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# Non-traditional Age Black African International Students' Experiences: Phenomenological Heuristic Inquiry

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Keywords: CRT, sociocultural, Black Africans

**Abstract:** This paper summarizes the results of a qualitative study where the purpose was to explore the lived experiences of adjusting to U.S. culture among Black African international non-traditional age adult students while attending predominantly White higher academic institutions. Implications for faculty and higher education administration working with Black African adult international students on American university campuses are suggested.

Making the decision to attend a foreign higher educational institution is a major life event that often occurs with very little knowledge and understanding of the complex nature of higher education life. For international students in the U.S., the transition can be overwhelming. Perhaps the most unsettling aspects of this transition are the need to deal with a degree of cultural, social, and educational changes for the first time. Some of the changes international students in the U.S. face include encountering a different societal value system, unusual food, gender role adjustments, separation from family and friends, and loss of social status and power (Lacina, 2002). In addition being considered a minority, having difficulty understanding the American accent, and being unmarketable for the level of employment one was previously accustomed are issues for many in coming to a new culture (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005). For those adults enrolled in higher education institutions being expected to function academically amidst unfamiliar teaching and learning styles, dealing with a generational gap between oneself and traditional-age students, sensing that others perceive one as inferior, and having a general sense within and without the classroom that one does not fit in are factors that often affect international students. These changes suggest this transition is even more overwhelming for non-traditional age international students whose experiences are different from traditional students (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003). Non-traditional age students within the adult education literature are defined as students who are at least 25 years of age and re-entering school after having had a break in their education (Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 2003; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). These scholars generally refer to non-traditional age students as *adult students*. In contrast, traditional students are defined as students who enroll full time in college when they are under 19 years of age, and do so directly upon high school graduation (Christie & Hutcheson, 2003).

Generally, international graduate students (often described as non-traditional adult learners) have been an active part of education in the U.S. (Brown, 2005). Thus, their importance and presence in the U.S. cannot be overlooked when the country is clearly dependent on the foreign-born population within certain disciplines. For example, more than 50% of the engineers with PhDs and 45% of math and computer scientists with PhDs working in the U.S. are foreign-born (Anderson, 2005). Despite this important contribution to American society, it is surprising that the literature addressing these students' adjustment and experiences is silent. Instead there has been an extensive body of literature, both conceptual and empirical, on the topic of

acculturation and adjustment of *traditional-age* international students studying in the U.S. (Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Yeh, 2003). There are issues of common concern faced by both traditional and non-traditional international students, collectively. These issues include academic adjustment and cultural and social adjustment. However, the studies have indicated that adult international students seem to face more challenges in the adjustment process than traditional international students (Poyrazli, Arbona, & Bullington, 2001; Wang, 2004). Nevertheless, literature addressing non-traditional international students' adjustment and the challenges they experience in American educational institutions is scarce. Even more limited is the literature that addresses the non-traditional Black African students' challenges.

Although African international students are one of the least represented groups among the international students on American campuses of higher education, a recent report released by Open Doors (IIE, 2004) indicated that Africa was ranked fourth among the top seven leading places of origin for international students. As the numbers of African international students continue to rise (Constantine et al, 2005), there remains a compelling need to qualitatively examine the experiences of these students, particularly the adult-aged students whose presence is more visible in graduate programs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate educational and cultural experiences of Black African international non-traditional age adult students in U.S. higher educational institutions, and therefore assumes that there is a possible interaction and influence among the academic, social and cultural aspects of the experience requiring a comprehensive exploration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theoretical perspectives and one adjustment model were used in this study for understanding experiences faced by Black African international adult students. First, I drew from Critical Race Theory (CRT). There are several tenets to CRT: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism (racism is so embedded into everyday life that it often appears to be natural and normal to many people within the American culture); 2) whiteness functions as a system of privilege and 3) race and racism in education can best be fully understood by incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives (Bergerson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Second, because aspects of CRT are a better fit for African Americans than Black African internationals, I also drew from sociocultural approaches specifically based on the work of Ogbu (1992) and Fanon (1967) as well as adult educators including Alfred (2002), Guy (1999), Johnson-Bailey (2001), and Tisdell (1995). These theoretical approaches were relevant to this study since they explicitly attend to culture, ethnicity, race, class, and gender that affect Black African international students in the U.S. system of higher education. Since the emphasis on international students' adjustment has focused on the process, I also drew from the acculturation model as described by Jandt (2004). This model is based on five stages, beginning with a honeymoon phase, and then proceeding until one is more fully integrated in the new culture.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized a predominantly phenomenological heuristic approach, with insights from other interpretive qualitative approaches that address sociocultural elements (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000). Phenomenological approaches allow participants to have voice as they make sense of their own lived experiences (Merriam, 2002). Because phenomenology does not really account for social constructivist approaches to knowledge construction to any great degree, and

because I wanted to have participants construct further knowledge together in the context of a focus group, a broader social constructionist approach to research (Schwandt, 2000) also informed the research design. The purposeful sample consisted of Black African international adult students who at the time of college enrollment did not possess permanent residency status in the U.S., and for whom English was not their primary language. Six women and seven men from various African countries were interviewed. The data from both individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to phenomenological heuristic methods. Member checks and triangulation were conducted for verification and dependability.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The findings are grouped into four main categories: (1) adjusting to a new educational system, (2) growing awareness of race, (3) developing strategies for social and cultural adjustment, and (4) broadening individuals' worldview and professional growth.

