

Title: Racial-Ethnic Identity and Academic Performance for Contemporary sub-Saharan Africans in the U.S.

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Introduction

This article takes a closer look at research conducted on newly arriving African immigrant groups and their adjustment and integration in the U.S. In particular, it incorporates current literature on the integration of 1.5 and 2nd generation blacks from the Caribbean to shed light on similarities and differences for those arriving from Africa, and the generations growing up in the U.S. This study is motivated by the hypothesis that there are important distinctions between black groups from sub-Saharan Africa. As the number of Africans increases in the U.S., and become semi-permanent or permanent residents, there will most likely be an increase in American-born African children. These children will then become socialized in school systems in the U.S. How African children will be acculturated and accepted at their schools and by their peers has been shown to influence how they identify themselves and perform in education and later in life.

This article uses the findings from structured interviews and focus group sessions that I conducted to explain racial-ethnic identity and academic performance. The primary goal behind conducting interviews and holding focus groups with recent sub-Saharan African immigrants, 1.5 and 2nd generation participants, was to (a) determine their reasons and their family's reasons for coming to the U.S., (b) to assess their integration in the U.S., and (c) to evaluate how they find community (ethnic or racial), and identify and interact with other black groups (foreign-born and native-born) in the U.S.

In my findings, newly arriving sub-Saharan African immigrants and refugees identify more with their country of origin and ethnic group than with African Americans, many are high achievers and highly motivated, many want to contribute their skills and education received in the U.S. to rebuild Africa and make it a highly functioning continent. Most respondents prefer to maintain relations to Africa, but also keep the option of making a life for themselves in the U.S. African women seem to be entering higher education at higher rates than their male counterparts, and both male and female respondents commented on this perception and emerging reality. Before examining the results of my focus groups, I review current understandings of racial-ethnic identity and academic performance.

Background

Recent studies on this topic highlight the fact of diversity of black groups in the U.S. and that the African American population is actually made up of foreign born blacks from the Caribbean and also several countries making up sub-Sahara Africa. Logan (2007) puts this representative proportion at one fifth of the total black/African American population. Because identity in this instance is so layered, I thought it important to evaluate how ethnic difference would play out in academic performance and overall achievement. To do so, I created a study that would ask about their and their family's motivation for coming to the U.S. and asked questions to reveal their integration thus far in school and other socio-economic arenas.

Africa still sends more immigrants than refugees (DHS 2009). It can be assumed that some of these immigrants entering the U.S. from Africa are highly skilled and motivated.

According to Logan (2007) the social and economic profiles for Africans is above that of African Americans, which means they are employed in higher paying occupations, obtained higher education degrees, and for some cases their skills have transferred over to the American system successfully. With that stated it is also important to note that Africa is still a leader in sending refugee and asylum seekers, particularly from Somalia. Other countries like Nigeria and Ghana have added to the sub-Saharan African immigrant population here. This bifurcated flow of refugees and immigrants has led to some interesting findings and depending on the demographic profile of the individual or family arriving, helps to explain the integration of the parent and children involved.

Another important concept related to identity formation in the U.S. is perception. Waters (1999) asserts that “race serves as a master status defining the person to others” (Waters 1999: 5). Therefore, the identity of these new black immigrants could self-identify as Caribbean and in this study sub-Saharan African, but identity is not only self-identified it is also imposed upon by others, outsiders that would see these black groups as being the same as American-born blacks. This reality posits a dilemma for foreign-born black groups that may not perceive the accomplishments of American-born blacks in a favorable way. There is a common and historically rooted assumption that there is a racial disadvantage for being black or perceived as black within U.S. society. Although some foreign-born black groups are aware of racial tension between black and white native-born groups, they may feel outside of this debate or share the sentiments of whites against blacks. Further my research findings from the qualitative interviews reveal there is sometimes a gendered and generational element to self identity and this determines how one may deal with being perceived as a native-born black or African American.

Method

Testing the Research Objectives

Having established the issues of adaptation, of identity and relative success with integration of sub-Saharan Africans, I conducted an ethnographic study that took place in Los Angeles, California and Seattle, Washington. The findings from in-depth interviews, focus group sessions, and participant observation at African student associations, community events, and local festivities were used to support findings based on quantitative data extracted from Census Bureau datasets Integrated Public Use Micro Data Sample (IPUMS) and the American Community Survey (ACS). These findings reveal key insights into sub-Saharan Africans in five areas: (1) reasons for migration, (2) how well they are doing in the U.S., (3) their interactions with community, (4) identity formation, and (5) choice to stay in the U.S. or return to respective African country of origin.

