they actually enjoy it.

Kwame reported the need to validate his qualifications when he was seeking a job in his field of study and was told he was unqualified. He was already working for the State of Arizona when a position had come up due to a grant he had written. He challenged his purported lack of qualifications and eventually got the job.

Ladi, as others, reported that some co-workers felt threatened by him. He said that being competent could pose a threat to others in the workplace:

Talking about the detrimental benefits of being extremely qualified for your position, some co-workers are scared, especially some principals, and they do not want you to be around because they are so scared of you becoming the principal. I have credentials. . . .
I have a teaching credential, and I have more credentials than I need. The detrimental thing would be that it is underutilized despite the fact that I have the credential. I am being paid at the scale of a teacher instead of an administrator.

He added:

You know . . . some are very respectful and dignify you; some are scared of you, but it allows you to open up to talk about your profession and to practice your profession as much as you want. That would be the benefit.

Bola also described the experience of intimidating others because of her qualifications and her performance:

But when I moved to M—, initially, the person that employed me was okay. It was people around were intimidated [by me]. But it did not take much to intimidate. When you are four in group and they assign you something to do and you do [it] better than anybody else and the person that assigned that job sent a sample of what you have done [to others] and said, “This is the way I want it to be done”—You see somebody getting mad and tossing it away. Or sometimes you have people where it is not a matter of competence or incompetence, its just intimidation.

**Standing up for oneself in the workplace.** The workplace appeared to have been a major source of anxiety for the participants. Each interviewee talked about incidents of intimidation at work, overbearing supervisors and bosses, and coworkers who would claim work done by the participant. Participants reported having to stand up either to speak up when challenged, or to claim their work as their own when others tried to take credit for it. Bola said that this latter happened a great deal to her:
But that happens a lot. Many times people take [credit for] my work, they pass it on, and when others start asking questions, they come back to me. I say, well that is why you should not claim my work, if you were not the one who prepared it. Because sometimes when you prepare something, and you send it to other people, you do not protect it, and they take it over and say it is theirs. That happens a lot.

Bola gave an example of having to stand up for herself during a meeting when another was trying to take credit for work she had actually done:

The first time you can actually wait until the meeting is over, go to that person and say, “You know, I don’t know what you are trying to prove, you know, you didn’t have anything to do with that project. I did it. So I’d appreciate it if you don’t say it [that you did it] next time.” Then I will go to my boss and I will say, “By the way I was the one who prepared it.” I do this [rather than say it at the meeting] so that I do not make the person look bad.

Her response implied that the second time they do it they do not deserve such diplomacy. She reported that in general one simply needed to assert oneself:

You have to fight to exercise your authority; you have to show them. You really have to be assertive. About jobs, you know, people still look at Africans—I mean, they still look at us questioning our status—and all that. The way I treat it most of the time, especially at meetings, is—[Let’s say] you are saying something, and someone tries to cut you off, and you just bring them back and say, “Hey, these are the facts.” I mean, when you keep on giving them the facts, you do your homework, you do not let them intimidate you, they see your work. It is really a pleasure to hear someone say, “She is a genius.” To hear a White person to say, “She is a genius.” You know. So after a while, once they get
to know you, they respect your work. But . . . you cannot fight them. You cannot be combative and say, “Who do you think are?” blah, blah. You kill them by giving them facts. And you do an excellent job. Once you do an excellent job, there is nothing they can say about you.

Kwame was interested in a job in his field of IT, and he was having difficulties acquiring one. He said he was working for the state and wanted one of the jobs in his chosen field that the state had gotten a grant for:

I wrote a proposal for a grant. The grant was to train American IT workers to reduce the country dependency on foreign IT workers . . . It took me 7 months to put together the coalition, the stakeholders. We got $1.74 million. I wrote all the job descriptions, and I was told I wasn’t qualified for any of the jobs.

When he was told he was not qualified, he took the issue all the way to the city manager:

After going all the way to the city manager, I was given one of the lowest jobs, which was the coordinator, which is fine. And fortunately for me, when the director left, he suggested that I be given the [his] job. So I became the director of H1b visiting and H1b IT training and IT manufacturing—so that was one of the good things.

Interestingly, all participants said they were up to the task of standing up for themselves, especially when the issue that challenged them was due to their African cultural background.

