

Telling Our Own Stories: A Phenomenological Study of Sub-Saharan African Immigrants

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Abstract

Many immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa consider immigration towards the West as an opportunity for educational and economic self-fulfillment. Their needs and interests along with their skills and talents remain poorly understood and underutilized with most countries not recognizing their presence and doing little to facilitate their integration. We undertook this phenomenological project to not only investigate the unstructured phenomenon of immigration of Sub-Saharan Africans in the West, but also to tell our own varied and personal stories, and to share our lived experiences of perseverance, and our survival strategies. In doing so, we hope that future generations of African immigrants can learn from and be encouraged by our resilience, resistance and successes. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the challenges of using phenomenology as a research design, present the process used and in the process give a voice to nameless and countless stories that represent the personal experiences of Sub-Saharan immigrants in the West. Using phenomenology as a design, we share on its challenges as we tell the stories and present some of the issues including how immigrants reconcile their understanding of success from their respective worldviews with the meaning of success in the countries they have emigrated to; how emigration has affected their personal, academic, social, economic, and professional lives; and what mechanisms of resistance they have developed in order to adapt to their new context.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan Immigrants, Phenomenology, Immigration, Storytelling, Resilience, Resistance

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Background Information

The focus of Immigration policies in the West does not address the peculiar circumstances of Sub-Saharan Africans who are in the Western countries legally. For example, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform in the USA focuses only on border security, and other immigrant punitive measures including worksite enforcement penalties and employment eligibility verification but nothing to support immigrants from Africa. In the UK, immigration reform and new policies are not only harsh they are viewed as racist (The Independent, March 2015). Although The British Nationality Act 1948 granted the subjects of the British Empire the right to live and work in the UK, recent years have seen tighter immigration controls implemented even on commonwealth citizens (Chothia, 2013; Migration Policy Institute, 2009).

Throughout the literature and government census reports that were reviewed for this project, the recurring finding was that immigrants from Africa were the most rapidly growing and highly educated population of black immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and is expected to continue to increase (Kent 2007). It was further reported that many of them are highly educated, underemployed, yet nearly 65% of African immigrants have one or more years of college education. This in comparison to records of the US Census Bureau that indicate that about 30 percent of the entire American population that is twenty-five years or older has a bachelor's degree or equivalent.

The majority of the black immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa came from Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia Ghana, South Africa and recently more are coming in from Somalia and Sudan. African immigrants now make up 1.6 million or 36 percent of the black immigrant population (Census Bureau, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2013). However, their needs and interests along with their skills and talents remain poorly understood and underutilized with most US States and European countries barely recognizing their presence and doing little to facilitate their integration.

We are undertaking this project to not only investigate the phenomenon of immigration of Sub-Saharan Africans in the West, but to also tell our own stories, share our lived experiences of perseverance, our survival strategies and our continued experience with discounting so that future generations of African immigrants can learn from and be encouraged by our resilience, resistance and successes, and see that their experiences are not unique and that the obstacles that they will encounter are not insurmountable (hooks, 1989).

Purpose of Study

“It is our stories that connect us. It is our stories that allow us to hold up the mirror that looks like somebody else’s life, but we actually get to see ourselves.” Oprah Winfrey

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the challenges of using phenomenology as a research design, maintaining unbiased interconnection between us as researchers and as the object of research, and still be able to give a voice to nameless and countless stories that represent the personal experiences of Sub-Saharan immigrants in the West. Using phenomenology as a design, we tell some of their stories and present

some of the issues including how immigrants reconcile their understanding of success from their respective worldviews with the meaning of success in the countries they have emigrated to; how emigration has affected their personal, academic, social, economic, and professional lives; and what mechanisms of resistance they have developed in order to adapt to their new context.

For the purpose of this chapter, African immigrants in the United States, refers to nationals of Africa that are not North Africans, but from the region commonly referred to as Sub-Saharan. African immigrants in the United States are the nation's most highly educated group. The authors are motivated by a common thread among the participants that were interviewed: "Telling our own stories from our own perspectives is important and empowering because when others tell it there are omissions and misrepresentations and a lot of stereotyping".