#### *Dealing with a New Educational System*

Participants' decision to pursue education in the U.S. meant countering and dealing with a series of challenges. These challenges included language issues particularly the participants' personal responses to the first-time awareness of having an accent and the American students' and faculty reactions to participants' accents. For example, Xero from Nigeria not only had difficulty understanding the American accent but discovered that American students and teachers could not understand her accent. Xero stated, "I was very frustrated. They couldn't understand me. I could not understand anybody either." Another challenge was adapting to a new classroom setting and atmosphere. Participants in this study found conflicting cultural norms in the classroom environment. For example interaction between teachers and students was perceived to be informal, a style that was uncomfortable to participants. Encountering new teaching and learning styles were additional challenges. Methods and frequency of academic examinations, use of new technology as a means for instruction, and emphasis on independent learning were among the new instructional approaches that participants had to adapt to.

#### *Growing Awareness of Race*

All participants grew up and were socialized within a racially homogeneous group where the concept of 'minority' and the color of their skin were not in their consciousness. Realization that they were 'Black' and a 'minority' took place when they enrolled into predominantly white educational institutions. For example, Wanjiru stated, "I realized I am Black when I came to this country." Resulting from this racial awareness was the introduction of a more insidious element to their experience when they began to perceive racial discrimination. This was based on their racial identity or skin color as perceived from both White students and higher education administration and faculty. In addition, distrust and lack of cultural sensitivity were seen to be racial challenges in the education process according to participants. For example, Frank always felt that the Black African students were the first suspects if something went wrong in the laboratory: "...when you work with instruments in sciences, something would go wrong, we [Black African international students] are to be aware because, suddenly you will be the first suspect and I think you have to be aware of that."

#### *Living through Socio-cultural Differences*

Dealing with the realities of being in a new culture was marked by a feeling of loneliness, of moving from a communal culture to an individualistic one. Participants reported feelings of being "left out" and segregated from American students during social gatherings. Another finding related to living in the new culture was the loss of professional status. Participants in this

study were adults who had been in the workforce for many years prior to coming to the U.S. and who as a result enjoyed a level of positive status within their community. However, upon arrival to the U.S. they found that they could not maintain the same status, thus resulting in feelings of low self esteem and frustration. For example Hope reported, "I felt very inferior...I felt like *I am nothing*." Similarly Frank said, "felt somehow like *stepping back* in social order..." Tswana described the experience as "social demotion." Developing strategies to cope with cultural adjustment was another finding in dealing with the realities of being in a new culture. Such strategies included forming friendships with other international students, identifying with other members of their ethnic group, maintaining family support, and forming close relationships with Americans who indicated interest in the participants.

#### *Broadening Individuals' Worldview and Professional Growth*

Overall, participants in this study reported being satisfied with their U.S. education. In fact they reported that attending U.S. higher educational institutions broadened their worldview and fostered professional growth. Personal development was one of the indicators of their achieved knowledge. In fact participants reported having developed a different "mode of thinking ... and different way of viewing the world" as described by Chidinma. Learning to interact with other students from other cultural backgrounds was another indicator of the participants' increased worldview. This was marked by new ways of learning as reported by Cimiyyu, to be "more open, [and to] appreciate everybody's differences." Lastly, academic advancement was found to be an indicator of participants' professional growth. This achievement was found to be a source of "self confidence [and provided] a sense of accomplishment" as indicated by Richard.

### **Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

Participants in this study found that dealing with a new education system in the U.S. was tantamount to wrestling with a series of challenges. Particularly salient issues that arose out of this study were language accent issues and differences in classroom and instructional culture. Further, the study concluded that issues related to race affected Black African international adult students more than what is documented by the literature. The few scholars who have made mention of race and discrimination issues particularly in reference to Black African international adult students seem to treat the issues as serendipitous secondary findings in their studies (Constantine et al, 2005; Senyshyn, Warford & Zhan, 2000). In the current study, two major findings regarding race emerged: participants' awareness of skin color resulting in differential treatment and growing distrust, and cultural insensitivity towards Black African international adult students.

Encountering new social and cultural norms and lifestyles also surfaced in this study. Culturally and socially Black Africans are primarily relationship-oriented and community oriented. Coming to a foreign country for Black African international adult students meant encountering people with different value systems; this caused them to experience a certain level of disconnect and confusion. Too, given the fact that these were also older students who had professional status in their home countries, this study brought to the fore the loss of that status and the use of multiple strategies for cultural adjustment. Despite the many challenges participants in this study voiced, U.S. higher education has had a significant positive impact on them, in broadening their worldview and fostering professional growth. Accomplishments reflecting this impact include personal development, cross-cultural interaction, and academic advancement.

In conclusion, the findings of this research have major practical implications for faculty and higher education administrators. First, given that adjusting to a new educational system can be challenging to Black African international adult students, pre-arrival orientation programs for faculty and administration staff can help ease the adjustment of these students, making them more aware of the students' socio-cultural experiences and prior academic background. Second, Jacob and Greggo (2001) indicated that international students' interaction with the host country members contributed to a better adjustment process. It is therefore suggested that orientation personnel and adult educators advocate and promote interactions between Black African adult international students and American adult students. Third, Black African adult international students bring with them an immense wealth of life, academic, and professional experiences, experiences which American students and faculty could benefit from. Therefore, it is recommended that curricula be inclusive to allow Black African international adult students opportunities to share their experiences in the classroom. Fourth, the findings of this study have indicated Black African adult international students' perceived racial treatment from White instructors and administrative personnel in the U.S. higher educational institutions. Senyshyn, Warford, and Zhan (2000) found that international students who experienced discrimination have more adjustment problems than peers who experience little or no discrimination. It is therefore recommended that the multicultural departments within colleges and universities empower these Black African international adult students to safely challenge situations when they sense differential treatment or when they do not receive needed academic support.

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