Kwame said of his workplace experiences overall:

So here I was an African, not really accepted by the Blacks, not favored by the Spanish, not favored by the Whites. So it was a constant struggle to survive, to keep . . . to keep pushing up and getting promotions and getting a gain.
Remy remembered an instance when a man who was White appeared to be envious of her position and had made the remark that she had gotten the position because of her clothes. She said:

This gentleman [White] who was a case manager with me and I now became the supervisor, we were all sitting around cubicles just chatting and he said, “I guess if I dressed up professionally to work, maybe they’ll make me supervisor too.” I looked at him. I’m generally even tempered, so I wasn’t sure where he was coming from. And then he started to ask me, and I said, “I worked at another regional center. I was a senior case manager before I came here. I have a master’s from UCLA.” Then you can see him sit back. He finished a bachelor’s degree. Not that there’s anything because you can work at my job with experience with a bachelor’s, but I came in with a master’s.

In this instance, Remy was standing up for herself when a coworker was obviously envious of her position; he obviously could not understand why she would be in a position above him because preconceptions associated with her race and her gender.

**Leadership and professional opportunities due to acquired skills and academic connections.** The fourth and final theme that emerged across cases was the ways in which participants all benefited from their education through the offer of good jobs and the rise to leadership positions at those jobs. There was the perception amongst the participants that their education had not only transformed them in terms of acquired skills, competence, confidence, and persona, but also, that these attributes, due to their education, resulted in good jobs and promotion to higher office. It is noteworthy that participants cited the downturn in the economy and perceived racial discrimination in the offer of jobs; however, they all felt they had been rewarded for their efforts and education. The researcher also noted that three of the participants
who are still in regular employment look forward to being promoted in the near future. In fact, two believed that their employer is grooming them for future leadership roles.

In addition to his regular job as an administrator at the school district, Ladi was still an adjunct professor at two Ivy League universities in the West Coast. Remy led co-workers to conferences and seminars, and Bola attended seminars and conferences regularly. Each participant believed this was a form of professional development that would eventually lead to leadership opportunities in the future. At the time of the interview, both Ladi and Remy were in their 50s, and therefore were looking forward to several more years of employment. Remy believed that she would be offered a position of director, while Ladi believed that he probably would be offered a superintendent position at the school district in which he worked. Bola had decided to retire at the end of 2013. This theme had two subthemes: Initial intent to return to the native country, and connection with mentors and other professionals. Both of these were related to Leadership and professional opportunities: the lack of opportunities affecting the intent of participants to return to their native country, and the connection with mentors and other professionals led to them to these opportunities.

Initial intent to return to the native country. Participants all mentioned that their initial wish was to return to their native country after their studies. Not one of them was intending to remain in the U.S. after graduate school because they wished to use the acquired skills for the benefit of others in their home country. They all had wanted to “help the people in the native country.” Each participant mentioned this sense of social consciousness. For example, Kwame noted:

My intention was to go back to Nigeria. At that time that there was a gap between engineers and technicians because no matter what engineers design, technicians will have
to build it. My idea was to go back and have a technical school whereby our people can focus on technology. At that time, there was no IT [information technology], but mostly on the other field from painting to wiring, electrical work, and so on. What I had in mind was applied sciences. That was what I wanted to do.

Kwame did go back to Nigeria when his mother had died, and he set up a business while he was there. He left someone else in charge and came back to the U.S. to hone his skills and gain competence with the opportunities available for him in the U.S. He returned to a job working for the State of Arizona doing statistical research for social services. He then became a consultant for an Arizona healthcare company.

Like Kwame, none of the others were able to return to the native country permanently due to many factors, including the absence of job opportunities in the native country, and the pressure to remain with spouse and family in the U.S. The most compelling reason for not returning was based on family pressure to remain in the U.S.

**Connection with mentors and other professionals.** The participants also talked about mentors in the U.S. All found lasting friendships with former professors, co-workers and bosses who continued to mentor and help them in their professional lives. Ladi and Bola said that former professors mentored them. Ladi described a professor as “exemplary.” Ladi also described a classmate who was critical in helping him to find a job. Even though a classmate had dropped out of the doctoral program, he saw that Ladi did not have a job in keeping with his qualifications, and so helped him to land a job as principal:

Actually, my job as principal of a high school was given to me by a classmate of mine who never finished his doctorate. . . . He became a superintendent, and he saw me and
he said, “You need to follow me. You need to do this. You need to be in administration,” and I took his advice. We’re still friends today.