Researcher Bias

The main challenge was bracketing to avoid bias. Although in this paper we are researchers, we are not very different from the participants in terms of race, gender, and education as well as some minority characteristics such as ethnicity, and social-economic class. Our reasons for coming to the USA are also not very different: education and economic uplifting. The researchers are Black women who have experienced the challenges of leaving their home countries and being immigrants and minorities in the USA where racial bias especially on Black people is real and continues to hamper the development of that minority group.

The researchers' lived experiences that we share here, was done with the aim of getting a deeper understanding of the phenomena for personal self change, to get a chance to tell our own stories, for use in the future as life and student coaches in our roles as professors in higher education institutions, and most importantly to give the current and future immigrants a voice and validation about their experiences.

Research Methodology, Design and Procedures

The primary objective of this phenomenological study was to explicate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of continental African immigrants. This paper presents data coding and analysis process and the critical themes that emerged. Participants were interviewed using structured and unstructured questions, which guided their description of their lived phenomenal experience. The interactive process was used to gather data through in-depth interviews and detailed descriptions of their experience, which were recorded digitally and through written self-reports.

The researchers' aim was not to produce a general description of how to conduct a phenomenological study, but to record the challenges we faced during the process, our reflection, experiences, and strategies of coping, as well as those of the respondents for future immigrants, for communities and governments to use in planning support interventions. Understanding the specific experiences of sub-Saharan or Continental Africans in the West could help Western host countries develop better social programs to serve the needs of those immigrants and ensure their smooth transition and integration.

By doing so, this project fills a gap in a much-needed literature and methodology about the lived experiences of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the West (Census Bureau, 2019). In addition to being therapeutic, the support circles that these immigrants have build have become their safe spaces for the members and we will be using them as such. In the process of research and interviews, researchers found out that some the immigrants already had unstructured forums where they met and shared foods from their countries of origin. These would be great opportunities for the researchers to expand and use as basis for a future coaching and mentoring program.

Many Sub-Saharan immigrants come to America and other European countries, completely unaware of the different ways in which racism and discrimination can negatively impact their lives and even derail their initial plans of achieving their education and or economic dream. Indeed, most of them initially believed that their hard work ethic will ultimately lead them to economic success and they completely discounted the impact of race on their lived experiences. Just to come to the realization of the insidious social and economic implications of race in America as well as other countries in the Global North (Chothia, 2013) is a continuous challenge.

Being qualitative in nature, the phenomenological design enabled the researchers to explore and describe the lived experiences and sense-making of Sub-African Immigrants. To collect quality data, in-depth approaches including open-ended, unstructured questions and follow up discussions were used. This was presented to the respondents as an evolving set of questions “that may seem more like a friendly conversation than a data-gathering interview” (Knox and Burkard, 2009, p.3). This in and of itself is a great challenge. The researchers had to constantly refocus themselves and bracket their experiences and emotions or else they would lose themselves in the story, emotions of empathy and it would become intertwined with their own.

Bracketing had to be used consciously all the time to avoid bias where there was data that was outside the researcher’s experience and or expectation. On dealing with the recorded text and allowing for the phenomena to speak for itself, Moustakas (1994) advised researchers to ensure that the meaning, essence, and intention are understood. The next step was an intuitive reflective interpretation process so as not to overlook a person’s individuality that came through the words and emotions as they narrated their stories. Phenomenology allows a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of the everyday experiences of the target audience because apart from being interactive, it is within the participants’ environment.

Simms and Stawarska (2013) and Fisher and Embree, Eds, (2000) offer that, a researcher’s role at this phase is to give participants an opportunity to voice their concerns, to share their lived experiences as a way to affirm their own efforts and agency in their success, with the understanding that knowledge and meaning is constructed individually and or collaboratively. From the aggregated responses of 25 out the 30 Sub-Saharan Immigrants who completed our interview, the researchers were able to determine their perceptions on the impact of relocating to the USA and other countries, their coping strategies and definition of success. Some of the participants revealed that they had relocated to countries like Malaysia before eventually ending up in the USA.

