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Author(s) Samuel Dermas Habtemariam, University of Kansas

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A Narrative Study of Cultural Identity Construction of African Refugee College Students in the Midwest

Abstract

There are few African refugee college students in the United States and little is known regarding how they construct their cultural identities. This study sought to examine the cultural identity of four African refugee college students in the Midwest. Using narrative interviews, data were gathered to answer the question: How do African refugee college students negotiate their cultural identities in the post-resettlement period? Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and interpreted with critical race theory. The findings show that African refugee students (1) preserve their African identity by keeping their values, (2) face identity confusion and (3) negotiate their cultural identity by engaging African cultural practices at home but American ones outside. Based on the findings, suggestions are discussed.

The United States welcomes refugees from all over the world, and since 1975, it has accommodated more than 3 million refugees (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). In 2018 alone, 45,000 refugees were resettled (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). A refugee is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group,” (USA for UNHCR, n.d., para 1).

Access to higher education would provide opportunities for refugees once they have resettled to a new host country, as greater educational attainment is linked to numerous indicators of health and well-being (Streitwieser et al, 2019). Yet, it is estimated that only one percent of refugee students have access to post-secondary education across the globe (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Refugee students who do access higher education experience unique and complex challenges. College policies, cultural shock, emotional and academic challenges define refugee students’ educational experiences and performances (McBrien, 2005). A majority of the refugee students are new to the type of education and curricula offered in the colleges in the U.S. and

find it difficult to comprehend the policies of the colleges in a short time (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). In addition, there is an implicit curriculum—that is, a “set of expectations and rules that define schooling as a cultural system that itself teaches important lessons” (Eisner, 1994, p.106)—that college learners experience. Not understanding the implicit curriculum can inhibit the academic success of students from a different cultural background.

According to Gudykunst & Kim (1984), acculturation is the method of managing with a new and strange culture, a “continuous process by which strangers are re-socialized into a host culture so as to be directed toward greater compatibility with or fitness into a host culture, and ultimately toward assimilation,” (p. 209). Refugee students often face challenges in negotiating the construction of their cultural identity due to close relationship to members of a group who have a shared values, history, language, and common knowledge of things (Norton, 1997). It is difficult for them to make sense of themselves in a new culture. They often find it confusing to identify themselves as minorities in the larger social structure leading to identity confusion, as they are in a dilemma between the host culture and the native culture (Berry, 2001).

The purpose of the study is to explore how African refugee college students negotiate their cultural identity in the U.S. using critical race theory to examine their identity construction within the sociopolitical and historical context of the U.S. higher education system and curriculum. Although some research provides insight into the identity construction of younger refugee students in their educational settings (Uptin, 2013; Erden, 2017; Saleh, 2018), these studies have focused on young refugee learners (children and adolescents). Thus, the present study expands the extant literature by focusing on African refugee college students in a post-resettlement period.

This study draws on critical race theory (CRT) to examine the refugee students' identity construction (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ndemanu and Jordan, 2018; Gay, 2001). It also draws on sociological perspectives and post structural theories in which identity is constructed in a fluid and in continuous process within a given context (Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Pavlenko & Blackledg, 2004). As Hall and Du Gay describe, "identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation," (p. 2). CRT addresses racial discrimination and prejudice as well as oppressive social structures, examining dominant ideologies and thoughts, race and racism, historical context, social inequality, and experiential knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1998). When applying CRT to the concept of identity construction, the values and practices of the dominant culture influence the identities of the individuals who join the society as newcomers. Hence, identity construction is fluid and should be seen within the specific situations of a dominant culture, language, and history that contribute to the formation of a dominant ideology.