Bola also thought that her achievement as an accountant was due to the mentoring influence of one of her professors. Kwame talked about coworkers who “helped me to find directions” when faced with life challenges. He spoke specifically about a coworker who had a position he had been unable to get in spite of being qualified. By standing up for himself and challenging the employer’s view of his qualifications, he was able to get into the field of his choice at one of the lowest rungs of the ladder. However, a coworker left and recommended Kwame fill his position: “I became the director of H1b visiting and H1b IT training and IT manufacturing—so that was one of the good things.”

Summary of Results

This chapter described research findings from interviews conducted by the researcher. Participants were Sub-Saharan Africans who hold graduate degrees from U.S. colleges and universities and who were currently working in the country at the time of the study. The method of data analysis adopted was IPA, which is a method used to examine rich data from interviewees who had experienced a particular phenomenon. In this case, the participants came from Sub-Sahara Africa and attended a graduate school in the U.S. In addition, they have remained in the U.S working as professionals. Participants in this study claimed to have been transformed by their American-style education. They claimed to have acquired skills, and a sense of confidence and competence that allowed them to find good jobs in their fields. They also said that the education they received had led to psychological changes in them, in the way they perceived themselves, the world around them, and their ability to think differently. Through their experiences in graduate school, especially those of discrimination, they constructed a self-
identity that enabled them to succeed in the workplace. Both at school and in the workplace, interviewees said that they had to continually validate themselves to professors or to others at work. They found that there was a prevailing perception that Africans were incompetent, which appeared to lead others to think that they were either not academically competent or that they were unqualified for their leadership positions. These participants also realized that their competence and qualifications posed threats to others in the workplace. These negative perceptions created a need for participants to always need to validate and qualify themselves to others, even sometimes, to subordinates. However, despite these challenges, Africans from Sub-Saharan Africa excelled at school, found good jobs, became leaders at work, and were generally accepted by those who knew their work as competent and respected them as qualified individuals. The next chapter will interpret the findings of this project, discuss how these findings affect educational practice, and what future research should be conducted to further this research.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

The overarching aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans who have graduated from U.S. universities and who are now working professionals in the country. There is limited research on the in-depth transformational experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans who are educated in the US and remain in the U.S. to pursue professional careers. Four participants took part in semi-structured interviews and the data were analyzed using IPA. In this section, the researcher discusses the findings in the context of previous literature, their implications for practice, as well as suggestions for further research.

The guiding questions for this project were: (a) How do African professionals who were immigrants and completed graduate schoolwork in the US describe and understand themselves and their American educational journey? (b) What aspect of American education had the most influence on these professionals who have taken the transformational journey of acquiring their graduate education and what factors influenced their decision to remain in the United States? (c) How do African students make sense of their decision to remain and work as professionals in the United States? In order to answer these questions, 10 semi-structured questions were posed to four participants from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Summary of Findings

Superordinate themes that emerged from this study were (a) Transformative impact of American education (b) Emergence of racial identity consciousness (c) “Race really matters:” Constantly validating oneself self to others and standing up for oneself in the workplace, and (d) Leadership and professional opportunities due to acquired skills and academic connections. Each of these themes had at least two subthemes. Related to the final theme was the fact that
these participants initially did not plan to remain in the U.S. after their studies but felt compelled to remain in the country either due to family circumstances, or the realization that their skills could only be put to use in this country. They also believed that having professional connections and professors who mentored them helped with their professional opportunities.

**Transformative impact of American education.** American-style education had an immense, transformative impact on the participants of this study. When they compared their ways of thinking, their worldview, and their individual skills prior to coming to this country, each participant noted a psychological change in them as a direct result of the education that they have received. Participants also had opportunities to reflect on their sense of self, which was transformative. Participants believed that a transformation occurred to them due to the gaining of practical skills, which increased their sense of competence at work. This sense of competence appeared to extend to other areas of their lives as well. They recognized that they were more questioning, more analytical, and better prepared in many facets of their lives. They recognized that through their education they had acquired academic and analytical skills at levels that they could not have achieved elsewhere. They all demonstrated problem-solving and leadership skills at work and in their private lives. These benefits, derived from their education, were reflected in the conclusions they made when they reflected upon and described their American educational journeys through the interviews.