Once potential participants had been recruited to take part in the research study, researchers engaged in a multiphasic informed consent process. The individual meeting served not only as the final phase of the informed consent process whereby potential participants could get any questions answered about the research as well as the interview session. During the first 15 minutes of the individual meeting, researchers finalized the informed consent process and obtained signatures and or oral permission to proceed.

In the latter 45 minutes, researchers conducted the interview sessions and digitally recorded the responses for ease of transcription later on in the research process. The transcribing of the recorded contents of the entire interview of each participant was used to develop summaries of each interview. A hard copy of the transcribed interviews and summaries was stored in a locked file cabinet with no identifying information on them; therefore protecting the identity of the participants and upholding confidentiality.

These steps are very challenging when compared to quantitative research where the data-gathering tool is very impersonal and very anonymous; there is no content to record or transcribe because the goal is not maintaining the story and narration style, as is the case in phenomenological design. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researchers entered the data into qualitative data analysis software, which helped us develop codes and themes from the transcribed information. Researchers used the recurring themes from the responses to discuss and describe the inner and lived experiences of the participants.

Data analysis: The process

Setting and Demographics

Table 1: *Participants' Bio Data*

Age Range	Total
19-22	2
23-26	2
27-30	4
31-33	3
34-37	1
38-41	0
42-45	3
46- 49	3
50-53	1
54-57	2
57 and above	4

Table 2: *Gender*

Female	13
Male	12
Other	0

Table 3: *Length of Stay in US*

Length Range in years	Total
1 and below	0
2-5	3
6-9	5
10-13	3
14-17	3
18-21	5
22-25	1
26-29	2
29 and above	3

Table 4: *Country of Origin*

Country	Total
Kenya	11
Ethiopia	2
Uganda	3
Rwanda	1
Burkina Faso	2
Senegal	1
Nigeria	3
Zambia	1
Botswana	1

Table 5: *Reason for Migrating*

Reason	Total
Education	20
Marriage	3
Business	0
Family	2

Table 7: *Marital Status*

Status	Total
Married	18
Single	7
Engaged	0
Living with girl/boy friend	0

Table 6: *Education/Degree Achieved*

None	2
Associate	0
Bachelors	12
Masters/MBA	6
PhD	4

Participant's age ranged from 19 to Over 65 but did not differ in terms of gender as shown in table 1. Non-response rate was insignificant and did not affect the results. Further, being a phenomenology, each participant's story has its own level of significance and ability to give voice and validation to the individual. Education is the main reason most of the African immigrants came to the US as shown in table 5 and 6. Although most of them came when they were young and single, with time their status changed as indicated on table 7.

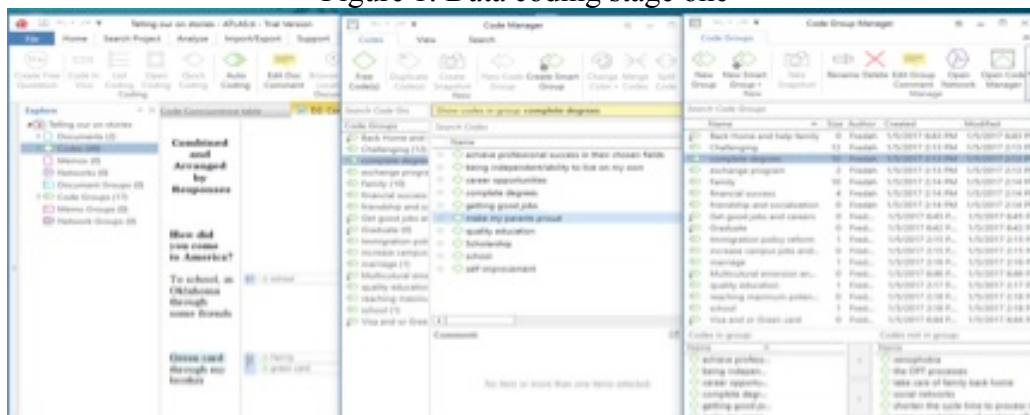
Data Organization and Coding

Data was organized by transcribing the audios manually, listening again and again to confirm quality, compiling them all into one text document, then uploading it to Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. This process enabled for the identification and construction of frameworks guided by the research questions and the conceptual frameworks. The data was then sorted into the framework and labeled ready for descriptive analysis and later for discussing the relationships.