Data collection took place over the course of eight months from 2009-2010. In order to attract eligible study participants, I requested that all African students at UCLA campus receive an e-mail about my research project. This e-mail included a questionnaire and any student that answered yes to all questions was eligible to participate and sign up for a focus group session (See Appendix A). During the Fall of 2009, I recruited twenty-two eligible participants. Out of twenty-two, six people joined focus group sessions and the others signed up for one-on-one interviews due to schedule conflicts and time constraints. The focus group sessions ranged between 45 minutes to 75 minutes. The in-depth interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 90 minutes. Three focus groups and twenty-four interviews were conducted for this study, creating a sample size of thirty participants.

Preliminary Findings

In Table 1 and 1.1 (see Appendices B and C), I display the interview and focus group session sample data. The respondents ranged in age between 17 and 38 years old. The average age was 23 years. There were 22 female and 8 male respondents. There were more respondents with Nigerian, Ethiopian and Eritrean ancestry than any other ancestry group. Most of the respondents were second generation, but there was also a substantial amount of newly arriving immigrants from Kenya, and The Democratic Republic of Congo. There was one respondent from Botswana. Four out of eight males and 21 out of 22 females said they experienced discrimination, either due to their racial-ethnic identity or immigrant status. Seven men and 20 women send remittances to family members in their respective countries in Africa. Note that some of these remittances may have been sent by the respondents' parents. Six of the female respondents identified as African American, five identified with their African ethnic group, and 11 identified with both. Two of the male respondents identified as African American, five identified with their African ethnic group and one identified as both. There were 15 female respondents and one male respondent planning to stay in the U.S. Six out of seven foreign-born males and five out of seven female respondents had plans to return to their respective countries in Africa. While two out of seven females and one out of seven expatriates plan to return to Africa, maybe not to live, but construct a life that involves migrating back and forth. Twenty one out of 22 female and seven out of eight male respondents were actively involved in cultural organizations, either on or off campus.

Ongoing Analysis

As immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa continue to migrate to the U.S. and while some maintain their ties (emotional and financial) to their country of origin, it is clear their presence in the U.S. will change the concept of what it means to be an immigrant from Africa, given the history of forced migration during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. While some sub-Saharan Africans are arriving with little option to do otherwise and are here seeking refuge and asylum, the majority arriving chose to migrate. This portion of the population is also interested in obtaining skills and education by any means and without a timeframe, which is evidenced by their continued migration and permanent settlement.

Out of thirty testimonies, a small snapshot of African community building and identity formation, it is obvious the diversity and expansion of these communities in the U.S. Although some plan to return to Africa upon the completion of their degrees, only time will tell. Many new arrivals miss home because their families and everything they have ever known is in their respective African countries. For those that came to the U.S. earlier in life and especially ones born in the U.S., they cannot see themselves living in Africa, but understand the importance of giving back and staying connected. A strong sense of identity is vital to the survival of any immigrant group in America. Being black in the U.S. has historically meant a disadvantaged and marginalized position in society. Future studies may reveal that through the passing down of cultural attributes significant to respective African nations, future generations of black African immigrants and their descendents growing up in the U.S. will make their once "minority" status hold a more positive connotation.

Appendices

Appendix A: Call for Focus Group Participants - included a six open-ended questions on-line questionnaire

Hello,

My name is Natasha Rivers and I am a doctoral candidate in the UCLA Geography Department. My dissertation titled, *An Evaluation of Historical and Contemporary sub-Saharan African Migration to and within the United States*, is looking for volunteers to participate in a focus group. If you cannot attend a focus group, and would like to contribute/participate in this study you can complete a questionnaire with similar questions. Ask me for the questionnaire.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is designed to evaluate the migration experience of sub-Saharan African immigrants to and within the US. It will examine the push and pull factors involved with the increased migration of African immigrants to the US, their dispersal once they arrive and how well these groups are performing in areas of education attainment and the labor market. In addition, this study also seeks to explore questions related to the forming of identity in terms of racial categorization and the impacts, if any at all, on performance in terms of education attainment and job market success or failure.

If you can answer yes to any of these questions, you are eligible for this study. Each participant will receive compensation for their participation in the study. Eligible participants may inquire further about their compensation.

Questions to check for eligibility. If you answer yes to any of these questions you are eligible for this study:

Are you or your family from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Somalia or another sub-Saharan African country not listed?

Would you classify yourself as 1st generation (not born or raised in the US, but live here now), 1.5 generation (not born in the US, but arrived by age 7) or 2nd generation (you were born in the US, but are a direct descendent of one of the above listed African origin groups)?