**Emergence of self-identity consciousness.** As indicated in the theoretical framework, there is a consensus in the available scholarship that in order to fully understand the lived experiences of African immigrants in the American higher education environment, it is essential to look at their experiences through the theoretical lens of race-centric transformative education that recognizes their culture and traditions. As a result of the behavior of some professors, as
well as co-workers and others, from whom they felt racial intolerance or hostility directed at them, the participants became conscious of their ethnicity in a way that opened them to examine race relations. Each talked about the effect that interactions with professors, students, and the campus community had on them as students both in undergraduate and graduate schools.

They reported becoming conscious of who they were as Africans, and they expressed the need to develop an attitude towards coping with racial discrimination. They began to do this at school and were able to perfect this as these experiences also emerged in the work place. This finding is consistent with other research findings, such as the studies by Manyika (2001) and Brown (2008), who found that African immigrants in the US are pressured to negotiate their identities around race, class, and nationality.

The participants in this study did not subjugate their African heritage but found ways to adapt to American society by deciding to stand their ground in the face of discriminatory attitude towards them, or by asserting themselves when necessary to do so. Lee and Rice, (2007) found that perceived discrimination can be debilitating to international students trying to cope with the challenges of graduate school while Brown (2008), and Swaminathan and Alfred (2010) showed that international students are reluctant to ask questions in the classroom for fear of being considered unintelligent. Participants in this study most often reported not feeling intimidated in the classroom, nor did they appear to allow what they considered to be racial incidents negatively affect the sense of who they were and the goals they had set for themselves. In fact, all the participants at one time or the other sought help from university authorities when they felt aggrieved. Participants maneuvered through the challenges posed by a few American professors who had preconceived notions of the African persona and cultural background. When reported to the appropriate authority, there were interventions to correct perceived discrimination by the
professors. This indicated that the university was quite aware of the tendency of some professors not to be race sensitive, and most often clear interventions were made to address the problem. In each case study, the participant recalled incidents of discrimination in the classroom setting and described the ways in which these were addressed. All of them were immediately investigated, and decisions were often reached favoring the student. Their social experiences both in and outside of campus were considered to be supportive, and these led to lasting friendships with peers and professors, which helped them to further their careers.

Participants also reported that these incidents gave them a sense of resilience. They forged an identity based on experiences of discrimination that allowed them to go on and stand up for themselves in the workplace.

“Race really matters:” Constantly validating oneself to others and standing up for oneself in the workplace. The work environment presented a different set of challenges that participants needed to overcome to be successful. Despite the academic and work related skills that the participants possessed, co-workers and bosses often questioned their qualifications and competence. The participants’ response to this was to always defend themselves, as well as fight back when intimidated. This finding agrees with those of Beoku-Betts (2004) study, who described attitudes of Westerners towards Africans as a form of third world marginality. The race and cultural background of the participants often become a reason to prejudice them regardless of their academic qualifications or professional competence. The participants reported that both qualifications and competence appeared to pose threats to less educated Americans. Either way, the participants learned to negotiate these workplace matters, proving themselves to those who wanted to feel superior towards them. All participants claimed they became stronger
with these challenges, and they were always ready to assert themselves when they needed to thoroughly cite their qualifications and credentials.

**Leadership and professional opportunities.** The decision to remain and work in the country was one that was taken based on each participant’s circumstances. The decisions were either predicated on the necessity to live with the family or the unavailability of work and growth prospects in the native country. It was a decision that none of the participants regretted. They found that there were opportunities to practice what they had learned, and they gained a sense of competence in the workplace. This is in keeping with previous literature. Nwabah and Heitner (2009) conducted individual and group interviews to investigate leadership experiences of African women in Texas. They interviewed 22 female Nigerian-born women in Texas who were also employed in U.S. based organizations. These women voiced their determination to overcome racial stereotyping, immigration problems, work related problems, and perceived discriminatory incidents. This study finds that Africans indeed overcome racial stereotyping to become professionals in the American workforce.