The main challenge was the reading and re-reading a text, listening to the audios over and over, taking notes, reflecting on the data and writing down interpretations and ensuring that none of the responses was omitted or misrepresented. Using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software, the researchers used open coding to initially create as many codes as possible followed by axial and scheme coding as shown in figure 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Another challenge included the process where researchers observed the frequencies and intensity of occurrences of a concept as displayed by the software and making memos and code notes. The process enabled the researcher to identify patterns in the data and to search data to help answer the research questions. Despite the challenges, using software not only made the process faster and neater but it also enhanced the reliability, credibility of interpretations and validity/trustworthiness of findings by producing analysis, creating, inserting and indexing codes and constructing hyperlinks that made it easy to retrieve selected segments within the text. It also made it convenient to store and display large amounts of qualitative data without becoming concerned about space or how to view multiple segments at once as shown in figure 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1: Data coding stage one



further color coded to narrow down the frequent codes which were then screened for the most recurrent and eventually into themes and sub-themes.

Five major themes that seemed to answer the research questions and support literature review section that were revealed from the data included the challenges of being an immigrant in the USA, perception and definition of success, racism and discrimination, coping strategies and the myth of completing degrees and going back home. Sub-themes included how they came to the USA, their experiences, comparing their success to others who came before them, and the Optional Practical Training (OPT) Process.

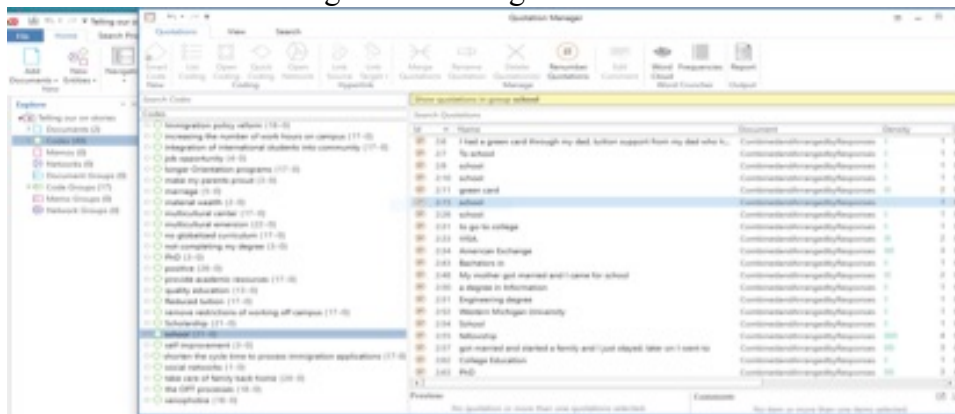
Data Analysis

The categories from the coding process were then further sorted into recurring themes. All narratives related to a particular theme were placed under that theme. For example those categories that highlighted the challenges of being an immigrant were grouped together, just as were those on success, racism, coping and myth of going back home (Table 8).

Table 8: *Themes, subthemes and Frequency of Responses (%)*

Research Question Phrase	Theme	Sub-theme
How did you come to America? Why did you come to America? How has your experience as a continental African immigrant in America been like?	Challenges of being an immigrant in the USA	How they came to the USA
What does success mean to you?	Perception and definition of success	
What are the personal expectations/goals you set when you arrived in America? What are the expectations/goals that your family set for you?/expected of you?	The myth of completing degrees and going back home	Coping strategies
If you were to make a suggestion to your State Representative about resources and support that immigrants would like to see happen, what would that be?	Their recommendations on further support for international students	

Figure 5: Coming to America



The majority of the participants cited school as the main reason why they came or were sponsored to the USA. Others came with the hope of getting jobs and making money so as to live a good life as well as support their families back home while others came to join family and or their spouses. The major visa categories were student and Green Card.