Methods

This is a qualitative study that investigates how African refugee college students construct their cultural identity in the Midwest. Guided by the narrative methodology, the study attempts to understand the lives and experiences of the refugee college students in negotiating the construction of their cultural identities. According to Riessman (2008), the narrative methodology focuses on how participants give meaning to experiences through the act of storytelling by paying attention to the content of the individuals' accounts and how self is produced through the acts of storytelling. The rationale for using the narrative methods is that it goes further than the content of the respondents' accounts and examines the motive behind

telling the story or the provided account, which paves the way for follow up, as stories about the experiences are narrated in an organized way (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Setting and Sample. This study was conducted in a midwestern U.S. after obtaining IRB approval. Participants were recruited through a social service agency that support refugees during and after the resettlement period. Four African refugee students were purposefully chosen for key characteristics to answer the research question of this study. Those characteristics include being African refugees, who were selected as participants due to shared home cultures and languages with the researcher, and being university college students. Also, participants had to be in the US for a minimum of six months to increase their credibility, having more lived experience to refer to.

Though the participants are from two African countries, they represent diverse ethnic backgrounds and vary in terms of their region, language, and educational experiences. Two participants are Eritreans who came to the U.S. in 2015. Case descriptions for each participant are given below. All names of participants are pseudonyms.

Gebremariam. Gebremariam is an Eritrean who came to the U.S. in 2015. He stayed in Ethiopia as a refugee for five years and went to school there before he came to the U.S. He was living in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia with his mother and little sister. While in Ethiopia, he had a huge challenge of learning Amharic, the official language of the country and communicating with the teachers in the same language as his first language is Tigiryna.

Afwerki. Like Gebremariam, Afwerki is an Eritrean who came to the U.S. in 2015. Afwerki fled to Sudan and stayed in the refugee camp for a long time with his parents. He went

to school there and learned Arabic, which is an official language and medium of instruction in schools. His first language is Bilen.

Zuma and Jacob. The other two participants in the study, Zuma and Jacob, are from the Democratic Republic of Congo. They escaped to South Africa with their parents and lived in Johannesburg for more than ten years. Zuma and Jacob both speak Swahili as their first language. They went to school in South Africa and did not have a problem in learning English, an official language and medium of instruction in the country. They arrived in the U.S. in 2016.

Date Collection. The participants completed semi-structured interview twice in March and May 2020, respectively. While the first interview was conducted face to face, the latter was via telephone due to COVID-19. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes and was audio recorded. The rationale for using semi-structured interview is that it contains open ended questions, which may allow the participants to tell all their stories without being restricted. In addition, there were follow up questions to make the interview more meaningful and story-like (Riessman, 2008).

Data Analysis. Analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis procedures. I started analyzing by creating broad categories for the data derived from the theoretical framework, research question, literature review and interview protocols. Categories included 'Acculturation', 'Home Culture', 'Values', 'Identity Construction'. After reading the transcribed data, I highlighted and assigned chunks of text, ranging from a single line to a full paragraph, to these broad categories. Then, the transcribed data were shared with the research participants to ensure the researcher captured their perspectives accurately (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). After incorporating their comments, the data were discussed and interpreted using critical race theory.

Findings

Preserving African Identity. The participants expressed their interest to preserve their African identity. These refugee students left their countries when they were young; some were born in the country of first asylum, but due to the mounting pressure from their parents, the participants wanted to keep up their African identity. The actions that identify them as Africans were to be respectful to elders and teachers, not staying out until late night for a drink, though they are 18 years old or above, not having tattoos or piercings, not having a girlfriend until graduation, standing out academically, and sharing the social and economic burdens of the family. In fact, family is seen as the core of the existence, which is why the refugee students told stories of playing their part to provide social and economic assistance to their families. Moreover, their stories show that they respect parents' decisions and get prior approval from parents before making any school or life-related decisions. In view of the literature, these values attribute to their cultural identity, as they have shared values and characteristics with each other and seem to be united in showing allegiance to those values (Hall and Du Gay, 1996).