**Implications of Study**

Research findings show that Africans who earn professional degrees tend to remain in the US after their studies, and as such, contribute to the economic well being of this country. College administrators should encourage African students to pursue practical and professional courses and should put in place the means for such students to address acculturative stress. Helping international students, especially African students, cope with these challenges would allow them even greater opportunities to excel in this country. This study shows how Sub-Saharan African immigrants have coped with acculturative problems and provides evidence that American education has a transformative impact on their sense of awareness. These findings
have important implications to academic counselors, college administrators, and the international student community in the sense that they might help direct policy, or provide insight into the community at a level that helps educational institutions to formulate policy. Having counseling services to address such issues is recommended. Multicultural training for teachers in higher education may allow these international students to have a more positive impact both educationally and professionally.

The evidence from this study correlates to the experiences of the researcher as a graduate student in the country. Taken together, these results suggest that Sub-Saharan Africans have similar experiences both in graduate school and in work situations. In this context, the researcher opines that a two-way approach should be adopted to help Sub-Saharan Africans succeed both in college and at work. There is need for outreach to these students by college administrators such as counselors to address specific problems that face African students on college campuses. On the other hand, the researcher sees a need for presojourn counseling for students leaving their home countries for further studies in the US. It is important that students know about the challenges that they will face before ever coming to the United States. Such presojourn counseling would have exposed students to such issues as housing, transportation, cultural differences, the possibility of discrimination and various ways to manage it, and America’s academic system.

In regards to presojourn preparation, this researcher suggests an opportunity here for collaboration and partnerships between government agencies and universities in the U.S. and in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as third-party vendors. These institutions can unite together to prepare students in their home countries before they embark on their educational journey to the US. Workshops, seminars, and other informative programs could be held to draw potential
graduate students to learn about the U.S. system. In addition, on arrival, students could attend similar activities as part of the orientation program specifically targeted towards Sub-Saharan African students. As educated Sub-Saharan Africans are a great asset wherever they choose to live, all stakeholders would benefit from such collaboration.

It is the suggestion of the researcher that academic support targeted towards African students should include opportunities for students to seek mentoring from professors. Decisions to mentor students should not be optional to college professors, but should be part of the college’s counseling program; the college should encourage mentoring. Such mentoring would provide an avenue for students to report incidents of discrimination in the classroom setting or help them deal with academic performance problems.

In addition, this researcher believes that because of the increased diversity on American campuses, educational counselors must be adequately prepared to meet the challenges presented by ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse student populations (Gardiner, 2006). Ethnic differences and the need to maintain one’s cultural identity are values held by African immigrants (Conrad, 2009), and sometimes these cultural values conflict with the necessity to adopt American values and therefore full acculturation. Therefore, if a college adopted the suggestions offered here, African students would have the benefit of both the counselor and the mentor to guide them through the educational system in a pragmatic, structured environment.

In general, therefore, it is essential to the academic as well as the professional success of Sub-Saharan Africans if a two-pronged approach is adopted to prepare them for their academic journey in the United States. This would include a presojourn exposure to the American educational system through workshops and seminars and other forms of extra curricular activities. American universities and colleges could set these projects up through collaboration
with local universities or third-party vendors as well as government agencies in Sub-Saharan Africa. During the interviews for this project, participants indicated the difficulty they faced in deciding which classes to take and when, and even on what career track to pursue. These issues could be addressed in any of the presoujourn workshop sessions. Alternatively, for those who arrive without presojourn counseling, a mandatory first semester one unit academic course could be imposed on all Sub-Saharan African students, as a means to help them get organized as they begin their studies. Once enrolled, the mentoring from professors would help these students succeed in these educational institutions.

**Limitations of Study**

This study is limited in regards to sample size; only four African professionals were interviewed. It also has regional limitations. These participants live in the West Coast of the United States, and they were all from one country and shared the same ethnicity. Sub-Saharan Africa is a large area geographically and is comprised of several countries, several ethnicities, religion, and cultures. Participants in this study reflect a small sample of this population currently residing in the United States, and the results may not be generalizable to the entire population of Sub-Saharan Africans who have studied in the US and gone on to pursue professional careers.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

These findings could be validated through surveying a greater sample of African participants in regards to these transformational experiences. They could be asked about being graded differently from their peers, about reasons for remaining in the US, and specific challenges in the workplace. Also, due to the limitations of this study concerning using
participants only from Nigeria, perhaps further research could explore these questions with other Sub-Saharan Africans as well.