The exchange program that was aligned with the local university.

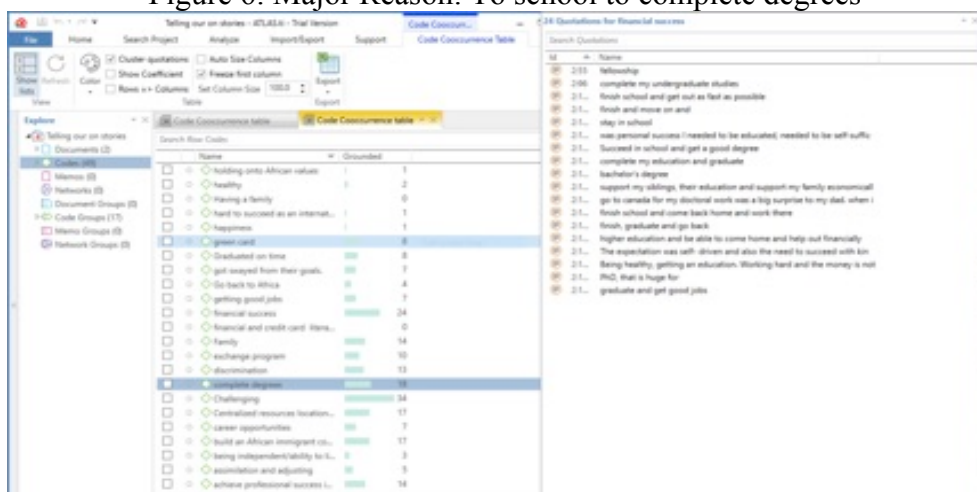
I came to totally do personal improvement. I realized it was only America that could sustain my faith to improve myself.

School brought me to America.

I came to visit, then I got married and started a family and I just stayed, later on I went to school.

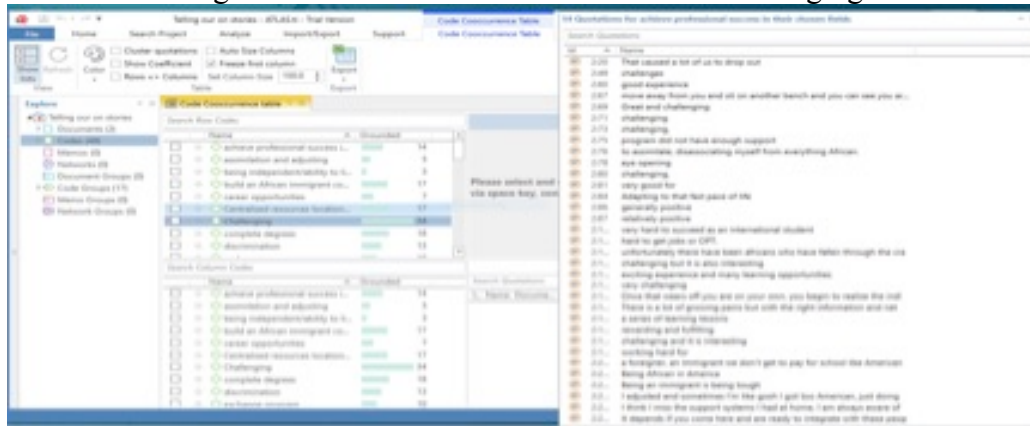
I won the diversity visa lottery.

Figure 6: Major Reason: To school to complete degrees



The main reason for coming to USA was school with the goal of getting their degrees and either going back home or using those degrees to get good jobs in the USA or back home. Unfortunately, some of them did not have their dreams come true for a variety of reasons including finances, cultural challenges, illness, or the opportunity to work and thus getting distracted from studies.