Are you the first in your family to go to college? Do you believe that the cultural attributes linked to your ethnic background help you to succeed in school or in the labor market?

Do you identify as being an ethnicity other than African American, but identify as black?

Do you speak more than one language, African dialect or language?

Who can participate?

*Community College, Cal State, UC Undergraduate & Graduate Students and recent graduates of sub-Saharan African descent and are at least 18 yrs of age

Your participation will include the completion of a 1 ½ to 2 hour focus group. Before we begin the focus group you will receive a consent form to be signed before participating in this study. This study is 100% confidential and anything said during the focus group will in no way be linked back to any individual person.

If you choose to participate, please direct all questions, comments or concerns to my e-mail: riversn@ucla.edu. Make sure to put in the subject line of the e-mail “focus group participant” Indicate your first and second choice by placing 1st or 2nd next to your desired date in your e-mail reply.

Available Dates to attend a focus group session:

Week 7: November, Monday 9th from 9a-11a _____ or Thursday 5-7pm _____
Week 8: November, Monday 16th from 9a-11a _____ or Thursday 5-7pm _____
Week 9: November, Monday 23rd from 9a-11a _____ or Thursday 5-7pm _____
Week 10: November, Monday 30th from 9a-11a _____ or
December 3rd Thursday 5-7pm _____

Please do not hesitate to ask me questions before, during or after your participation in the study.

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Appendix B.

Table 6.1: Demographic Aspects of Migrants

Participants: Country of origin	Classification	Sex	Age	Type
Botswana	Newly Arriving	M	31	Interview
Nigeria	2 nd generation	M	22	Focus Group
Nigeria	Newly Arriving	M	30s	Interview
Kenya	Newly Arriving	M	38	Focus Group
Ethiopia	Newly Arriving	M	20	Interview
Ethiopia	Newly Arriving	M	26	Interview
Ethiopia	2 nd generation	M	33	Interview
Ghana	Newly arriving	M	27	Interview
Liberia	1.5 generation	F	22	Interview
Congo	2 nd generation	F	24	Focus Group
Congo	Newly Arriving	F	19	Interview
Nigeria	Newly Arriving	F	20	Interview
Nigeria	2 nd generation	F	27	Interview
Nigeria	2 nd generation	F	28	Focus Group
Nigeria	2 nd generation	F	32	Focus Group
Nigeria	2 nd generation	F	31	Interview
Ghana	2 nd generation	F	26	Interview
Ghana	2 nd generation	F	20s	Interview
Eritrea	2 nd generation	F	19	Interview
Eritrea	2 nd generation	F	22	Focus Group
Eritrea	1.5 generation	F	25	Interview
Eritrea	2 nd generation	F	25	Interview
Eritrea	Newly Arriving	F	24	Interview
Ethiopia	2 nd generation	F	26	Interview
Ethiopia	1.5 generation	F	25	Interview
NA (Afro-Caribbean)	Newly Arriving	F	28	Interview
Somali	Newly Arriving	F	24	Interview
Oromo	1.5 generation	F	26	Interview
Kenya	Newly Arriving	F	24	Interview
Kenya	Newly Arriving	F	17	Interview

Appendix C.

Table 6.2: Adjustment in the U.S. and Ties to Africa

Selected Variables	Male	Female
Country of Origin		
Botswana	1	0
DR of Congo	0	2
Ethiopia	3	2
Eritrea	0	5
Ghana	1	2
Kenya	1	2
Nigeria	2	5
Oromo	0	1
Somalia	0	1
Generation		
Newly Arriving	6	6
1.5	0	4
Second	2	11
Plan to Return		
Ethnic Origin	6 out of 7	5 out of 7
Expatriate	1 out of 7	2 out of 7
Stay in the U.S.	1	15
Identity		
African American	2	6
Country of Origin	5	5
Both	1	11
Experienced Discrimination (racial or immigrant status)	4 out of 8	21 out of 22
Involved in Cultural Organizations	7 out of 8	21 out of 22
Send Remittances		
Yes (Includes parents)	7	20
No	1	2
N (Sample Size)	8	22

References

Primary Sources:

Department of Homeland Security

<http://www.dhs.gov>

Immigration Statistics: Table 10: Persons Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status by Broad Class of Admission and Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Year, 2009
(XLS, 38 KB)

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Logan, John R. (2007) "Who are the Other African Americans? Contemporary African and Caribbean Immigrants in the U.S." In *The other African Americans: contemporary African and Caribbean immigrants in the United States*, edited by Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Maryland, 49-68

Waters, Mary C. (1999) *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, Russell Sage Foundation