Conclusion

This study is significant in the sense that it focuses on Sub-Saharan Africans who are pursuing professional careers in the United States. This population has not been sufficiently studied. The population of Sub-Saharan Africans who have settled in the country has risen in the past 50 years, and this population has the capacity to make significant contributions to American society. Members of this population have formed or belonged to cultural organizations, and many can be found in different facets of American society. The findings of this study should provide reliable information for American colleges and universities about African immigrants and the need for institutions to put in place strategic interventions that would assist African students to succeed on their campuses.

Although these research findings support the current literature regarding the acculturative stress suffered by international students, the participants in this study perceived acculturative stress not as an impediment but rather as challenge to be overcome, which they all did. Research shows that in spite of acculturative stress such as perceived discrimination and language barriers, Sub-Saharan Africans who have graduated from US universities and who now live in the US as citizens excel both in college and at work. African professionals living in the US are able to navigate their school and work environments successfully by understanding the implications of racial attitudes and in effect developing coping skills that allow for growth and opportunities in the country.

One element that remained constant for all participants was the intention to return to their native country after their sojourn in the US. All of them, however, never returned but remained
in the country. The motivating factor responsible for their interest to study in the U.S. was that American education was perceived to be better than the one they could have received anywhere else. Parental involvement and influence was very dominant in the decision making process. Exposure to American art and culture, including having worked for American companies prior to arrival in the U.S., were all factors that generated their interest to come to the United States. All participants reported incidents with college professors who gave them poor grades without justification for it.

This study shows that Sub-Saharan African students who later remain to pursue professional work were motivated to succeed due to their need to meet expectations of self, family, and community. This is in keeping with previous research (Nebedum-Ezeh, 1997). Acculturative stress, such as language problems, loneliness, feelings of isolation, perceived racism, depression, academic work, and exhaustion have been found to lead Sub-Saharan African students to work harder, seek help within their own communities, and to find ways to assimilate quickly into the American cultural ways (Manyika (2001); Essandoh, 1995; Msengi, 2007; Pruitt, 1996). This study validated previous literature because interviewees were found in leadership roles at work often in white-collar job environments.

In the light of the findings of this research, international advisors should endeavor to make available to African students outlets to seek help when aggrieved due to problems developing from interactions with professors, especially concerning grading, evaluation, and other assessment issues. Students bringing claims should not be penalized or considered “agitators,” but rather, their experiences should be validated. They should be offered counseling to help them make sense of these experiences. In addition, multicultural training for teachers may have a positive impact on these students.
References


Appendix A

Notification of IRB Action

Northeastern

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: August 29, 2013
IRB #: CPS13-08-06

Principal Investigator(s):
Karen Reiss Medwed
Olujide Osikomaiya

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
Sub-Saharan African Immigrants and Their Experiences in American Higher Education

Participating Sites:
N/A

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval:
12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: AUGUST 28, 2014

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

San C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Participant,

Your name and email address was given to me by XXXX. I am writing to you about a research project that I am conducting as part of the requirements for me to obtain a doctoral degree from Northeastern University in Boston. I am working with my Principal Investigator, Karen Reiss-Medwed.

The research project is my thesis for the degree and the study is to examine the experiences of African immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa who have obtained advanced degrees from a USA university and who are working in the USA now. I understand that you meet these important criteria and therefore might be interested in participating in my study. I am looking for participants in the age range of 35 – 80 years old. Your participation is totally voluntary and any information you share with me will be confidential.

If you would like to participate, or have any questions about the project, please respond to this email osikomaiya.o@husky.neu.edu and I will give you additional information you might need and an informed consent form for your information. Thank you for your time.

Olujide Osikomaiya
Appendix C

Unsigned Informed Consent From Human Participants Committee

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education.