Figure 7: Life and School in the USA Is Challenging



Most participants said, “Life on your own in the US is hard. Those who come after us should have an easier life here in the US if they knew from us what we have experienced”. The reasons they gave for life as an international student being hard and challenging included:

As a foreigner, being ridiculed, stereotyped.

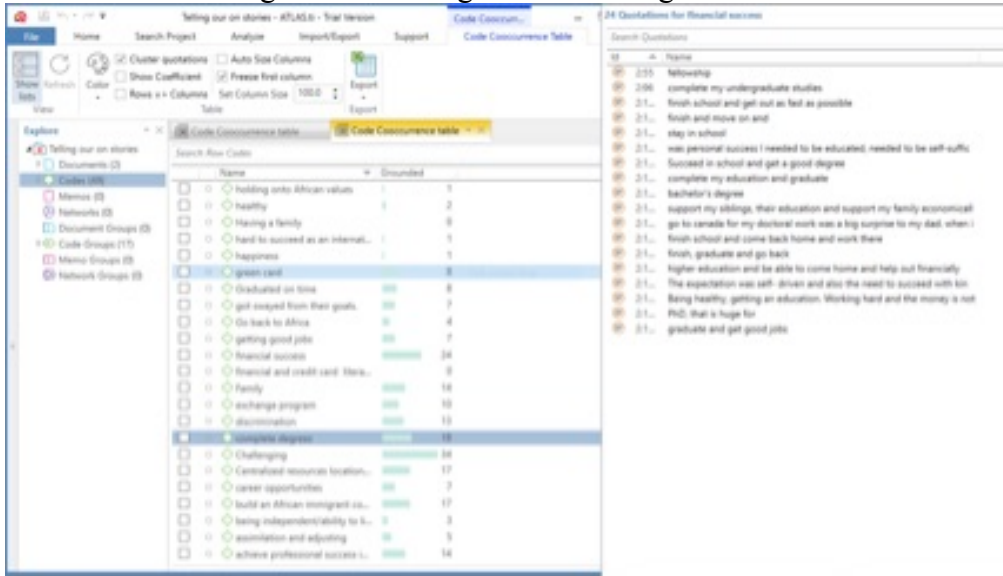
Language barrier was very humiliating.

International students are burdened with so many credit hours per semester even if they are not working it is too much knowing what other factors they are struggling with.

Option to work more hours, and a revision of the restrictions of working off campus.

I lived in a predominantly white state and even in church where you are expecting to be better accepted they move away from you and sit on another bench and you can see you are not accepted. In school it was hard to get a friend.

Figure 8: Challenges to Achieving Success



Most of the participants that were students, were still struggling academically with full time classes and full time low paid jobs on campus. Although some managed to get their degrees, it was hard to get jobs outside campus or OPT. Others were still struggling to get scholarships and or teaching assistantships to pay for school. Major challenges cited that hindered their success included:

In terms of academic success and achieving a bachelor's degree it was both my parents' and my expectation.

My family's expectations for me were to graduate, get a job, send them money, because I am the most educated and so the expectations to support them financially is higher.

The exchange program did not have enough support and the orientation program was very brief and so much information all in a week and then after that you are on your own and no follow up.

My experience socially we feel very isolated, from African Americans you don't feel like you have much in common with them.

The expectation that once done with school they would go back home and contribute to national success and development has become a mirage for many. For most, their dreams have not been realized and they either are accepting their situation, settling or getting disillusioned. At first their dreams were clear and future was bright and hopeful as indicated by some of their statements.

...go back home yet I don't have enough savings, so I am thinking about that. But I would like in future to invest in US and my home country.

After completing education and struggling to get jobs and or OPT they become disillusioned:

They expected me to be done with my education and go back home to work in a big company and earn a lot of money.

Well, my parents wanted me to finish school and come back home and work there.

My life here has been very unsuccessful. I came here with intention of finishing my degree but got a lot of setbacks and I gave up on school and decided to work on meager jobs to support my family.