Identity Confusion. The refugee students told stories that they do not want to look different from the rest of the student population, and hence pretend to look like American students. This appears to imply that there is, indeed, a fluid nature to identity and that it is a continuous process based on contexts, as Hall and Du Gay (1996) suggest. In some cases, the African refugee students explained to their American peers that they have different values and attempted to reflect them at school, though they were not always successful in convincing them. Thus, the cultural mismatch between the refugee students' home culture and school culture appears to be evident, leading them to identity confusion, a finding in line with Berry's (2001) study.

Negotiating cultural identity. In negotiating their cultural identity, the African refugee students understand that they are in a foreign culture and hence should abide by it. In their stories, they expressed their great skill of partly following American culture in their colleges but African culture at home. This kind of code switching between American and African cultures seems to have provided them a ground to negotiate their identity and establish a border between the two cultures, though all African refugee students do not agree with having a neutral position to negotiate their African cultural identity. Exemplary quotes from the participants are given on table 1.

Conclusion

This study shows how four African refugee students maintain their cultural identity by practicing their values and negotiating their cultural identity by keeping a borderline between American and African cultures. Their narratives showed a flexibility to engage in American practices when they are outside and African cultural practices at home. A diversified college curriculum is needed to ensure social inclusion and to bridge the cultural mismatches between the refugee students' home and school cultures. The values the African refugee students described in the study should be incorporated in the college curriculum to stop the prevalence of dominant ideologies and thoughts, one of the components of CRT (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Finally, the paper argues for reconsideration of education policy in the US and within the higher education curriculum so that the cultural identity of African refugees is acknowledged. Amthor & Roxas (2016) argue for broadening "the scope of multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy" (p. 155) at school level. Findings from this paper suggest a need to do so at the college level to ensure the inclusion of African refugee students' values, identities, and voices in the multicultural education policy.

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Table 1: Participants' Exemplary Quotes

Theme	Exemplary Quotes
<p>1. Preserving African Identity</p>	<p>Respect for elders:</p> <p>“Most of the students here, they just disrespect the teachers. I did not see this back home in Sudan when I was learning because in here, they give them a lot of freedom and they do whatever they want. But back home, even if you see elder, we say hi to him and we kiss his hand to show them we respect them. In here, they don’t have stuffs like that. This affects my social engagement because I don’t want to be part of like showing disrespect to my elders. I want to be like with showing respect to my elders and make my day with them, you know not like disrespect anyone by doing whatever I want to do. I got sometimes follow part of my culture too.” (Afwerki)</p> <p>Supporting parents:</p> <p>“You are in America, but you have been through a lot and someone with the common sense would know I have to do better for my family. My parents have gone through a lot for me. I am sure about that. They don't have to say that but that's for sure. I must.” (Jacob)</p>
<p>2. Identity confusion</p>	<p>Wanting to fit in and be yourself:</p> <p>“Even though you say you are African, and you say this won’t affect your life, you still want to fit in. You still want to be seen as normal as one of them. So you sometimes forget and you start blending in with them and Um, you start blending in and if you move away you like you forget that. Hey, this is not me. It's like stay on track, is your personal like this? You want to be like them. But remember you're not though. you want to but you are not. So it's hard to to maintain it.” (Zuma)</p> <p>Seeing oneself as a culturally different student:</p> <p>“I don’t think I have a common ground to discuss matters with my American classmates. I believe if there were students from Eritrea or Ethiopia, I would have a common ground to raise common subjects to discuss. Also, I would understand their cultural cues, all the verbal and nonverbal signs which make my communication easy. But here since I cannot even speak English properly, it is difficult to see myself as an American student. I think the American classmates would see me in the same way; maybe they see me as an alien and different student culturally.” (Gebremariam)</p>

3. Negotiating cultural identity	Switching between two cultures: I've been here for four years. I know how to code switch. So I know when I'm in my house, it's African and when I'm outside, I know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. Some teachers don't like being called Sir or Mom. They think oh you are making me feel old, you know. So you just have to know to make them comfortable. (Zuma)
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