Name of Investigator(s): Karen Reiss-Medwed & Olujide Osikomaiya

Title of Project: Sub-Saharan African Immigrants and their Experiences in American Higher Education

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to complete a partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree by Olujide Osikomaiya. You must be at least 35 years old to be in this research.

The study will include a recorded 90-minute interview at a place mutually agreed on by you and the researcher. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to answer questions about your experiences during your student days at your university and the reasons why you have chosen to remain in the United States after your studies.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about Sub-Saharan Africans who have chosen to remain and work in the United States.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Olujide Osikomaiya the person mainly responsible for the research at 510-314-1468 or email osikomaiya.o@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Professor Karen Reiss-Medwed, the Principal Investigator at 617-390-4072 or email k.reissmed@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park,
Appendix D

Informed Consent

Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department

Investigator Name: Olujide Osikomaiya

Title of Project: Sub-Saharan African Students and Their Experiences in American Higher Education.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I am inviting you to take part in a research study about the experience of African immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa in American institutions of higher learning. This form contains all the information you need about the study, and after reading about the study; please feel free to ask me any questions. When you are ready to make a decision, please tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

I am inviting you to participate in this study because you immigrated to the United States from a Sub-Saharan country in Africa and because you hold an advanced degree from an American college or university.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of African immigrants who studied in the United States and their reactions to the American-style education that they received.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to answer several questions about your experience as a student at an American college or university. I will also ask you questions about your professional experience working and living in the United States.
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed in your own home or at a time and place that is convenient for you and the interview should be 90 minutes. I will request only one interview, but may also request a second and third interview for additional information from you. The interview will be recorded in a digital recorder.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There will not be any risks, harm, discomfort, or inconvenience associated with this research. Your answers to the question will be kept in strict confidence and will not be shared with anyone. You will not be identified by name.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help me to complete my thesis for the doctoral degree that I am pursuing.

Who will see the information about me?

Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. That means no one except me will know that the answers you provide are from you. I will transcribe the interview myself and your name will not be on the tape. I will code the data without any references to you in any way that you can be identified. Your interview will be kept on a password-protected document on a computer hard drive and will be destroyed after I have defended the thesis.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

No harm will come to you if you decide not to participate in the study. Just let me know you are not interested and there will be no negative consequences to you for your decision.
What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

You will not be exposed to any danger during this study; therefore, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not be required to fill out forms or be subjected to any form of inconvenience.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will not be paid for your participation in this project.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
If the interview is held outside your home, you will need to buy gasoline to and from the interview.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be at least 35 years old to participate.

____________________________________________ ________________________
Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above
Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How long have you lived in the United States and what brought you to the country?

2. Which college or university did you attend and why did you decide to go to this particular graduate school?

3. How do you, as an African student, describe your experiences within the American higher education classroom?

4. Provide an example of a situation or experience that in retrospect affected your sense of being an immigrant attending an American university.

5. In what ways have you been influenced by the American-style education that you received?

6. What factors made you decide to remain in the United States?

7. In what ways have your interaction with Americans in and outside the university you attended influenced the way you now live your life?

8. In what ways have you changed due to your experiences at this school?

9. Describe an event or incident that affected you as a student and which you still remember even now as a professional living and working in the United States.

10. Describe your work experience as a professional living and working in the USA.
Appendix F

Follow-Up Questions

1. Describe your experience in the classroom?
2. Was there any event or incident that made you feel unwelcome at the college?
3. What happened?
4. How was this incident resolved?
5. What did you like best about attending this college or university?
6. What did you not like?
7. Would you recommend this college to another African student?
8. Describe what this institution could have done to make your life a little easier.
9. Who could you have shared this with if you had the opportunity?
10. Did you at any time while attending this college ever felt like quitting?
11. What happened?
12. Did you have the support of other students?
13. Were there departments or units in the university attending to the needs of African students?
14. Were there units attending to the needs of international students?
15. How does your school experience now inform the way you make work-related decisions?
16. Mention a specific change that has happened to you based on your educational experiences.
17. How would you describe the impact of this change on you?
18. How would you describe the impact of this change on your family?
19. Would you recommend to a potential immigrant to attend graduate school in the United States?
20. Why or why not?
21. What would you say have influenced that decision?
22. What are your contributions to the Sub Saharan African immigrant community?