Some get married to Americans to get papers and to get jobs so they can support themselves and their families back home.

Researcher Bias and The Phenomenologist Challenge: Researchers' Reflection and Lessons Learned

When we were envisioning this research, we did not realize just how challenging it was going to be in terms of bracketing and being objective as expected of phenomenological studies. Being the observer, whose background and experiences are so similar to the observed/the interviewees, posed a challenge of introducing bias into the study. Although we made every effort to control such bias, we are here sharing our stories from our lived experiences, for the sake of clarifying and also presenting the challenges. Both researchers are immigrants from Continental Africa, but from different regions. One is from the East and the other from the West of Africa.

What was interesting and challenging at the same time was how the major issues and themes raised in this study mirror the lived experiences of both the researchers themselves, as well as those of the interviewees.

The major themes that the researchers wove into their reflection include the challenges of being an immigrant in the USA, perception and definition of success, racism and discrimination, coping strategies and the myth of completing degrees and going back home. Sub-themes include how they came to the USA, their experiences, comparing their success to others who came before them, and where they are now.

Recommendations

Participants' recommendations that they felt would improve college life for them and other future international students included a social program with a centralized place and equipped for African Immigrants to help them adjust and integrate into the higher education environment in the USA, navigate campus, determine success, get a campus job, maintain immigration status, achieve academic success, get food cheaply, international scholarships, events on campus, career opportunities, and information on companies that employ students legally. The center most important because it would help them solve all the other challenges of being lonely, missing deadlines on school assignments because they did not know how to navigate the electronic resources, and dropping out due to economic hardships.

The researchers concurred with the participants especially about a student success center with a program that supports immigrant students' success by focusing on their unique needs. Most international students from developing countries, once their parents or sponsors pay tuition, they is no allowance provided for the student.

Expanding job opportunities on and off campus would provide for them necessities that the university does not provide like food and accommodation as well as books.

Conclusion

It was evident throughout our research that being a Sub-Saharan/Continental African immigrant poses unique challenges. Apart from isolation, loneliness and missing family and community support, adjusting to the weather and different cultures were among the major challenges cited. Economic challenges were also a major hindrance to student success.

A phenomenologist approach to research is also challenging. Being involved and immersing too intensely can introduce unintended bias. Data collection becomes a huge endeavor because of the large amount of data collected. Analyzing and interpreting without introducing personal bias is was the greatest challenge. Bracketing was very helpful to the researchers.

The benefits, however, compensated the strenuous effort. They include being able to observe a familiar phenomena and immersing one self into it. It is refreshing to be able to support such a community while at the same time become an engaged scholar and provide a solution that not only helps the community but the researcher as well.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Participants will be asked the following questions below. The interview will take 45 minutes and will be recorded using a digital recorder. Researchers will review the informed consent document before starting the interview and they will remind participants of the voluntary nature of this research study. Researchers may also answer any questions participants might have. Researchers will refer to participants by number so that they can protect the identity of the participant.

Bio Form

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is the highest degree you have achieved?

How long have you been in the USA?

Interview Questions:

1. How did you come to America?
2. Why did you come to America?
3. How has your experience as a continental African immigrant in America been like?
4. What are the personal expectations/goals you set when you arrived in America?
5. What are the expectations/goals that your family set for you?/expected of you?
6. What does success mean to you?
7. Has your nationality and /or gender hindered or helped you in any way?
If so, how?
If not, how do you explain that?
8. Do you know people from your country and/or other African countries who have come here and have been successful?
9. What does their success look like? Describe their success.
10. Do you know people from other African countries who have come here and who have not been successful?
11. What does that look like?

12. Has living in a different culture with different values impacted your marriages?

If so, how and why?

13. If you were to make a suggestion to your State Representative about resources and support that immigrants would like to see happen, what would that be?

14. How is being an immigrant in the West? (U.S.A.; Canada; U.K.; Australia)

Thank you for sharing your story with us.